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American Ethnic Literatures and Cultures

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Introduction

This academic textbook is the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the literary and cultural studies sections of our Department. The main aim of the textbook is to offer you a brief introduction to American ethnic literatures with an emphasis on their historical and cultural background. The need for an interdisciplinary approach arose from our own wish to combine our cultural and literary research and incorporate our findings into an academic textbook and thereby achieve a greater degree of interconnection between individual academic subjects.

The textbook is divided into two main parts. The first part focuses on the historical and cultural background of different American ethnic groups and is designed to give you a historical and cultural perspective on the specific ethnic groups.

The second part of the book focuses on a literary overview of American ethnic literatures, examining several important authors and their major works. Each of the chapters contains a set of warm-up questions. After each chapter, you will find questions for discussion based on reading assignments or movie recommendations. The inclusion of film adaptations of selected literary works makes the textbook more multidisciplinary and more approachable for students of American Ethnic Literatures and Cultures.

The main goal of this textbook is to expand students' knowledge of American literatures and cultures at the master's level and acquaint them with specific features of ethnic literatures in the contemporary USA. The text offers concise overviews of Native American, African American, Asian American, Jewish American, and Hispanic American literature. The secondary goal of the textbook is to familiarize students with the rapidly evolving canon of American literature in all its ethnic diversity. After studying this textbook, the student should:

1. have a better overview of concepts such as ethnicity, identity, assimilation, and multiculturalism and their relationship to American literature and culture;
2. have familiarized themselves with the most representative authors of American ethnic literatures and their works;
3. understand the historical and cultural background from which these ethnic literatures emerged and identify their most distinctive features; and
4. understand the complexity and diversity of contemporary American literature and culture.

During our classes on the history of American literature, we discussed how the canon of American literature has undergone constant revision, with many authors who were long excluded from wider recognition later being accepted as significant figures. However, the early monolithic canon of American literature had been relatively unchanged until the movements of the 1960s in which,

under the influence of contemporary critical theory, the accepted timeline of American literature underwent a profound change, and the literary canon became more diverse in terms of gender, race, and class. With the emergence of post-colonial and ethnic studies, the diversity of the canon has become greater than ever, and we can now see American literature as remarkably distinctive in this respect. Writers have always addressed the question of how to define ethnicity, the extent to which an immigrant should attempt to assimilate into the majority culture, and how far they should preserve their ethnic heritage. Obviously, these questions can lead to larger issues such as the definition of national identity and national literature and where we should draw the lines between local and global identities. We understand that a single course in American ethnic literature cannot hope to answer all of these complex questions, but we firmly believe that discussing these questions in classes can help us to be more understanding and tolerant of ethnic diversity.

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1. What is race, multiculturalism, transculturalism, identity, ethnicity, racial identity, assimilation, and racism?

Warm-up

Have a look at all of the above terms and try to explain them. Then compare your definitions with those given below.

Race

The idea of race has played an important role in the history of humankind and continues to have hugely important consequences in our societies. Contemporary understandings of race see the concept as *a social construction or a social invention*, but this has not always been the case. Modern ideas about race emerged in the Enlightenment of the 18th and 19th centuries. Encyclopedia Britannica defines **race** as the idea that the human species is divided into distinct groups on the basis of inherited physical and behavioral differences. Genetic studies in the late 20th century refuted the existence of biogenetically distinct races, and academics now argue that “races” are cultural interventions reflecting specific attitudes and beliefs that were imposed on different populations in the wake of western European imperial expansion from the 15th century onwards.¹

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is the assertion of the value of cultural diversity within Western societies and of the international significance of non-Western cultures. It is a reaction against Eurocentrism, white supremacism, and patriarchy, especially as those perspectives have served as sources and have provided measures of cultural value.² More recent terms such as transculturalism or interculturalism have emerged in connection with multiculturalism.

Transculturalism

Fernando Ortiz coined the term transculturalism in the late 1940s within the framework of theories of postcolonialism. Transculturalism describes the merging of two different cultures (for example, the blending of European and Caribbean cultures as a result of the European colonization of the

¹ Britannica 2020.

² Nelson 356, 2015.

Caribbean). Instead of one culture being dominant and another culture being submissive, the term transculturalism denotes a new type of culture that develops as a result of a process of merging and blending.

Identity

Identity refers to both a group self-awareness of shared distinctive characteristics and an individual self-awareness of inclusion within such a group. Self-awareness can be formulated in comprehensive cultural terms (ethnic identity), in biogenetic terms (racial identity), in terms of sexual orientation, and in terms of gender. Persons and groups often adhere to multiple and fluid identities, different features of which may be selectively relevant in specific social situations.³

Ethnicity

Ethnicity refers to the identification of a group based on a perceived cultural distinctiveness that makes the group into a “people”. This distinctiveness is believed to be expressed through language, music, values, art, styles, literature, family life, religion, ritual, food, names, public life, and material culture. This cultural comprehensiveness—a unique set of cultural characteristics perceived as expressing themselves in commonly unique ways across the sociocultural life of a population—characterizes the concept of ethnicity. It not only revolves around a “population,” a numerical entity, but a “people”, a comprehensively unique cultural entity.⁴

Racial identity

Racial identity - Racial identity has historically been understood as relating to responses to racism and prejudice while ethnic identity involves a sense of belonging to a group connected by heritage, values, traditions, and often languages (Phinney & Ong, 2007).⁵

Assimilation

Assimilation is broadly defined as the conformity of a minority or immigrant group to the customs and attitudes of a dominant culture. We can view assimilation positively as a means of cultural integration despite the ethnic differences between the minority and the majority cultures or more

³ Britannica 2022.

⁴ Britannica,
<https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropology/The-anthropological-study-of-education#ref839804>

⁵ Britannica,
<https://www.britannica.com/science/anthropology/The-anthropological-study-of-education#ref839804>

negatively as the rejection of an individual's ethnic community and ancestry through the complete absorption into the prevailing culture. The concept of assimilation in American society has been seen as a series of complex mutual relationships; as hope and disappointment, accommodation and resistance, and gratitude and rage.⁶

Racism

Racism refers to the belief in a racial hierarchy based on unchangeable characteristics or assumed physiological traits and also practices that discriminate against a people because of their perceived or ascribed racial identities.⁷

⁶ Nelson 81, 2015.

⁷ Nelson 440, 2015.

Reading and discussion:

Read the chapter on “Ethnicity and Race” by Werner Sollors⁸ and the chapter “New Ethnicities” by Stuart Hall⁹ and answer the following questions:

- 1. What is the shift in the understanding of the terms race and ethnicity in the two articles?**
- 2. Explain how these two authors define race and ethnicity.**

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⁸ https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/0371/Werner_Sollors__Ethnicity_and_Race.pdf

⁹ <https://www.amherst.edu/media/view/88663/original/Hall%2B-%2BNew%2BEthnicities.pdf>

2. Native American Culture and Literature

2.1 Who are Native Americans?

The people whom we have come to know as Native Americans (or historically, as American Indians) had been living on the continent for several millennia before it received the name America. Recent scientific findings on the settlement of the Americas indicate that the Bering Strait, a body of water located between northeast Russia and northwest America, was likely a solid landmass in the past due to lower sea levels and served as a route by which humans from Asia could migrate and settle in America. This process could have occurred around 12,000 years ago, possibly even earlier, and scientists generally agree that the migration occurred in three waves over the course of several millennia. The original migrants gradually diversified into many cultural and language groups, and competition for resources pushed some of them further south. Very little is known about these early cultures as Native tribes did not use writing systems to record their histories in this period. However, archaeological finds suggest a wide variety of architectural forms, social structures, and means of cultural expression.

While Columbus' voyages to America can be seen as the most important encounter between the Old and New Worlds due to the consequent cultural and social changes on the continent, he was by no means the first European to come into contact with Native Americans. Historical sources mention Norse settlements in Greenland and the North American mainland as early as the 10th century, with some communities surviving for nearly five hundred years. The same sources also state that the Norse settlements engaged in trade with the native Inuit people. However, it was **the arrival of the Spanish** and the Portuguese in the New World at the end of the 15th century that led to massive changes in how Native Americans were perceived – not only by Europeans but by the native peoples themselves.

Not all of the encounters between the newly arrived Europeans and the native cultures were necessarily violent or harmful. The widespread exchange of plants, animals, technological inventions, and ideas (but also diseases and, sometimes, less than willing human populations) between the Americas, Africa, and Europe is now known as the **Columbian Exchange**. For instance, **horses** had been largely extinct prior to the arrival of the Europeans, but from the 16th century onwards, some of the horses brought to the New World by the Spanish escaped and began breeding in the wild. Native Americans soon adopted horse riding and this led to a transformation in their way of life. Other animals brought by the settlers were also adopted by the Natives such as **donkeys, pigs, sheep, cows, goats, chickens, and bees**. The exchange process was complex; while Europeans discovered new crops in the New World such as potatoes, tomatoes, corn, and tobacco,

they also introduced crops from other parts of the world such as **rice** and **bananas** from West Africa and **citrus fruits** and **grapes** from the Mediterranean.

However, the expansion of the European realm came at a terrible cost to the native population. While the estimates for the population of the territory of the modern-day United States in the pre-Columbian era range from **two million to eighteen million** people, by 1800, there were only about **600,000 Natives** in the area. This massive decline in population was primarily a consequence of the epidemics of diseases that European settlers brought to the New World, but other factors were also involved such as warfare and violence at the hands of the European settlers and internal conflicts between Native tribes as they competed for resources that could be traded to European merchants, struggles that were made bloodier still due to the introduction of firearms. The displacement of Native populations from their ancestral lands, the forced conversions to Christianity, and the enslavement of Native peoples meant that tribes faced not only a sharp decline in their population but also difficulties in preserving their cultural heritage and their traditional styles of living. These drastic and often violent changes meant that the perception of what it meant to be Native American was slowly but surely transformed under the watchful eye of the new settlers.

As is the case with many ethnic groups, the way in which Native Americans are perceived has been heavily influenced by the media. Portrayals of Native Americans both in Central European culture and internationally typically depict the variety of peoples as a single homogenous group; Hollywood movies in particular depict “all Indians, all the time, as horse-riding; tipi-dwelling; bow-, arrow- and rifle-wielding; buckskin-, feather- and fringe-wearing warriors”¹⁰. Upon close inspection, we can discern these features of Native American life as belonging to various tribes and cultural groups, some of which did not even live in the same geographical area.

The geography and climate of a given region played a crucial role in determining a tribe’s way of life, and for this reason, Native Americans can be broadly grouped based on the area of the modern United States in which they traditionally lived. Several systems for classifying the regions, or **cultural areas**, in which Native peoples lived have been proposed, ranging from five groups to as many as ten. For the purposes of this textbook, we will use the simplest division as follows:

- a) Arctic region – Inuit, Aleut...
- b) The (Great) Plains region – Sioux, Cheyenne, Crow, Comanche, Wichita...
- c) Northeast region – Iroquois, Algonquin...
- d) Southeast region – Seminole, Cherokee, Creek...
- e) Southwest region – Hopi, Navajo, Apache...

¹⁰ Gover 2017.

All of these groups have distinct characteristics based on their style of living, housing, hunting styles and cuisine, and of course social and cultural markers. **The Arctic region**, the area that we now know as Canada, Alaska, and Greenland, is characterized by its cooler climate. The land was mostly treeless, flat tundra, and people's lives were bound to fishing, hunting caribou (reindeer) on land or seals and whales from open boats, and gathering seasonal fruit. Dogsleds, canoes, and boats were all indispensable parts of their lives, and clothing made from sealskins and furs protected people from the cold winters. Igloos made of packed snow and Barabara lodges dug into the ground and then covered with wood, moss, and earth were typical for this region. Perhaps the most well-known language of the Arctic region is the Eskimo-Aleut language.

Some interesting facts¹¹:

- The name "Alaska" is derived from an Aleut phrase, *alaeksu* or *alashka*, meaning "mainland."
- The Inuit thought that animals' souls were located in their bladders.
- Parkas, or anoraks, heavy coats lined with fur, were invented by the Native people of the Arctic region; traditionally, they were made out of sealskin or caribou skin.
- The Inuit had special relationships with people outside their families: e.g., sharing partners with whom men shared the food they obtained, song partners for religious singing, and name partners, people of the same name with whom they exchanged gifts.

The tribes who historically resided in the area of **the Great Plains** are probably the most similar to the conception of the American Indian held by many in Central Europe based on depictions in classic Western movies. However, the nomadic style of living that we typically associate with these peoples only developed in the 18th century after the Natives had adopted horse riding as a means of transportation and hunting. The large grassy prairies attracted grazing animals, such as bison/buffalo or elk, but overhunting was a regular problem and was likely the reason why this hunting culture was rather short-lived. At the end of the 19th century, European settlers arrived to introduce large-scale agriculture and cattle-rearing in the region and the Native tribes were driven off of their ancestral lands.

The tribes of the Great Plains, including the Kiowa, the Sioux, the Comanche, and many others, historically made their living via hunting, gathering seasonal fruit and nuts, or farming. The typical animals for the region, aside from the already mentioned bison, included deer, cougars,

¹¹ Waldman 2006.

bears, prairie dogs, eagles, and wolves and were used as a source of food, clothing, and decorations, but also feature prominently in the mythologies and symbolism of the tribes. Teepees, tents made of wood and leather, were customary housing units for the nomadic groups, while more settled people often used earth lodges (for example, the Mandan tribe) or grass houses (for example, the Wichita tribe).

Some interesting facts¹²:

- Two of the most famous battles in the history of Indian-American relations involved the Sioux: the Battle of Little Bighorn (also known as Custer's Last Stand), and the Massacre at Wounded Knee.
- Many Plains tribes enacted so-called Vision Quests, spiritual journeys undertaken by adolescent boys on the cusp of adulthood or by warriors before an important event such as a war. Vision Quests were intended to provide a spiritual vision involving a participant's guardian spirit or allusions to the future and were typically performed in isolation in a remote place through a process of purifying the body, fasting, and occasionally self-harming to instigate the visions. These often came in animal form but could also be connected to other natural objects and phenomena, or even a tribal ancestor.
- The Kiowa are possibly more closely linked to Mesoamerican cultures than to other Plains tribes based on their language, worship of stone images, and keeping of tribal records in the form of a pictographic calendar.
- The Cheyenne had elaborate conventions and rituals related to courting – Cheyenne women were known for their chastity before marriage, and the courtship process could take four years. Women could choose whether or not they wished to talk to a man, and even then, both families had to agree to the marriage.

Probably the most widely known of **the Northeastern tribes** are the Iroquois and the Algonquins. The climate of the Northeast was ideal for a wide variety of trees, plants, and animals that could be used for food, clothing, and decorations. The tribes here practiced agriculture and focused on the three most important and widespread crops of the area - the legendary *Three Sisters* of corn, beans, and squash. These crops were planted in a symbiotic fashion; the tall corn stalks supported the beans, and the squash with its large, low-hanging leaves protected the roots and retained the moisture at ground level.

¹² Waldman 2006.

The local tribes were often at war with each other, and this necessitated the fortification of villages with tall wooden palisades. The typical housing in this region was wooden longhouses which were usually occupied by more than one family, sometimes as many as twenty. In the 16th century, five tribes formed the Iroquois Confederacy (joined later by another tribe) also known as the Iroquois League. These nations united with the common goal of peace and mutual support, deciding important matters in councils of chosen representatives from each tribe. The nations retained a considerable amount of independence from each other, with the Confederacy operating much like a federal government; indeed, some scholars believe that the founding fathers of the United States may have drawn some inspiration from the Iroquois Confederacy while drafting the US Constitution.

Some interesting facts¹³:

- The term Iroquois refers to the Six Nations speaking Iroquoian languages: Cayuga, Mohawk, Onondaga, Seneca, and Tuscarora. Iroquois (or Haudenosaunee) society was matrilineal, meaning that children belonged to the mother's family rather than the father's, and men often came to live with their wives' families after marriage. Women owned the crops, and property was passed down the maternal line; women also chose the chiefs and representatives for the Confederacy.
- One of the most common myths about Native Americans is the claim that the island of Manhattan was sold to European settlers for \$24 worth of beads and other trinkets. The story paints the Lenape (Lenni Lenape, Delaware) as gullible savages who had no understanding of the value of money. In reality, the Natives of the area had little use for the concept of individual land ownership. In their understanding, no one could "own" land; it was there for anyone to use, and it was this right that they believed they were selling to the Europeans – the right to use the land for a short period of time, much like a lease.
- In his 1826 novel *The Last of the Mohicans*, James Fenimore Cooper likely merged together two different north-eastern tribes to create the fictional tribe of the Mohicans for the story: the Mohegan (who actually did have a chief named Uncas, like the Native character in the book), and the Mahican, some of which have come to use the fictional name 'Mohican' for themselves.

¹³ Waldman 2006.

- The Powhatan tribe, famous from the tale about Pocahontas and John Smith, can be classified as a tribe of the Northeast region, although it also shared some characteristics with the Southeast tribes.

The Southeast region was home to nations of mostly settled people who resided in a single location for longer periods of time. This was likely connected to the fact that the climate of the area could support larger populations by growing sufficient quantities of crops such as corn, beans, squash, pumpkins, and tobacco. The tribes usually built permanent settlements near rivers and often constructed large earth mound structures on which they built their houses. The typical housing units were a mixture of wooden poles, branches, and vines covered with mud, grass, or animal skins; other tribes, such as the Creek, built clay houses, and each village had a square where important events and games were held. The Southeast nations were most seriously affected by the Trail of Tears, the forced eviction of Native tribes, especially the Cherokee, from Georgia in the 19th century.

Some interesting facts¹⁴:

- The game of lacrosse was invented by the tribes of the Southeast region and was played between clans from one village and clans from different villages.
- The Southeast nations also differed from northern groups in terms of their social structure. While tribes in the north were often ruled through councils of specifically chosen people, societies in the south were often ruled by a few select individuals. The Natchez tribe, for example, had an elaborate system of social classes with a king-like figure with the title of “the Great Sun” and a royal family, in which the king’s mother played the important role of advisor and the king’s relatives, both male and female, held important social positions. Greater and lesser nobles were then followed by a class of ordinary people – the so-called “Stinkards”. Interestingly, individuals could achieve a higher social status not only via heroic or pious deeds but also via marriage since the royals and the nobles were forbidden to marry within their own social class.
- From the late 17th century onwards, the Seminole nation in Florida incorporated many runaway slaves into their families and social structures. These Africans were sometimes still viewed as slaves in the Seminole territory, but this slavery mostly consisted of farming and giving a portion of the crops to the Seminoles. Many Africans also became members of the

¹⁴ Waldman 2006.

Seminoles via marriage and adoption, and if an African man married a Seminole woman, their children were considered Seminole as the Seminoles saw ethnicity as being derived from the mother's side. This acceptance of runaway slaves was used as an excuse for the forced removal of the Seminoles from their territories and for the Seminole Wars in the 19th century.

The Southwest region of the United States is comprised mainly of deserts, plateaus, canyons, and some evergreen forests. The aridity of the environment meant that plants and animals were scarce, with the people living either as farmers in permanent villages, for example, the Pueblo or Hopi peoples, or as nomadic hunters, such as the Apache or the Navajo. The typical housing units of the region were as varied as the lifestyles of their inhabitants – from stone and brick houses to huts covered with brush or earth. The best surviving native structure in the region, the famous cliff dwellings of Mesa Verde in Colorado, was created by the Pueblo people sometime in the 12th century CE.

The Southwest was a region of Spanish exploration and settlement, bringing the Natives of the area into direct contact with the Spanish for several centuries. The settlers attempted to convert the Natives to Christianity, often by forcefully relocating the Natives from their homes into artificial villages built in the Spanish style which were intended to eradicate tribal divisions and lifestyles. However, the Natives often resisted such practices; the Pueblo people revolted against the Spanish in 1680, and the Apache famously raided the Spanish settlements for centuries.

Some interesting facts¹⁵:

- After the Mexican War in 1848, the United States annexed Mexican territories and US troops arrived on Mexican soil in large numbers. In addition, this was also the period of the California Gold Rush (1848-1855) which resulted in an influx of US migrants to the area. However, the Apache did not consider US claims on the territory as valid, stating that the United States might have defeated Mexico, but Mexico had never defeated the Apache and thus the land still belonged to the Apache.
- The tribal names that we know today greatly illustrate the Natives' lack of agency in the writing of their own histories. Many names of the tribes that we know today were not the tribes' own names for their people. For instance, the word Comanche was most likely derived from another tribe's phrase *komon'teia* or *kohmaths*, "the ones who always want to

¹⁵ Waldman 2006.

fight us”, while the Comanche referred to themselves as Nermurnuh (Nimenim, Ne-me-ne, Nuumu), “the true human beings”. The Apache similarly thought of themselves as ‘the people’ (Tineh, Tinde, Dini...), while their enemies simply called them apachu – enemy.

- The final sustained uprising of Native peoples in US history was Geronimo’s Resistance (1881-1886). The Apache struggled to adapt to life in the reservations to which they had been forcibly relocated, and Geronimo and his followers fled the reservations numerous times, attempting to wage guerrilla war on the US troops. Geronimo died a legend and a prisoner of war who had never been allowed to return to his homeland in 1909.

2.2 Becoming Native American

Native Americans currently comprise around 1.6% of the US population; approximately half of this population of **five million people** claim mixed ancestry. As the previous section of this chapter has illustrated, it would be unwise to view all of these varied cultural groups within a single homogenous category: for this and several other reasons, many people of indigenous descent object to the term Native American. As some objectors have noted, it is difficult to see why a people can be considered as “native” to a geopolitical concept which they themselves predate: Native people were, of course, “native” to the continent long before it was given the name ‘America’.

Other objections arise from the fear of being viewed as an essentially homogenous group, a view perpetuated by popular media such as cinema which tend not to distinguish between the different tribes or even cultural groups, and which have historically either been bluntly dismissive of any claims of cultural diversity among Native peoples, have used white actors to portray Native characters, or hired Native extras and actors without regard to their specific tribal identity. Props and costumes were a mixture of items from different cultures; imagine seeing a Slovak character in an African film played by an African actor wearing Austrian lederhosen or a Scottish kilt and speaking French. This dismissal and disinterest in authentic Native languages and cultures was a common feature of the film industry and often led to expressions of defiance from Native actors. When they were hired to speak their language in a Hollywood film, Native actors would often say something funny instead of their characters’ lines, and since nobody on set would bother to translate the Native languages, there are several films where serious dialogue about war is interspersed with jokes about a white general’s genitalia, lines which would be unintelligible to people outside that particular tribe. One such example is found in the 1964 film *A Distant Trumpet* in which Navajo actors were hired to play Apaches. Since nobody on the film set translated what was being said, the dialogue between a white lieutenant of the US army and an “Apache” Chief played by a Navajo actor made it into the final cut as follows:

Lieutenant: If I do not return, General Quaid will find you. And you will be dead, and all your people.

Apache Chief, speaking in Navajo: Just like a snake, you will be crawling in your own shit.

Lieutenant: No, he is not a fool. You are!¹⁶

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the scope of the injustice of dismissing all indigenous languages as simply “Native American”, it would be useful to be aware of the sheer number of the languages that we are discussing. The estimates of the indigenous languages once spoken in North America range between 300 (in the 16th century) and 1000 (in the pre-Columbian era). Roughly **150-170 survive today**, with the definition of a surviving language being a language with at least one speaker – by way of comparison, there are currently 24 official languages in Europe, and around 200 languages spoken. A 2009 article in *National Geographic Magazine* discussed the work of the *Living Tongues Institute for Endangered Languages*, an organization trying to preserve as many Native languages as possible. The organization’s director, Greg Anderson, explained that the importance of Native languages also lies in the rich oral tradition of each tribe: if the language disappears, the culture, traditions, tribal dances and practices, and other important cultural markers die with it:

With the loss of the languages, all kinds of wonderful things that the speakers did with their languages have also vanished, for example, some of the greatest works of oral literature ever produced—the multilingual performances with different characters speaking different languages that was found in the Pacific Northwest.

The highly elaborate dances that accompanied the oral tradition are frequently also gone. Large amounts of local knowledge about fauna and flora, ecosystem management, local place names, spiritual values, and so on are all submerged, altered or gone because the original languages that expressed these concepts are gone or no longer well understood.

(Anderson in Braun, 2009)

The disappearance of so many languages can undoubtedly be attributed to the changes in the demographics of the continent after the arrival of European settlers. From the First Contact and the arrival of Columbus in 1492, Native populations were subjected to constant waves of forced relocation and eviction from their land, and several legislative measures of the American government made it difficult, if not outright impossible, to keep alive the languages and the cultures of some tribes. The following section offers a brief overview of the laws passed in the US and the events that most dramatically influenced the lives of Native Americans, and which are thus often referenced in works of Native American literature.

¹⁶ *Reel Injun* 2009.

The six **Trade and Intercourse Acts**, or Indian Intercourse Acts, were passed by Congress from 1790 to 1834 and introduced the provision that states, organizations, and individuals were now forbidden from buying land from natives. With the passing of the legislation, the federal government accepted almost exclusively responsibility for economic relations with the Native population.

However, at the beginning of the 19th century, the US government under George Washington and Henry Knox still appeared to strive for the acculturation of the Natives rather than their eradication, at least in some places. According to Washington, the Natives were biologically equal to whites, but their society was inferior and thus, in order for them to be “civilized”, changes had to be made which included the adoption of Christianity, the institution of private property rules, the provision of European education for Native children, and the adoption of European styles of living.¹⁷ Some Natives adopted these practices, along with plantation farming and, allegedly, slavery, most notably the five southeastern tribes (Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek (Muscogee), Seminole, and Cherokee) which were known at the time as the “Five Civilized Tribes” a name reflecting the ethnocentric approach of the 19th century, where those who adjusted to the European style of living were deemed “civilized” and those who did not were seen as “savage” or “wild”.

Nonetheless, even these adaptations were insufficient to protect the southeastern tribes from the **Indian Removal Act** signed into law by President Andrew Jackson in 1830. This Act officially allowed the US President to exchange the lands west of the Mississippi River for the lands held by Native tribes in other parts of the US, and to provide aid and protection to the Natives participating in the exchange of lands. However, the exchange did not happen as peacefully as the text of the Act would suggest; roughly 60,000 people of the ‘Five Civilized Tribes’, as well as their African slaves, were forced to march west of the river, with thousands dying on the journey or shortly thereafter from exposure, hunger or disease. This act of forced removal spanning the 1830s is now known as the **Trail of Tears**.

Shortly afterward, it became clear that Native tribes removed from their ancestral land were unable to assimilate at their own pace in the new areas, and the removal policies were replaced by reservation policies such as the 1851 **Indian Appropriations Act**.¹⁸ Within two decades, no Native people were recognized as independent nations by the federal government. Natives were seen as “wards” of the government and thus incapable of entering into any economic or political agreement; furthermore, all of the earlier agreements which some tribes had made with the government regarding the ownership of land or payments of goods, livestock, or cash, were now considered void.

¹⁷ Perdue 2003.

¹⁸ Deloria & Salisbury 2002.

One of the main cultural differences which were perceived by the US government as an obstacle to the ‘civilization’ process was the issue of land ownership. The **General Allotment Act** of 1887, also known as the Dawes Act, was supposed to do away with the concept of collective tribal ownership and instead sub-divide the lands previously owned by entire tribes into individually owned parcels ‘granted’ by the government to those Native people deemed ‘capable’ of managing their own land. Native landowners were thus expected to assimilate not only into US culture and society but also into the capitalist economic system.¹⁹

In addition, assimilationist policies targeted Native youth and used education as a means of eradicating tribal culture, languages, and practices. While boarding schools for Native children had long been operated by missionaries aiming to “civilize” and Christianize their pupils, the government issued a law in 1891 that **made school attendance compulsory** for all Native children and allowed federal governments to remove children forcibly from their families and reservations. The conditions in these schools were often extremely harsh. Children were forced to adopt both European dress and hairstyles and take Christianized names; they were severely punished if caught speaking their native languages or referencing their cultures in any way. Many who went through the system were subjected to physical, mental, and sexual abuse. Furthermore, the education the children received in return was only ever intended to assimilate them into society rather than offer a path to true success; the goal of the boarding schools was to provide “thorough industrial training” and teach the children the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Higher education was believed to have “no place in the curriculum of Indian schools”.²⁰ This “kill the Indian, save the man” approach to the education of Native peoples continued at boarding schools across the US until almost the end of the 20th century.

While the lives of the Natives at the end of the 19th century were governed federally, they would not be granted **US citizenship** until 1924 after prolonged lobbying from both individuals and organizations concerned with the inefficiency and inhumanity of the federal government’s solutions to the so-called “Indian Problem”. The Meriam Report of 1928 surveyed the living conditions of Natives, assessing the failures and suggesting potential reforms of the system. The **Indian New Deal** of 1934, a part of Roosevelt’s broader New Deal programs, took a less assimilationist approach to tribal cultures and ways of life and brought an end to the allotment system, but many Natives saw the reform as little more than a reorganization of affairs that remained far closer to “civilized” US societies and structures than anything Native.²¹

¹⁹ Deloria & Salisbury 2002.

²⁰ Deloria & Salisbury 2002.

²¹ Deloria & Salisbury 2002.

Somewhat surprisingly, the US involvement in World Wars I and II contributed to the integration process. The participation of Natives in the Army during WWI facilitated the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act, and in the 1940s, in addition to military service, many Native people left reservations either on military service or to work in the wartime military industries. The 1950s saw the decline of federal supervision of Native tribes and a growing acceptance of the idea that the United States should ensure Native Americans the same freedoms, privileges, and legal treatment as other citizens, although this attitude often stemmed from the desire of many to exploit the reservations as a source of cheap labor. The rapid move from reservations to urban environments contributed to the rise of “Red Power” – the growth in Native political, social, and academic activism in the 1960s and 70s, much of which came within the context of the broader civil rights movements active in the US in this period. With the **Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act** of 1975, tribes were given the right to manage federal funding and programs in ways consistent with tribal customs, traditions, and ways of life, and the **Indian Child Welfare Act** of 1978 ended the forced removal of children to boarding schools. And while this self-determination created new issues for the Native communities (such as the growth of the gaming and gambling industry in the 1980s), with the tribes actively involved in their political, social, and economic management, these issues have often led to productive political discussions between the tribes and the US government.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. Which historical event do you believe to be the most important to the formation of Native American identities? Why?**
- 2. Which Native American cultural items and practices may be reflected in Native American literature?**

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3. Native American Literature

Key terms: Native American Renaissance, canon, oral tradition, spirit of place, Kiowa, Native American trickster figure, post-Indian, dime novel, western, generic literary forms, circular composition, noble/brutal savage, open-ended resolution, disoriented individual, loss of identity, cultural conflict, storytelling as healing, ritual novels, pueblo, Tonto.

Warm-up:

1. Do you know any Native American writers?
2. What do you know about Native American history and culture?
3. Do you think that there are any distinctive features in Native American literature that differentiate it from other ethnic literatures?

After studying this chapter, students should be able to understand the following:

1. The historical development of Native American literature
2. The major works and the most representative authors of Native American literature
3. To understand Native American literature in the context of American literature
4. To identify the most distinctive genres and features of Native American literature

In his Introduction to *Encyclopedia of Ethnic American Literature* (2015), Paul Lauter explains that “long before Europeans arrived in what they thought of as the ‘new world’, it was already inhabited by enormously diverse groups of Native Americans, speaking a huge range of distinctive and mutually unintelligible languages, with a multitude of cultures, religions, forms of organization, food and folkways”.²² As he continues, “America well before the arrival of Europeans, was, as we would now call it, a multicultural world”.²³ However, as many anthologies emphasize, a renaissance of this diversity appeared in the 1960s when the civil rights and feminist movements demanded access “to the voting booth, to the front of the bus, to public accommodations, to jobs from which one had been largely excluded by virtue of race, ethnicity, and gender”.²⁴

Any discussion of Native American (or American Indian) literature usually starts with the 1969 manifesto titled *Custer Died for Your Sins* by **Vine Deloria** which marks the beginnings of

²² Nelson, xvii 2015.

²³ Nelson 2015.

²⁴ Nelson 362, 2015.

the long overdue recognition of the literary representation of this marginalized group. Why long overdue? Because American Indian literature had been largely invisible until the early 1970s, even though the earliest known work by a Native American author was written in 1772, a sermon by the Mohegan turned Christian minister **Samson Occom**. Occom's work is reflective of a period of time between the arrival of the white settlers and the Indian removal in 1830 when many Native Americans had already converted to Christianity, with some even learning to write in English. However, there was still a long period in which Native American literature was absent from the literary **canon** of early American literature, and the long silence over the existence of what is now a very diverse and large body of literature is still a troubling topic in American history. Native American literary works and the recognition of American Indians were rarely included in university literature courses before the 1970s. Fortunately, this situation began to change with the advent of the civil rights movement and the emergence of new academic movements in the 1970s and 1980s such as ethnic studies, feminism, and women's studies, and the contributions of Native Americans to a broad range of literary genres are now widely studied and celebrated. The Pulitzer Prize for Fiction was awarded to the then-unknown Kiowa writer **N. Scott Momaday** in 1969 for his first novel *House Made of Dawn* (1968), and the acclaim with which **Leslie Marmon Silko's** novel *Ceremony* (1977) was received definitely led to wider recognition of Native American literature and the beginnings of what we today call the **Native American Renaissance**.

However, before mentioning specific writers, we should pause to consider how Native American literature differs from other American ethnic literatures. **Are there any distinctive features that make this literature specific? And are these characteristics reflected in the different genres of Native American literature?** We should bear these questions in mind when examining this brief overview of some of the most significant Native American writers and their major works.

The first full-length **Native American autobiography** was written by **William Apess** (Pequot, 1798–1839) titled *A Son of the Forest: The Experience of William Apess, a Native of the Forest* (1829) which recounts Apess' conversion to Christianity but also refutes many common stereotypes about Indians. The first known **Native American novel** certainly exemplifies the attempt to imitate the European form with Indian themes that were popular at the time. **John Rollin Ridge** (aka by his Cherokee name Yellow Bird) based his *Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta, the Celebrated California Bandit* (1854) on a real-life bandit of the same name who becomes corrupted during the Gold Rush. The part Indian Joaquin becomes a folk hero in the American West as he seeks revenge on the whites who tortured him and robbed him of his land. As a work of American literature, *Murieta* paved the way for the subsequent wave of **dime novels** and **Westerns**

that become hugely popular in the latter half of the century.²⁵ If we compare Ridge's popular tale with the works of the Native American Renaissance we can note the transition from oral folktales, trickster tales, autobiographies, generic forms, and creation myths to more hybrid forms which appear during and after the advent of the Native American Renaissance. According to Kolář, these works appear to have a **circular pattern of time**, emphasizing the repetitive aspects of history. This feature has an impact on the **circular composition** of the novels themselves, which often have conclusions that are **open-ended**. The circular conception of time in these works may stem from the authors' awareness of the repetition of seasonal cycles. In some novels, modern Native American writers employ the **archetypal mythic pattern of the quest**. Their protagonists are usually **disoriented outsiders** who have problems fitting into society. They suffer from a **loss of identity** caused by their encounter with a different (i.e., white) culture. **Cultural conflict** is a predominant theme in many of these books.²⁶

Perhaps the leading figure in the Native American Renaissance is **Navarre Scott Momaday** (1934-), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist, playwright, storyteller, and painter. His major works include *House Made of Dawn* (1968), *The Way to Rainy Mountain* (1969), and more recent works such as *The Man Made of Words: Essays, Stories, Passages* (1997) and *In the Bear's House* (1999). He was born in Kiowa country in Oklahoma and grew up among Navajo, Apache, Hispanic, and Anglo children, immersed in the rich oral traditions of the reservations and **pueblos**²⁷ of the Southwest. The tribal experience is embedded in his work which draws upon a variety of genres such as oral narrative, history, autobiography, and fiction. The broader concept of literary criticism that emerged in the wake of the 1960s civil rights movement and the emergence of ethnographic studies enabled Momaday's work to become an accepted part of the literary **canon**. Using different techniques, such as allegory or anecdote, and **archetypes**, Momaday interweaves history and legend and applies vibrant imagery to give voice to his **Kiowa** heritage.²⁸ His works are also rich in descriptions of landscape, or the "**spirit of place**", an essential element of the Native American oral tradition. At first glance, Momaday's writing appears to represent a distinctly regional type of literature, employing local geography and the customs, speech, and traditional imagery of Native Americans but, as Porter has observed his work is also multi-ethnic and multicultural.²⁹ In *House Made of Dawn*, Momaday describes the dilemma of a young Tano Indian named Abel who is forced to balance the ancient spiritual world of his ancestors with the 20th-century materialistic world,

²⁵ Nelson 368, 2015.

²⁶ Kolář 11, 2003.

²⁷ Pueblos are compact permanent living of mainly North American Indians (Britannica).

²⁸ Nelson 343, 2015.

²⁹ Porter 2005.

essentially relating the situation of any individual who is caught between two different cultures. In this sense, his work is universal and multicultural. The beginning of the novel sees Abel return to a Pueblo reservation in New Mexico from his military service in World War II and his attempt to reintegrate himself into the tribal community from which he has become alienated. He feels torn between the old culture of his ancestors and the new culture he experienced during his time in the army. The novel has a **circular composition**, both starting and ending with acts of ritual running. Momaday alters the narrative voices in the manner of Faulkner and combines Kiowa and Navajo myths and folklore. He also intermingles various genres and refers to the diary of the Christian missionary Nicolás, legends, and poems. In this way, the novel can be perceived as **postmodern**, but some passages are also reminiscent of magical realism. *House Made of Dawn* is considered to be the first **non-linear, non-chronological, ritual novel** of the Native American Renaissance.³⁰

Leslie Marmon Silko (1948-) is a Native American poet, novelist, short-story writer, and essayist. While Momaday's character of Abel portrays the traumatic nature of Native American heritage, Silko's writing is more of a celebration of mixed-blood heritage, especially in her novel *Ceremony* (1977). Silko's main character is a half-white, half-Indian war veteran called Tayo who is also torn between the dominant white male culture and his native American roots. After his return from the war against the Japanese in World War II, he suffers from **PTSD**,³¹ but he recovers from his condition through **ceremonial rites of healing**, tribal stories, and women-centered traditions. The novel has a **multilayered narrative structure** in which naturalistic prose is combined with highly expressive Indian poems.³² Silko's own mixed heritage (she is a Laguna Pueblo woman from a reservation near Albuquerque, New Mexico, but also has Mexican and white heritage) enables her to write about different kinds of identities. Her main aim is to emphasize the role of storytelling **as a healing element**. The spider's web is an important structural metaphor for her writing, with the circularity of the work and its complex weaving of different strands of the narrative suggesting connections that are difficult to untangle and overcome.³³

Other writers of Native American Literature include **John M. Oskinson** (1874-1947), **James Welch** (1940-2003), **Janet Cambell Hale** (1940-), **Joseph Bruchac** (1942-), **Paula Gunn Allen** (1939-2008), and **Gerald Vizenor** (1934-), the poet and saxophonist **Joy Harjo** (1951-), who is the first US Poet Laureate of indigenous origin, **Simon Jay Ortiz** (1941-), a prominent poet committed to promoting Native American culture, **Linda Hogan** (1947-), a novelist, poet and

³⁰ Kolář 13, 2003.

³¹ Post Traumatic Stress Disorder

³² Kolář 13, 2003.

³³ Nelson 462, 2015.

environmentalist, the playwright **LeeAnn Howe** (1951-), the short story writer **Susan Power** (1961-) an **Eddie Chuculate** (1972-). More contemporary writers include **Natalie Diaz** (1978-), a poet who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for her collection *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020) and who is a campaigner for the preservation of the Mojave language, **Layli Long Soldier**, an advocate against the oppression of Native American people, and **Tommy Orange** (1982-).

Gerald Vizenor is of Anishinabe heritage and an enrolled member of the Minnesota Chippewa Tribe of the White Earth Reservation. He was born in Minnesota but his father was murdered when he was two years old and he was subsequently raised by his Swedish American mother, Anishinabe grandmother, and their extended family in Minneapolis and on the White Earth Reservation.³⁴ In an essay by Kimberly M. Blaeser, he is described as an author who has devoted his career to upsetting the status quo, deconstructing the term “Indian”, re-defining the concept of mixed-blood heritage, and liberating modern-day Native people by developing the idea of the postindian.³⁵ The use of the **trickster character** is a trademark characteristic of his work. In addition to his lifelong activism, he has published more than 30 books, drawing on a mixture of Native myth, research, motifs from science fiction, and personal reflections. An excellent example of his work is the novel *Bearheart: The Heirship Chronicles* (1990) which relates a pilgrimage across a postapocalyptic America and features key motifs of his work such as the use of trickster characters and his understanding of **postindian identity**.

Louise Erdrich (1954-) is a Native American novelist, poet, and children’s author. Over the last 30 years, she has become one of the most renowned Native American writers, many of whose works are set around an Ojibwe Indian reservation in eastern North Dakota. She is the daughter of a French Ojibwe mother and a German American father, and the influence of this mixed origin can be found throughout her work. She first found success with her 1984 novel *Love Medicine* which explores the lives of different families from 1934 to 1984 and addresses the multigenerational legacy of suicide, alcoholism, and cultural assimilation and also the ability to retain elements of tribal wisdom. *The Beet Queen* (1986) was written as a sequel to *Love Medicine*, but Erdrich shifts her focus of attention from her Ojibwe heritage to her father’s German American background. The cyclical nature of Erdrich’s writing is confirmed in her 1988 novel *Tracks* in which she returns to her Ojibwe characters. Erdrich uses the motif of the **trickster figure** in her sixth novel, *Tales of Burning Love* (1996). Another typical feature of her work is the use of multiple narrators. The works of **Momaday, Silko, Vizenor, and Erdrich** are somewhat challenging and often feature unconventional styles of writing, a recurrent element of Native American literature. They present

³⁴ Poetry Foundation 2021.

³⁵ Porter 257, 2005.

complex narratives which blend different genres, timeframes, and, often, realities. These qualities are considered uniquely “Indian” in their embrace of nonlinear historical and temporal elements and in their prioritizing of myth as a seamless component of reality, but these aspects are also, in some ways, typical of modern and postmodern writing generally, which tends to be disjunctive, complex and experimental.³⁶

Perhaps no other Native American writer has offered such an expressive account of what it means to be a Native Indian in the contemporary world than **Sherman Joseph Alexie, Jr.** Alexie’s major themes are pain, poverty, and **alienation**, but he treats these serious issues with a degree of humor and comedy. The best examples of his capacity to laugh through the tears are his novels *Reservation Blues* (1995) and *Ten Little Indians* (2003). Alexie is not only a writer but also a poet, screenwriter, and comedian. The 1998 movie *The Smoke Signals* (IMDb) is based on one of his stories from the collection titled *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993). He was born a Spokane/Coeur D’Alene Indian and was raised on the Spokane reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. The central theme of Alexie’s writing is that in order to understand American Indian life, one has to understand the bloody history of America as a whole: “Imbedded in so many of Alexie’s narratives are the losses experienced after Christopher Columbus’s discovery of the new world in 1492, puritan preacher and educator Cotton Mather’s sermons of “America’s God-given rights” in the late 1600s, the implicit and explicit policies of Manifest Destiny in the early 19th century and the Indian wars later in that century, and the debilitating conditions of reservation life into the contemporary era”.³⁷

Other significant Native American authors include the poet **Nila NorthSun** (1951-) and her collection *Love at Gunpoint* (2007) or the accomplished writer and critic **David Treuner** (1970-), the author of *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee: Native America from 1890 to the Present* (2019) which offers a shocking counter-narrative of indigenous life in America covering the period from the Wounded Knee massacre to the present, breaking down many stereotypes of Native American life in the process.

Native American literature of both the past and the present features a number of features that we might consider characteristic of the genre. The academic Stanislav Kolář has suggested that these characteristics include:

- an emphasis on the oral tradition
- the sacredness of the spoken word and the tradition of storytelling:

³⁶ Nelson 370, 2015.

³⁷ Nelson 60, 2015.

(Storytellers often play the role of historians; as Leslie M. Silko notes in her novel *Ceremony*, “You don’t have anything if you don’t have the stories”).

Many stories relate to “animal” people, relating tales of men turned into animals (e.g., tales about the Coyote, the Turtle, the Fox, the Mountain Lion, or the Otter)

- the significance of ceremony and its medicinal power
- ritual writing structures
- a circular notion of time in opposition to typical linear time (the circle becomes a symbol of time)
- the importance of nature
- the interconnectedness between the sacredness of nature and the spirituality of life
- a preference for communal values, a sense of collectivity
- the search for the self (initiation stories of American youth)³⁸

3.1 Native American stereotypes

As you have seen in the historical chapter, stereotypical depictions of native Americans still appear in media and popular culture. Hollywood productions are certainly responsible for creating native stereotypes such as that of the Indian princess (see *Pocahontas* 1995) or the noble savage (such as in the character of Tonto in the *Lone Ranger* series of radio, film, and TV productions or in the 1992 film adaptation of *The Last of the Mohicans* by J. F. Cooper). Popular films such as *Little Big Man* (IMDb 1970) or *Dances with Wolves* (IMDb 1990) are examples of movies that attempted to portray Native Americans in a more authentic manner, but even in these more sympathetic films, the white characters remain the protagonists. The previously mentioned films *The Smoke Signals* (IMDb 1998) and *Pow Wow Highway* (IMDb 1989) attempt to show a more genuine account of the everyday struggle for self-assertion which Native Americans face. Treuner’s novel *The Heartbeat of Wounded Knee* (2019) also deconstructs these stereotypes as invented images that have been perpetuated in popular culture through films, TV, and advertisements. Another good example of the attempt to break down stereotypes is Louise Erdrich’s “Dear John Wayne” from the collection *Jacklight* (1984).

The trickster in Native American literature

A common feature in the mythology of many Native American cultures, the **trickster** is a mythical creature of constant change which lacks a fixed identity. They can be either male or female and they

³⁸ Kolář 11, 2003.

can take the form of animals such as the coyote, hare, or raven. Carrie Sheffield explains that the trickster often performs two distinct functions in Native American oral traditions, both a folk hero and an example of how not to live.³⁹ A good example of a trickster is the Anishinaabeg trickster Naanobozho in **Gerald Vizenor's** *Summer in the Spring* (1993) who provides mankind with fire by stealing from the sun.⁴⁰

Tonto, the companion of the Lone Ranger, can also be seen as a trickster figure., Tonto was one of the best-known Native American characters in 20th-century popular culture through his presence in the *Lone Ranger* radio and television shows, in which the eponymous Texas Ranger fights crime in the late 19th-century American Southwest. The stories offered several different explanations of Tonto's background and the origins of his friendship with the Lone Ranger, but they typically involve a situation in which the Lone Ranger rescued Tonto from a racist assault.⁴¹

Conclusion

Despite the rich abundance and promising future of Native American literature, there are still many open issues related to the genre and to ethnic literature as a whole. What exactly is Native American or American Indian or Indigenous literature? Does it actually exist? Obviously, these questions are related to the very complexity of Native American history itself. There were more than three hundred cultural groups and more than two hundred languages in North America when Columbus arrived. This diversity is naturally apparent in the linguistic and genre differences in Native American literature and renders it difficult to provide a straightforward definition of the genre. This textbook by no means aims to offer a precise answer to this question, but it does offer a very concise preview of a far broader field of research. It is interesting to note that the recent growth in Native American literature has also encouraged further academic research into the origins of Native American literature and the need to shed more light on the presence of indigenous people in mainstream contemporary American society. However, we should also be aware of the caveat which some academics have noted that it is perhaps inappropriate to apply western literary critical approaches to indigenous texts (see, for example, the work of Arnold Krupat).

³⁹ Nelson 490, 2015.

⁴⁰ Nelson 491, 2015.

⁴¹ Britannica 2022.

Reading discussion:

Read Louise Erdrich's poem "Dear John Wayne" from the collection *Jacklight* (1984) and answer the following questions:

1. What images from American popular culture are used in the poem and what is their purpose?
What stereotypes about Native Americans appear in the poem?
2. How does Erdrich criticize colonization?

Read John M. Oskinson's short story "The Problem of Old Harjo" (1907) and discuss the following questions:

3. How is the idea of the white savior deconstructed in the story?
4. What is Old Harjo's "problem"? And what is Miss Evans' trauma?
5. How does Oskinson view the historical and cultural influence of whites on Native Americans?

Watch the movie *Smoke Signals* (1998) based on a short story by Sherman Alexie and discuss the following:

6. What Native American stereotypes are refuted in the movie?
7. How does the "Bildung" or "coming of age" motif appear in the movie?

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4. African American Culture and Literature

The topic of African culture, traditions, and societies is vast and any discussion of it will inevitably be somewhat limited in scope. Africa is, after all, the birthplace of humanity, with most historians and archaeologists agreeing that the continent is the place where humans first evolved as a species; archaeological research in Ethiopia in 1974 revealed the remains of our **prehistoric ancestor**, Lucy, whose almost complete skeleton is thought to be approximately 3.5 million years old. *Homo sapiens* evolved in East Africa around 100,000 years ago, and the species subsequently migrated to Europe, Asia, the Americas, and Australia. The oldest evidence of the use of tools, weapons, and jewelry also comes from Africa, and the fertile plains in the delta of the Nile River gave life to one of the most prominent ancient civilizations, or “cradle of civilization” – Egypt. It would be impossible to sum up the rich history of the continent in a few pages; “there are about one thousand African peoples (tribes)”⁴² and each has, or had, its own distinct religious, cultural, and social system. The focus of this book, however, is the region from where the ancestors of today’s African Americans lived, or more accurately, the areas from which slaves were transported to the Americas over the span of several centuries.

4.1 A brief history of the slave trade in Africa

Even before the 15th century, many states had incorporated **slavery** into their socio-economic system, most famously, perhaps, the classical societies of ancient Greece and Rome, the latter of which developed slavery as an economic institution on a scale previously unknown in Europe. Roman slaves were usually taken from conquered regions such as Gaul or Germany; after the fall of the Roman Empire, slaves were usually a minor part of the workforce and other forms of servitude were implemented, such as serfdom or peasant, bondsman or clansman systems. Slavery also existed in Africa long before the 15th century, albeit on a much smaller scale – in most African societies, slaves fulfilled a variety of roles, and their freedoms and obligations varied from tribe to tribe and from state to state.⁴³ Individuals typically ended up as slaves either through misfortune, by becoming, for example, a prisoner of war, or as a punishment for a crime. However, while the subjection to the authority of another is always a precarious position with the possibility of abuse, in general, slaves were not treated as “an inferior form of humanity”.⁴⁴

⁴² Mbiti 1969.

⁴³ Klein 2010.

⁴⁴ Ciment 2007.

Medieval slavery in Europe was tied to the **expansion of the Islamic world** in the 8th century into the Mediterranean and North Africa. The slave trade flourished both internally, among the various regions and states of Africa, and externally, across the Mediterranean. It is estimated that more than 4 million slaves were transported from West Africa to the Mediterranean and Middle East between 650 CE and 1500 CE.⁴⁵ Furthermore, the Islamic invasions of the 8th century introduced a new crop of **sugar**, and after the first Crusades, European nations began experimenting with sugar production, particularly in Crete, Cyprus, Sicily, Madeira, São Tomé, and the Canary Islands. Thus, the techniques and the plantation system of sugar production employed in the Americas have their roots in the Mediterranean of the Middle Ages.

In the early 15th century, **the Portuguese** expanded into North African regions in search of precious metals which were increasingly scarce in Europe, and adopted many routes and trading systems used by Muslim merchants. Many of the slaves transported at this time were sold to Africans in exchange for gold. However, the established slave trade allowed the Portuguese to use African slaves as a labor source after the discovery of the Americas and the Portuguese settlement of Brazil in the early 16th century. In this period, African slaves were first transported to Portugal, where they were subsequently distributed throughout the western Mediterranean. The relatively small numbers of slaves in any given place (usually constituting less than 10% of the population) allowed the Africans to adapt quickly to the language, culture, and customs of the European world, and many of them also accepted Christianity. It was this part of the population, the *ladinos* or Europeanized slaves, who were among the first to arrive in the Americas as companions on their masters' voyages to the New World.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of Africans to arrive in the Americas were slaves. The availability of European labor was still restricted by the slow economic recovery of Europe in the aftermath of the Black Death, the ongoing confrontations with the Islamic world, and the internal conflicts triggered by the Reformation, and therefore nations establishing trading empires across the Atlantic chose a cheaper and much more easily attainable option of providing a workforce for their plantations in the Americas: the African slave trade.

4.2 Who are the African Americans?

So, what did Africa look like at the time? Trans-Saharan trade flourished from the 12th century due to the high demand for West African gold, and trading routes were also used for scholarship and travel. Some of the most prominent empires of the times were the **Mali Empire**, the **Kingdom of**

⁴⁵ Ciment 2007.

⁴⁶ Klein 2010.

Kongo, Great Zimbabwe, and the Ethiopian Empire (Abyssinia), each of which had its own rules and rulers, legal and trading system, and specific societal structure. Let's take a look at some of the common features found in the region from which most African American ancestries can be traced.

A feature found in most West African societies is the **importance of family** – not only within the immediate family of parents and children but with a strong emphasis on the extended family too. Children were brought up to think about themselves in relation to their parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, and various other family members. Obligations to the family were given the highest priority, and the significance of kinship and lineages remains an important aspect not only of modern West African ethnic politics⁴⁷ but also in the history of African Americans. Children and land were both viewed as communal property, in the sense that land was often distributed by the elders in order to benefit the community as a whole. Similarly, children were looked after and raised by the whole extended family or the whole village; marriage was an important means of strengthening the bond within one lineage/family or of building new relations with outside communities, and thus the desires of the two individuals involved were not seen as overly important. In turn, families would provide support and guidance in times of need: among the Akan people of Ghana, long sessions would be held if a dispute arose between spouses, with many family members in attendance offering help and support in finding a solution to the issue⁴⁸.

Religion played an indispensable role in the life of West Africans even before the arrival of Islam or Christianity, the two largest faiths of modern-day Africa, with each accounting for roughly 40% of the population, Islam being predominant in North and West Africa and Christianity dominating the Sub-Saharan, i.e., the Central, Southern and Southeastern parts of the continent. The people of West Africa often introduced elements of their own indigenous religious practices to the Christian and Muslim canons, such as healing practices, sacrifices to the ancestors and spirits, the use of amulets and fetishes, Africanized rituals, and music. But even prior to the arrival of the monotheistic religions of Islam and Christianity, the belief in one supreme being ruling over the universe and in the continuation of life after death was already entrenched in West African culture. Religion was a part of everyday life and was passed on from generation to generation through oral transmission and rituals instead of written records, and belief systems were often connected to the importance of kinship via the worship of ancestral spirits. Priests, elders, kings, and heroes were also incorporated into religious practices, although there were no real religious leaders or founding

⁴⁷ Hornsby Jr. 2005.

⁴⁸ Hornsby Jr. 2005.

fathers. Magic was also an intrinsic part of these religions, invoked to ensure that specific events happened to a specific person, and divinations were performed to let the priests know which rituals to perform. Many of these local religious beliefs and practices were brought to the Americas, transformed by their contact with Christianity, and, in a sense, globalized; for example, the Vodun⁴⁹ religion of Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria gave rise to several similar religions in the Caribbean such as Haitian Vodou, Dominican Vudú, or Louisiana Voodoo/Voudou.

Music is another local cultural practice that was preserved and adapted by Africans in America.⁵⁰ The early 20th century songsters and blues musicians of the Mississippi Delta have been compared to the griots of Senegambia, a class of singers and musicians who often sang the praises of the rich and powerful in exchange for payment; if payment was not forthcoming, the praise could turn into insults. Griots often delivered their narratives rhythmically and many scholars suggest that this tradition gave rise to modern-day **rap**. The **banjo**, an instrument central to (African) American music, has been traced back to the same region. The “call and response” technique in which a choir of singers responds to a line sung by the main vocalist can still be found in many modern genres of music. Many other forms of art, such as sculpture or the visual arts, also carry the traditional motifs of Africa via similar features, such as protection of the living, fertility, fortune-telling, or ancestor worship. Crafts in which many African slaves excelled due to their heritage include metalwork/blacksmithing, basket weaving, wood carving (often featuring images of reptiles for spiritual strength), and pottery. **Dance** was also an important staple of the culture brought from Africa; for instance, **capoeira**, both a style of dance and a form of martial art, was originally developed by Brazilian slaves as a form of unarmed self-defense that allowed practitioners to confront the armed slave owners.

The African slaves also brought their native **languages** to the Americas. As will be shown in the following subchapter, the slaves did not come from only one country, or one nation, and thus, the languages they spoke were many and varied. There are five language families present on the African continent (Afroasiatic, Austronesian, Indo-European, Niger-Congo, and Nilo-Saharan) and around 2,000 indigenous languages: “one quarter of the world’s languages are spoken only in Africa”.⁵¹ Many slaves who were transported to America were originally from one of the most linguistically diverse areas in the world, the region which forms the border between modern-day Cameroon and Nigeria. Many words from this linguistically unique area have entrenched themselves into modern English. For example, “cola” is the name of a popular drink but also of the

⁴⁹ Meaning “spirit” (Ciment 2007).

⁵⁰ Ciment 2007.

⁵¹ Diamond 1997, in Childs 2003.

African nut from which it is produced; “chimpanzee”, “banana” and “jazz” all derive from the Niger-Congo languages,⁵² the popular game “Jenga” derives from the Swahili word for “build”, and many names of dances, such as mamba, marimba, and the tango, all share African origins.

4.3 The Atlantic Slave Trade – Some statistics

African slavery is often spoken of exclusively as a transatlantic phenomenon, but the available statistics tell a somewhat different story. First of all, African slaves were not sent only across the Atlantic; from the 16th to the 19th centuries, **11 million people were taken across the Atlantic** but another 5 million were transported across the Sahara and the Red Sea, while a further 2 million were transported to the Middle East and the islands of the Indian Ocean. This outflow, of course, had severe consequences for the development of the African continent; estimates claim that by 1850, the African population was only half of what it would have been if not for the slave trade operations.⁵³ Furthermore, before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 15th century, many African societies were developing into complex state systems, a development that was halted by the arrival of the Europeans.⁵⁴ The high level of ethnic fragmentation apparent in modern African societies can be traced back to the period of slave trade, which heightened the sense of instability and the need to protect one’s families and communities with armed force, using weapons that were themselves purchased from European merchants with money obtained by selling captives as slaves. Slaves for these trades were often obtained by kidnapping people from other villages, which further intensified the prevailing sense of instability and insecurity. According to some modern scholars, the development of the slave trade and its consequence of locals raiding and kidnapping other locals had “detrimental consequences, including social and ethnic fragmentation, political instability and a weakening of states, and the corruption of judicial institutions”.⁵⁵

Slavers made more than 54,000 transatlantic voyages in the period of the slave trade, transporting human cargo which amounted to more than 11 million African slaves. **Portuguese** and **Brazilian** traders made 30,000 voyages, shipping a total of 4.6 million slaves. The combined efforts of **Britain** and the British areas of North America are estimated at 13,500 voyages and almost 3 million slaves. Other countries participating in the slave trade included **Spain, France, Holland, and Denmark**. The dominance of Portugal, and by extension Brazil, in the Atlantic Slave Trade is also highlighted when we examine the destinations to which the slaves were transported. The largest

⁵² Childs 2003.

⁵³ Manning 1990.

⁵⁴ Barry 1998.

⁵⁵ Nunn 2008.

number, 4 million slaves, went to **Brazil** and another 2.5 million to the **Spanish empire**, with almost 4 million to British, French, and Dutch possessions in the **West Indies**. Perhaps surprisingly, only around 500,000 slaves ended up in the area of British North America. These numbers point to the hopeless situation of the slaves at the time: enslavement, forced transportation, and abysmal living conditions were not merely a problem of British making, it was instead an integral part of a system in which a significant portion of Europe was complicit. Of the 11 million slaves who survived the journey to the Americas, 6 million started as workers on **sugar plantations** and 2 million on **coffee plantations**, 1 million each in mines or as domestic labor force, 500,000 in cotton fields, and 250,000 each in cocoa fields or in construction/building.

Given the territorial scope of the Atlantic slave trade, why is there such a predominance of references to slavery in terms of the US territories? One possible reason could be that the **life expectancy** of slaves in mainland North America areas tended to be slightly better than those in the Caribbean or South America. Firstly, the diet of North American slaves included a greater proportion of vitamins and minerals, resulting in lower rates of disease; while nearly 40% of slaves in Jamaica died of various fevers, the death rate in Virginia was an average of about 11%. Around 7.3% of Virginia slaves died of old age – while a shockingly low percentage in itself, it was still twice as high as that of Jamaican slaves.⁵⁶ This disparity was partly due to the conditions in the two locations; in the Caribbean, the majority of worked land was sugar plantations and food had to be imported and rationed. Moreover, sugar farming in a tropical climate was much more demanding than tobacco or cotton farming in more temperate climates. In addition, farmers on the American mainland realized that by keeping their slaves moderately healthy, they could work harder and generate a greater income for their masters. Similarly, dead slaves had to be replaced, and this was by no means cheap; historians have calculated that the price for an average slave in 1850 would be equivalent to \$40,000 in today's money.⁵⁷ It was significantly cheaper to maintain one's slaves at moderate health and have them produce children; since children usually inherited the slave status of the mother, they were automatically treated as the slaveowner's property.⁵⁸ For these reasons, by the early 18th century, the slave population in mainland North America was "self-sufficient" by the early 18th century and did not require new shipments of slaves from Africa; in contrast, the slave economy in the British Caribbean continued to rely on transports from Africa until the abolishment of the slave trade in the British Empire in 1833.

⁵⁶ Ciment 2007.

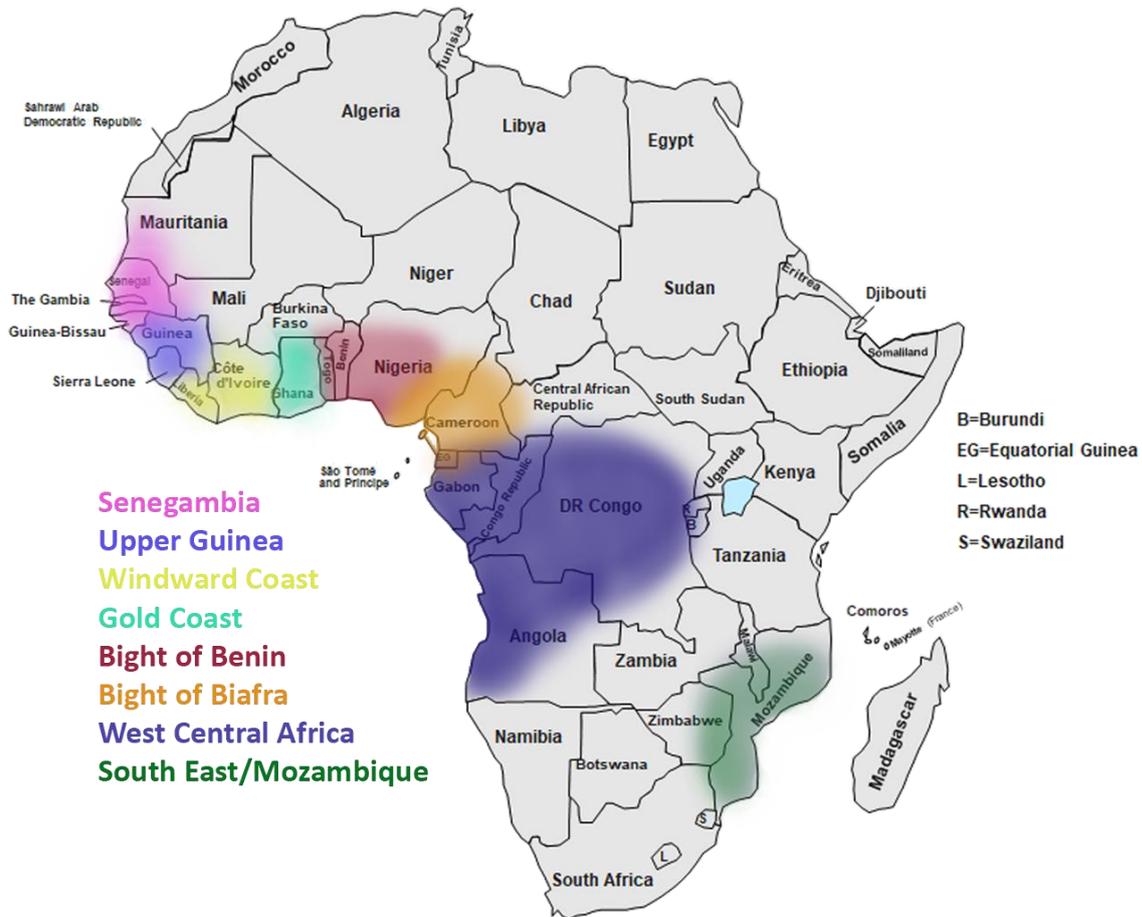
⁵⁷ Ramey Berry 2017.

⁵⁸ The Bible was often used to justify this idea of hereditary slavery, especially the story of Noah and his sons: "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers" (Genesis 9:25). This story was also used to imply that a certain race of men had been divinely predisposed to slavery as punishment for their sins.

So which parts of Africa did the slaves come from?⁵⁹ In the map below, you can see that Atlantic slave traders (primarily the Portuguese, the British, the Dutch, and the French) operated predominantly on the western coast of the continent, mostly due to the logistics of transport. Almost 40% of the total number of slaves transported to the Americas came from the area of **West Central Africa**, i.e., the modern-day Democratic Republic of Congo, the Congo Republic, and Angola. The Bight (or Bay) of Benin, also known as the “**Slave Coast**” due to its primary purpose in the colonial period, encompasses the coasts of modern-day Togo, Benin, and west Nigeria, exported around 20%, while 15% came from the **Bight of Biafra** (east Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon).⁶⁰ Of course, these numbers are estimates rather than exact figures; simply because the slaves were exported from a specific port or coast does not necessarily mean they were from that same country or state. In addition, the ethnic boundaries and the political boundaries of Africa are not always closely aligned.

⁵⁹ Lovejoy 2000.

⁶⁰ The Gold Coast of Ghana and eastern part of Côte d'Ivoire, exported more than 10% of the overall numbers. The areas of Senegambia (Senegal, Gambia), Upper Guinea (Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leone), and Southeastern Africa (Mozambique, Madagascar) exported between 4% and 5% each, and the area of the Windward Coast (Liberia and Côte d'Ivoire) almost 2%.



4.4 Becoming African American

In the following section, we will look at some of the most prominent events, legislation, and political movements that have influenced what it means to be African American today. As we have seen, slavery is a crucial element of this history, a period in African American history that spanned more than two centuries from the arrival of the first African slaves to Jamestown in 1619 to the passing of the 13th Amendment of the Constitution which formally abolished slavery in 1865.⁶¹ Yet, what exactly occurred over the course of these two and a half centuries? It would be incorrect to assume that the African slaves submitted passively to the inhumane treatment they received at the hands of plantation owners. In fact, in the territory of the US alone, there are more than 250 documented cases of ten or more slaves rebelling against their masters.

The earliest recorded rebellion happened as early as 1663, only 44 years after the first slaves were brought to Virginia, and included both black and white indentured servants.⁶² The 18th century saw several significant revolts – or what was considered by authorities to be a revolt, such as **The**

⁶¹ “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.”

⁶² Blakemore 2019.

New York Conspiracy of 1741 when Fort George and several other buildings in New York, Long Island, and New Jersey were burned down, with black people being accused of having conspired to burn down the city, kill white men and seize white women. At this time, black people constituted approximately 20% of New York City's population, and there were certain groups that could have organized such a large-scale event; dozens of black people (and some white indentured servants) were executed, publicly flogged or exiled, largely on the basis of dubious accusations in the testimony of a 16-year-old Irish indentured servant who was promised "significant rewards" for her testimony.⁶³

Throughout the 18th century, rebellions among slaves took on a much subtler form, partly because most of the leaders of the early revolts were African, not American-born of African descent. As the numbers of Creoles (people of French, Spanish and African descent born in America) rose among the slave populations, the forms of resistance changed from open and violent rebellion to subtle everyday tactics aimed at gaining concessions from the masters, such as better working conditions, increased food rations or some degree of social autonomy.⁶⁴ The Enlightenment concepts of universal freedoms and rights which took political form in the American and French Revolutions of the late 18th century also contributed to a growing rebellious consciousness.

The Great Awakening, a period of Christian revivalism that spread in the 1730s and 1740s greatly influenced the formation of an African American identity. Although some of the early revivalist preachers and missionaries spoke openly against slavery, many later abandoned these demands and adopted a more pragmatic approach, condemning the brutality and violence to which the slaves were subjected on daily basis. Nonetheless, some Southern slaveholders did free their slaves as a response to the revivalist teachings, and many other slaves were converted to Christianity, either willingly or at the command of their masters. In addition to conversion, many evangelists, such as David Whitefield or Samuel Davies, also advised slaveholders to educate their slaves; after all, if an individual was supposed to study the Bible, they had to be at least literate. The revivalist worship practices also allowed for mixed-race worship, even though black people were usually delegated to a separate section of the church, but black missionaries and pastors could preach to both white and black congregations. These events, and those of the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century, set the precedent for the development of future independent black churches and the religious practices seen among African Americans today.⁶⁵

⁶³ Doolen 2004.

⁶⁴ Hornsby Jr. 2005.

⁶⁵ Hornsby Jr. 2005.

The **American Revolution** (and the **American Revolutionary War**) of 1765-1783 brought with it the Declaration of Independence and its famous second paragraph stating “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”.⁶⁶ The Revolution also transformed American society in that the Northern slaveowners freed their slaves, thereby creating a significant free black population in the United States. However, this process was by no means immediate or universal; while the majority of Northern slaves had been freed by the first decade of the 19th century, some were still enslaved at the beginning of the Civil War, and the attainment of their freedom by no means led to a significant change in economic status for the majority of black people. Nonetheless, greater freedom to gather and take an active interest in politics led to an increase in the number of African organizations in the northern states such as churches, schools, and literary societies.⁶⁷ In much of the South, the situation did not undergo such a dramatic change, but in the upper South, slaves did gain easier access to the possibility of buying their freedom or of being freed by their masters by different means. Paradoxically, the selectiveness of manumission (freeing of slaves) in the upper South created a much more skilled and economically stable population of freedmen and freedwomen than among black communities in the North, although their political activism was much more limited.⁶⁸

The **French Revolution** of 1789-1799 espoused very similar ideals of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, and supported the idea that the oppressed masses should rise against their oppressors. This is exactly what happened in the French colony of Saint Domingue in 1791 when a significant free black community and a larger slave population saw an opportunity to gain support from the new French regime against the “aristocracy of the skin”⁶⁹ and a large-scale rebellion broke out. Although the French government did not initially support the uprising, the unrest provoked some aggression from the English and the Spanish in the area, and the French ended up making a deal with the leaders of the rebellion; the rebels would defend Saint Domingue in exchange for the abolition of slavery. When the conflict was over, France reneged on the agreement and attempted to reimpose slavery in 1802, but the European expedition was defeated, and the newly independent nation of **Haiti** was proclaimed in 1804.

Some scholars argue that all these events, especially the Great Awakenings and the American Revolution, contributed to the rise of a new group identity and that by the end of the

⁶⁶ The Declaration of Independence 1776.

⁶⁷ Palmer 2005.

⁶⁸ Palmer 2005.

⁶⁹ Palmer 2005.

colonial period black slaves were already developing a sense of racial identity specific to being of African descent on American soil.⁷⁰ Of course, the **Civil War** (1861-1865) sped up this process dramatically with the enlistment of many free black men into the Union Armies. Curiously, it was the Southern Confederacy that allowed black men to work for their army first; not as soldiers but as army laborers, helping to build camps and fortifications, and cooking or tending to animals.⁷¹ The government in the North feared the risk of insurgency and initially refused to allow black men to be armed. However, as the Union armies progressed further South, more and more enslaved people fled their former masters, and “tens of thousands of black men and women poured into Union camps”,⁷² providing ancillary “fatigue work” such as laboring, cooking or washing. As the war continued, the Union suffered heavy losses and white men became much more reluctant to enlist, leading to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation:

...on the 1st day of January, A.D. 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.

(Emancipation Proclamation, 1862)

Afterward, more than 200,000 black men enlisted into the Union forces, with almost 40,000 being killed or injured; however, the “emancipation” of black men was not absolute. While they could enlist and serve, they were mostly relegated to special units called the United States Colored Troops and were commanded almost exclusively by white officers. In addition, they rarely saw battle: the USCT units were often utilized as “army labor” and were paid less than white soldiers.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, the American South underwent a process known as the **Reconstruction** – a total transformation of the region’s political, social, and economic structures. Before the Civil War, millions of black people in the US lived as slaves and many others lived in an undefined grey area between slavery and freedom⁷³. And while Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation certainly aided the process,

[in] most regions of the South, freedom was either seized by the slaves themselves or offered by advancing Union armies. Emancipation came whenever slaves sensed that the authority of the master no longer held sway. Emancipation, then, was not just a legal act, but a

⁷⁰ Hornsby Jr. 2005.

⁷¹ Deford 2006.

⁷² Deford 2006.

⁷³ Ciment 2007.

psychological and existential event in the lives of every African American emerging from bondage.

(Ciment, 2007, p.88)

Even among Northerners, there was no real consensus on what the post-war South should look like; while some advocated for the sale of former plantation land to freedmen and the creation of local farming communities (a vision shared by the slaves themselves), others still held fast to the racist belief that blacks would not work unless coerced and proposed keeping plantations under white ownership, merely shifting the concept of slavery to the slightly more acceptable concept of wage labor. During the Civil War, many slaves had joined the Union army and the needs of these soldiers and their camp followers had to be addressed; for this reason, freed black families were temporarily granted some land. Many saw this as a promise of economic independence once the war was over, but ultimately the President's first order was that all land seized for this purpose should be returned to its former owners; any black people using the land at that time could either sign a contract with the former owner and become laborers or would be forced to move again. A system of **sharecropping** was set in place in which former slaves rented a portion of the plantation's land for a certain share of the crops grown on the land, usually half of the total harvest. However, this arrangement perpetuated the inequalities in land ownership; for instance, in Georgia in the 1870s, almost half of the population was black but only about 1% of the land was owned by black people, and only about 2% of urban or town properties.⁷⁴

In the era of Reconstruction, the **US Constitution** was amended three times; the 13th Amendment (1865) effectively ended slavery, the 14th (1868) granted civil rights and protection to former slaves, and the 15th (1870) ensured the right to vote regardless of "race, color, or previous condition of servitude".⁷⁵ Black people were suddenly granted the right to vote and to be elected (or more specifically black *men* – like white women, black women did not gain the right to vote until much later), to move their households away from the plantations, to shift their work from cotton to crops which they grew for themselves, to wear fashionable clothes, or object to a white person's opinion. But the Reconstruction government which offered some hope of racial equality to the South, effectively ended a decade later, with the so-called **Compromise of 1877** between Republicans and southern Democrats. The Republican candidate, Rutherford B. Hayes, was elected President on the condition that federal troops be withdrawn from the South, ending federal interference in Southern politics in cases of fraud or violence against black people.

⁷⁴ Ciment 2007.

⁷⁵ The Constitution of the US; Amendment XV.

With the formation of the Ku Klux Klan in the late 1860s and the shift from “**Reformation**” towards “**Redemption**”, a political movement of Democrats oriented towards economic growth of the South and white supremacy, the now officially free black people were deprived of a great portion of their political voice in the South. While black people were still being elected for office throughout the 1880s, laws were passed that targeted black and poor white voters specifically. One example of this is poll taxes, a system that mandated that voters pay a specific sum in order to be allowed to vote. In some cases, this legislation was retroactive and voters would be forced to pay for all the years since they had turned 21, the legal voting age at the time; this sum was impossible for many to pay, especially working-class voters. Some states also implemented a so-called “grandfather clause” which stated that voters would be exempt from poll taxes if their grandfather had voted in an election prior to the abolishment of slavery. Poll taxes had a significant influence on African American voter turnout; for instance, in Texas, the number of black voters dropped from 60% before the establishment of poll taxes to just under 30%; in Mississippi, a black turnout of 44% before the introduction of poll taxes dropped to 18% afterward.⁷⁶ Other suppression systems included literacy tests or specific residency documentation, and some of these systems remained in place well into the 1960s, with additional segregation laws being passed throughout the nearly 80 years; for example, Oklahoma passed a law segregating phone booths in 1915, in 1932 black and white baseball teams were forbidden from playing within two blocks’ distance from each other in Atlanta and Georgia, and Virginia segregated airport waiting rooms in 1944.⁷⁷

The concept of the two races being “**separate but equal**” was key to the segregation policies which were passed in the US from the 1870s onwards. These laws were known as **Jim Crow laws**, a phrase derived from the name of a blackface cartoon character and, by extension, a widespread pejorative term for black people. Schools, libraries, public transportation, and other public facilities were strategically and systematically segregated, with facilities for black people usually left underdeveloped and underfunded. This approach became so normalized in the public consciousness that by the end of the 19th century, segregation was even enforced in spaces that were not subject to specific segregation legislation; the principle of segregation was also upheld in the famous 1896 Supreme Court ruling on *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which stated that segregation by race was entirely in accordance with the US Constitution.

The reactions to these discriminatory practices and laws varied even among African Americans. In 1895, Booker T. Washington, a former slave who became perhaps the most

⁷⁶ Ciment 2007.

⁷⁷ Ciment 2007.

influential African American leader of the 19th century,⁷⁸ spoke out against civil unrest and protests for civil rights, advocating instead that black people persevere in bettering themselves and their economic condition through education. This conciliatory approach was criticized by others, such as W. E. B. DuBois, who called for an immediate end to public discrimination and demanded equal treatment of blacks and whites before the law and fair access to education for children regardless of race. DuBois was one of the founders of the **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)** in 1909.

WWI failed to bring any significant improvements to the treatment of African Americans; the US only entered the war in 1917, and while 365,000 blacks were drafted into the US army, only 639 were trained as officers.⁷⁹ However, indirect changes were set in motion as early as 1910 and continued over the next several decades in a demographic shift that became known as **The Great Migration**. Falling cotton prices and increased demand for labor in the more industrialized regions of the country, together with a fall in migration from Europe due to the war and later restrictions led large numbers of both black and white sharecroppers, farmers, and plantation workers to move to the cities in the North and the West over the first half of the 20th century. The unprecedented development of large urban communities of black people gave rise to a new wave of political, social, and artistic creativity known as the **Harlem Renaissance** (1920-1935). **Alain Locke**, one of the most prominent writers of this movement, described the emergence of a new consciousness that he termed **the “New Negro”** – defying stereotypes and celebrating black achievements. During the Harlem Renaissance, there were ten major themes that preoccupied black writers and artists:

1. Should black artists continue to seek “respectability” from Americans, or stress their own experiences, growing out of the black experience, and try to first reach a black audience in the struggle for black literary achievement?
2. How should black intellectuals express black pride, racial consciousness, and uplift in their artistic works?
3. What kinds of protest should be employed in black literary production?
4. Should black writers support the continued movement of blacks in the Great Migration?
5. What special role should black Americans play in anti-colonial struggles, especially in Africa?
6. Was there a place for disillusionment, militancy, and anger in black arts?
7. How were black women’s voices to be heard in the movement?
8. Should black writers focus on racial themes and avoid overtly political statements in their artistic creations?

⁷⁸ Ciment 2007.

⁷⁹ Ciment 2007.

9. How would blacks deal with the new issue of the diversity of the black population in urban centers – local blacks, migrants from the South, and immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean?
10. Where should blacks publish their manuscripts: with all-black publishers, or on the open American market (with white publishers)?

(Thompson, 2005, p. 481)

These issues clearly illustrate the scope of the difficulties that black writers, and other artists, had to face, many of which they are still struggling with today to some degree. Who should art be aimed at? Where should it be published? And how should blacks deal with diversity within the community? The answers to these questions were not clear in the 1920s, and they remain unanswered even a century later. Nonetheless, the rising hopes of the Harlem Renaissance were effectively ended by the **Great Depression** of the 1930s and by the beginning of WWII some years later. Between 1939 and 1959, the ten main challenges facing black activists, artists, and community leaders revolved around the following issues:

1. What economic, social, and political analysis should black intellectuals employ in their creative works: capitalism, socialism, or communism?
2. How should black separatism or integration influence black literary activities?
3. Should black Americans support the Republican or Democratic parties?
4. What role should protest themes play in black artistic productions?
5. How should the lives of black women, men, and children be reflected in black literature and the arts?
6. What roles should black Americans play in the future development of Africa?
7. Was there a place for race, or black consciousness, in African American literature?
8. Was there a special role for the black press to play in black American affairs and literary activities?
9. What steps should the Civil Rights Movement take to advance black American human and civil rights?
10. What role should black colleges and universities play in staging black artistic productions?

(Thompson, 2005, p. 484)

The three decades after the Great Depression also brought gradual progress in terms of racial equality. While some Southern states, such as Louisiana, Mississippi, or Alabama, remained strictly segregated well into the 1960s, many states took some earlier steps towards desegregation, albeit fairly tentative in nature. Rather than challenge the “separate” part of the “separate but equal” doctrine, the Supreme Court was known to rule in favor of black people when the “equal” part was

proven to be untrue; in two cases in 1938 and 1950, for example, states were forced to admit black students to white schools unless they were willing to build all-black schools which would not be inferior to white schools in terms of the quality of education provided. In 1948, President Truman issued an executive order banning segregation in the armed forces; in 1954, the Supreme Court ruled that segregation in public schools was unconstitutional in *Brown v. Board of Education*. These legal steps were mirrored by direct action; in 1955, the Montgomery Bus Boycott began when Rosa Parks, a local NAACP member, refused to give up her seat to a white passenger. Throughout the 1950s and 60s, many black students organized in groups for sit-ins and so-called “freedom rides” across the US.

The Civil Rights Act of 1964, which banned “segregation in public accommodations and job discrimination on the basis of race, national origin, religion or sex”,⁸⁰ was met with strong opposition from the South, but federal agencies could now withhold funding from institutions which practiced discrimination, and people who faced discrimination in education or the workplace could petition for redress. This legislation was soon followed by the **Voting Rights Act of 1965** which banned literacy tests (poll taxes had been banned in the previous year) and allowed the federal government to send examiners to register voters in any state where more than 50% of the eligible population had failed to register.

Once again, two very distinct schools of thought evolved among black leaders and activists in response to the developments of the 1960s. While integrationists, such as DuBois, advocated for nonviolent, equal integration into the white majority, separatists, or black nationalists, believed the white majority to be “irredeemably racist”⁸¹ and called for immediate separation of blacks into their own social, political, and economic spaces, a “fight fire with fire” response to white violence against blacks.⁸² The most prominent leader of this **Black Power** movement of the 1960s and 70s was **Malcolm X**, while the integrationist tendencies at the time were represented by **Martin Luther King Jr.** Some scholars argue that **Black Panthers**, or Black Panther Party for Self-Defense, was the most prominent black power party, founded in 1966 by college students with the goal to utilize the anger black people felt about segregation and police brutality and turn it into a political force.

In the early 1970s, the Supreme Court ruled that the Civil Rights Act prohibited not only overt discrimination but also “practices that are fair in form but discriminatory in operation”,⁸³ not only in the hiring process and in the workplace but also in education. Businesses (and later, schools)

⁸⁰ Ciment 2007.

⁸¹ Ciment 2007.

⁸² Ciment 2007.

⁸³ Griggs v. Duke Power Co., 1971.

were thus advised to avoid discrimination lawsuits by specifically seeking out minority applicants, a process also known as **affirmative action**. This practice gave rise to numerous lawsuits and court cases attempting to decide whether specific cases of affirmative action were constitutional or not, and the backlash against affirmative action has been a constant feature of US public discourse until well into the 21st century. Affirmative action was effectively repealed in California in 1996 with Proposition 209, stating that

[t]he state shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.

(California Constitution, Article I, Section 31, 1996)

However, in 2020, California is considering voting on the repeal of Proposition 209 in order to “remedy discrimination against, and underrepresentation of, certain disadvantaged groups” by considering gender, race, and ethnicity in college or job applications. These local debates clearly illustrate that the struggle for racial equality in the US is far from over and that many of the issues that plagued the 20th century still remain unresolved today. The problems of discrimination, underrepresentation, and violence against African Americans have gained high levels of visibility in the first two decades of the 21st century and given rise to a new movement protesting racially motivated violence titled **Black Lives Matter**. The movement first emerged following the death of Trayvon Martin, a 17-year-old black boy killed by a neighborhood watch volunteer George Zimmermann in 2012, and the subsequent protests it aroused. Zimmermann was found not guilty in 2013, and the hashtag #blacklivesmatter was created by three black women sparking a new social movement and inspiring protests all across the world.⁸⁴

According to US Census estimates from 2019, around 13.4% of the current US population is African American, but the black population is likely even higher if we take into account immigrants from African countries who tend to identify with their respective ethnicities rather than terming themselves as African American. Despite the significant size of this minority, only ten African Americans have ever been elected or appointed to the US Senate (0.5% of the overall number of nearly 2,000 Senators) and only 153 (1.39% of the total 11,040) have been elected to the House of Representatives. This political underrepresentation, the misrepresentation of African Americans in the media, and the police brutality and overt violence directed against African Americans are all issues that are reflected in contemporary African American literature.

⁸⁴ Lebron 2017.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. Which historical event do you believe to be the most important to the formation of African American identities? Why?**
- 2. Which African American cultural items and practices may be reflected in African American literature?**

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5. African American Literature

Key terms: autobiography, slave narrative, testimonial, antebellum, postbellum, abolitionist movement, Emancipation Proclamation, Revolutionary War, Harlem Renaissance, Afrofuturism

As you have seen in a chapter on African American culture, it is almost impossible to summarize the artistic contribution and essence of African Americans, an ethnic group that has been present in America almost since its discovery by Europeans. In the following chapter, we will go through a concise outline of African American literature. We will see how the literary form of the **autobiography** gradually evolved into a unique sub-genre of African American literature called a **slave narrative** during the antebellum period. We will then discuss the major works of the Reconstruction period which culminated in the burgeoning period of the **Harlem Renaissance** in the 1920s and the **Protest Movement** in the 1950s. In the aftermath of the Harlem Renaissance, we can see the emergence of a wide range of genres such as novels, poetry, and dramas culminating in the rich array of contemporary writers dealing with contemporary themes such as gay, lesbian and urban narratives which depict life at the end of 20th and beginning of the 21st century in African American literature. African American literature is an evolving discipline and new texts and writers continue to be re-discovered, which means that we are still in the process of putting the pieces of this amazing ethnic literary puzzle together.

Warm-up:

1. African American writers were a part of our History of American Literature course. Do you remember any major representatives of African American Literature?
2. BLM is an abbreviation for Black Lives Matter. What do you know about this movement?
3. African American literature is very closely linked with African American culture. Can you think of any contemporary representatives, either singers or artists, who are well-established in 21st-century pop culture?

After studying this chapter, students should be able to understand the following:

1. The historical development of African American literature
2. The major works and the most representative authors of African American literature.
3. To understand African American literature in the context of American literature.
4. To identify the most distinctive genres and features of African American literature.

5.2 The Harlem Renaissance

Even though the postbellum period offered a glimpse of hope in African American literature, a true renaissance did not emerge until the 1920s with the so-called **Harlem Renaissance**. One of the reasons why it took so long for African American literature to develop is undoubtedly that of the long history of racial inequality which had been frequently legitimized not only by political figures but also by writers. Although he was the principal author of the Declaration of Independence (1776) which states that “all men are equal”, Thomas Jefferson strongly believed in the existence of biological differences between blacks and whites.⁸⁵ Other key texts in early American literature such as Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) and Mark Twain’s *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1885) also contributed to the development of inappropriate African American stereotypes. In his seminal work *The Souls of the Black Folk* (1907), the prominent sociologist, historian, and civil-rights activist **W. B. Dubois** addresses European Americans directly, asking: “Would America have been America without her Negro people?” He answers his own question in strong terms:

“Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song – soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire two hundred years earlier than your weak hands could have done it; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centered for thrice a hundred years; out of the nation’s heart we have called all that was best to throttle and subdue all that was worst; fire and blood, prayer and sacrifice, have billowed over this people, and they have found peace only in the altars of the God of Right. Nor has our gift of the Spirit been merely passive. Actively we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation – we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?”⁸⁶

W.B. Dubois’s work *The Souls of the Black Folk* certainly deserves more attention, especially his idea of double consciousness. A similar stance is adopted by **Langston Hughes** in his poem “I, too, am America” (in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*). This new attitude of African Americans towards the stigma of racial determinism and inequality created a new intellectual platform that aimed to raise the consciousness of African Americans and establish a new image of

⁸⁵ Brtiannica 2022.

⁸⁶ Reilton 2021.

self-confidence and self-actualization. “The New Negro! Hoped to shrug off the image of subservience and submissiveness that had characterized the “Old Negro”.”⁸⁷

The Harlem Renaissance is associated with a program called the **New Negro movement**. Taking its name from the title of Alain Locke’s (1885-1954) powerful essay and anthology “The New Negro” (1925), it rejected assimilation into white culture and emphasized the importance of African American heritage and traditions.

*With this renewed self-respect and self-dependence, the life of the Negro community is bound to enter a new dynamic phase... The days of “aunties”, “uncles” and “mammies” is equally gone. Uncle Tom and Sambo have passed on, and even the “Colonel” and “George” play barnstorm roles from which they escape with relief when the public spotlight is off. The popular melodrama has about played itself out, and it is time to scrap the fictions, garret the bogeys and settle down to a realistic facing of facts.*⁸⁸

The Harlem Renaissance was the emergence of the Harlem neighborhood in New York City as a Black cultural mecca in the early 20th century and the resulting social and artistic explosion which it inspired. Lasting roughly from the 1910s through the mid-1930s, the period is considered a golden age in African American culture which was apparent in various cultural fields including literature, music, stage performance, and art.⁸⁹

Langston Hughes (1902-1967) is considered to be one of the greatest American poets and a key figure of the Harlem Renaissance. His entry onto the Harlem cultural scene contributed to a reshaping of African American identity and the incorporation of musical forms into poetry.⁹⁰ Hughes’s poem “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (1921) rings with his immense pride in his African heritage and marks the beginning of new forms in African American literature. Musical forms of poetry and also depictions of Harlem nightlife appear in *The Weary Blues* (1926) or *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), works which are considered to be some of the finest collections of poetry since Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.

Zora Neal Hurston’s (1891-1960) literary legacy is best exemplified in her work *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), a canonical text of both African American literature and also women’s studies. Hurston was a versatile writer who also carried out anthropological studies in collecting the folktales of black rural communities. She was also a free-spirited artist who refused

⁸⁷ Nelson 2015.

⁸⁸ Locke 1968..

⁸⁹ History.com 2022.

⁹⁰ Nelson, 235 2015.

to play the role of the “tragic mulatta”, but this harmed her career and most of her works were out of print by the time she died.

Countee Cullen, a poet, **Louis Armstrong**, a trumpeter who is known as the founding father of jazz, **Marcus Garvey**, an activist who focused on improving the conditions of the Black working class, **Aaron Douglas**, a painter, **Bessie Smith**, a singer, are just some of the key figures of the Harlem Renaissance during which African American culture flourished. The era came to an end with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 but its impact on African American identity and culture served as an inspiration for the Civil Rights Movement. We should also mention other poets of the period such as Claude McKay and Jean Toomer whose modernist novel *Cane* (1923) uses a variety of literary genres.

5.3 The Protest Movement

African American literature in **the 1950s** focused on the “black experience” and protests against segregation and racial injustices and the awakening of a new racial consciousness. Many works in this period focus on the conditional aspect of equality and the issues of race, gender, and ethnicity in eliminating racism and the social inequity with which it is linked. The new racial consciousness in African American culture enabled the rise of a new type of writers such as **Richard Wright** whose work started earlier but had an influence on **Ralph Waldo Ellison**, and **James Baldwin**. Even though their works continue to criticize racial discrimination and the impact of the transgenerational transition of the trauma of slavery, they also offer realistic accounts of the psychological struggles involved in finding a place in white society. This is particularly apparent in novels such as **Richard Wright**’s *Native Son* (1940) and **Ralph Ellison**’s *Invisible Man* (1951) which deal with an unnamed protagonist confronting the psychological invisibility of African Americans in American society. **James Baldwin**’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1952) explores the impact of religion on African American identity. Baldwin other work such as *Giovanni’s Room* (1956) addresses the issue of homosexuality and the development of the main character’s sexual identity. Female authors were also well represented in this period, such as **Gwendolyn Brooks** who was the first African American female poet to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1949 for her collection *Annie Allen* which depicts the Black experience during World War II.

The exploration of African American history and the consequences of racism can be found in **Alex Haley**’s controversial novel *Roots* (1976). The saga covers the lives of six generations of Haley’s family starting in 18th-century Gambia. Even though Haley faced considerable criticism regarding the authenticity of his family saga, it remains one of the most powerful depictions of racial history in American literature. Haley was the co-author of *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*,

the life story of the Black nationalist leader, which sold six million copies in its first decade. *Roots* was also a huge success, also selling six million in just its first year of publication, but the work has faced accusations of plagiarism and inaccuracies and has been kept out of the canon.⁹¹ Another controversial author is **Ishmael Reed** (1938-) whose work uses satire to give voice to neglected African Americans. His best-known novel, *Mumbo Jumbo* (1972) is a highly eclectic blend of magic realism and science fiction that incorporates conspiracy theories and religious themes and can be read as an Afrofuturist text.

Historical examinations of slavery are also found in **Toni Morrison**'s fictionalized account of the life of the escaped slave Margaret Garner in her novel *Beloved* (1988) for which she also wrote an opera libretto in 2005. *Beloved* is also often mentioned as a genre of neo-slave narratives. **Toni Morrison** (1931-2019) was the first African American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 and she is considered to be one of the leading intellectuals of the 20th century. Morrison's literary career started with her 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye* which was published when Morrison was almost in her 40s. This was followed by *Sula* (1973), *The Song of Solomon* (1977), and eleven more novels, children's books, and essays. Morrison's legacy lies in her assertion that the African American story is deeply rooted in history and in the legacy of slavery and she offers new perceptions of American history and identity. In the film titled *The Pieces I Am* (2019) she speaks about her reasons for writing:

*I didn't want to speak for black people. I wanted to speak to and be among. So the first thing I had to do was to eliminate the white gaze. Jimmi Baldwin used to talk about it, the little white man that sits on your shoulder and checks out everything you do or say. So I wanted to knock him off and you're free.*⁹²

The post-Civil-Rights era brought to the fore such writers as **Toni Cade Bambara, David Bradley, Paule Marshall, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Jamaica Kincaid, Paule Marshall,** and **Ntozake Shange**, but these are only a selection of the many authors who have left their mark on the remarkably versatile and diverse field of African American literature. These writers explore themes such as African American identity, and African diaspora using the trope of the “**talking book**” that connects the written text to the complex oral and musical traditions that play a key role within African American culture.⁹³

⁹¹ Dugdale 2017.

⁹² *The Pieces I am* (2019).

⁹³ Nelson 22, 2015.

5.4 African American Drama

When we speak about the development of drama in the context of African American literature, we must go back to the early 19th century and discuss **the minstrel show**, one of the most popular dramatic forms of the period in which white actors donned blackface make-up and parodied African American dress, dance, speech, and song.⁹⁴ Although minstrel shows enjoyed huge popularity into the 20th century, they were gradually dismissed as offensive for their use of racial stereotypes. The first African American drama of the 20th century is **Joseph Seamon Cotter Sr.**'s *Caleb, the Degenerate* from 1903. In 1923 **Willis Richardson** wrote the first African American drama to be produced on Broadway titled *The Chip Woman's Fortune*. With the onset of the Great Depression, African American drama went into decline however a number of plays were produced on Broadway such as **J. Augustus Smith**'s *Louisiana* (1933) and **Hal Johnson**'s *Run, Little Chillun!* (1933).

The themes of interracial relationships, segregation, and domestic life in the ghetto emerged in African American drama of **the 50s**, in particular, **Lorraine Hansberry**'s play *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959), the first Broadway play to be written by African American woman. Musicals were more predominant in African American drama of the 1960s such as **Ossie Davis**' *Purlie Victorious* (1961) and **Langston Hughes**' *Black Nativity* (1961) and *Prodigal Son* (1965). The post-Civil Rights movement enabled African American drama to flourish, with **Amiri Baraka** (formerly known as LeRoi Jones) emerging as a leading figure in the Black Theatre Movement. His confrontational approach to African American consciousness is most evident in his play *Dutchman or The Slave* (1964). A similar stance was adopted by Baraka's contemporary and fellow member of the Black Theatre Movement **Ed Bullins** in his drama *The Electronic Nigger* (1968) and *A Son, Come Home* (1968). In **1970** Charles Gordone's *No Place to Be Somebody* was the first African American play to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama followed by **August Wilson**'s play *Fences* (1987). August Wilson was the dominant figure in African American drama in the **1980s and 1990s**, and his plays offered a satirical view of the African American experience. His cycle of dramatic works maps the lives of African Americans in the 20th century. **Suzan-Lori Parks** was the first African American female playwright to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama with her *Top Dog/Under Dog* in **2002**. Parks is notable for her retrospective looks at older examinations of African American literary themes: she has adapted Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into a screenplay and Gershwin's opera *Porgy and Bess*.

⁹⁴ Britannica 2022.

5.5 Science fiction, African American gay and lesbian literature

Science fiction is generally considered to be the domain of white writers but many African American authors have also made important contributions to the genre. In the 1990s, the critic Mark Dery coined the term **Afrofuturism** to define “a cultural aesthetic that combines science-fiction, history, and fantasy to explore the African-American experience and aims to connect those from the black diaspora with their forgotten African ancestry”.⁹⁵ The most prominent representative of this cultural aesthetic is **Octavia E. Butler** (1947-2006) who is considered to be the foremost Black woman author in sci-fi, but other notable writers include **Samuel R. Delany**, **Steve Barnes**, and **Charles Saunders**. The science-fiction of these writers often features characters who eschew fixed racial or gender roles.

Gay and **lesbian** literature has historically remained an invisible genre and this was also the case with African American examples of this form of literature. Nonetheless, there are numerous African American authors who examine and discuss their sexual orientation in their writings. **Langston Hughes** decried the persecution of lesbians and gays in his 1951 poem “Café 3 A.M.” which was written a few years before the Stonewall riots. Homoerotic desire, often hidden in coded language, can also be found in the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and also in the work of **James Baldwin**, such as his coming-of-age novel *Go Tell It on the Mountain* or *Giovanni’s Room*. The years since the 1980s have seen a broader acceptance of gay and lesbian African fiction such as **Gordon Heath**’s *Deep are the Roots: Memoirs of a Black Expatriate*, **Audre Lorder**’s *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* (1982) and **Michelle Cliff**’s works in which she examines her Afro-Caribbean cultural and sexual identities.

As we can see in this brief outline, African American literature has undergone a continual process of transformation, and this is no less true in the early 21st century, with a wide variety of writers, artists, and prominent figures promoting the arts and the culture of African Americans. Among the most significant contemporary writers are **Ta-Nehisi Coates** (1975) who came to public attention with his autobiography *Between the World and Me* which maps the life of an African American in modern America. Coates’ journalistic work has also made a serious contribution to contemporary discussions on the topics of reparations, systemic racism, and white supremacy. New queer feminism was introduced by **Roxane Gay** (1974) in her 2014 collection of essays titled *Bad Feminist*. Historical reevaluations also appear in the work of **Colson Whitehead**, a highly acclaimed writer who was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2016 for his book *The Underground Railroad*. Other figures from popular culture such as Oprah Winfrey and politicians

⁹⁵ Tate

such as the 44th President of the USA Barack Obama are often at the forefront of the contemporary African American cultural scene.

Reading and discussion:

1. Read the following extract from Frederick Douglass' slave narrative and identify the stylistic features of the slave narrative. How does Douglass envision the escape from slavery? Can we see slavery as a metaphor in Douglass' narrative?

Very soon after I went to live with Mr. and Mrs. Auld, she very kindly commenced to teach me the A, B, C. After I had learned this, she assisted me in learning to spell words of three or four letters. Just at this point of my progress, Mr. Auld found out what was going on, and at once forbade Mrs. Auld to instruct me further, telling her, among other things, that it was unlawful, as well as unsafe, to teach a slave to read. To use his own words, further, he said, "If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master--to do as he is told to do. Learning would spoil the best nigger in the world. Now," said he, "if you teach that nigger (speaking of myself) how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy." These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty--to wit, the white man's power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement, and I prized it highly. From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom (Douglass, 37).

2. Read Langston Hughes's poem "I, too" (from *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*) and discuss how the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance appears in the poem. Identify some examples of jazz poetry in Hughes' work.
3. Read Roxane Gay's article "Bad Feminist" (published by VQR) and comment on how the author views "black feminism". How has feminism evolved from the beginnings of African American literature to the present day? What other writers in African American literature address feminist themes?

4. Based on the description given in this chapter, can you name the distinctive themes and features of African American literature? Describe the development of the recognition of African American literature as a part of American literature.

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6. Asian American Culture and Literature

As we have seen with the histories, cultures, and literatures of Native Americans and African Americans, it is crucial to recognize the impossibility and inappropriateness of attempting to homogenize a vast continent of different nations, customs, and cultures into a single distinct group, and this is also the case when we turn our attention to Asian Americans. Based on the estimates of the United Nations, the population of the continent in 2020 accounts for nearly 60% of the world population, a total of 4.6 billion people. The continent is comprised of 48 countries and 3 dependencies or other structures (Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macao), but this chapter will focus on the nations, countries, and cultures whose members have migrated to the US in significant enough numbers to form distinct communities and form the dominant parts of the identity which we know today as Asian American.

According to the data from the US Census Bureau, people of Asian origin are perhaps the fastest-growing minority in the United States; between 2000 and 2015, the number of Asians in the US increased by 72%,⁹⁶ and new data from the 2020 US Census is likely to provide evidence of an even greater increase. Among these 20 million Asian Americans recorded in 2015, people of **Chinese** descent made up nearly a quarter (4.9 mil), followed closely by **Indians** (4 mil) and **Filipinos** (3.9 mil). Other significant groups with a population of more than 1 million in the US include people of **Vietnamese** (2 mil), **Korean** (1.8 mil), and **Japanese** (1.4 mil) descent. The Asian American demographic group can be further divided into three sub-categories:

- **East Asian Americans:** Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Mongolian Americans, Taiwanese Americans, and Tibetan Americans
- **South Asian Americans:** Bangladeshi Americans, Bhutanese Americans, Indian Americans, Nepalese Americans, Pakistani Americans, and Sri Lankan Americans
- **Southeast Asian Americans:** Burmese Americans, Cambodian Americans, Filipino Americans, Hmong Americans, Indonesian Americans, Lao Americans, Malaysian Americans, Mien Americans, Singaporean Americans, Thai Americans, and Vietnamese Americans.

Before the coining of the term “Asian American” in the 1960s, the term “Asian” also seemed to encompass the populations of the Middle East, but the current subdivision clearly illustrates that in

⁹⁶ Lopez, Ruiz, and Patten, 2017.

the US, the term Asian (American) is understood to refer to the regions of the **south, east** and **southeast** Asia, with Middle Eastern and central Asian countries excluded from the Asian American demographic entirely. To compound this problem, the term “Arab American” has not yet been recognized to identify the Middle Eastern community in the US, although estimates suggest that there is a population of around 3.6 million people⁹⁷ who would make use of this label, were it officially available. For this reason, and due to the possibility of mixed ancestry and the difficulty in choosing only a single category, we have to take the data provided by the US Census with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, they provide us with the six categories of Asian Americans we will discuss in this chapter: the Chinese, the Indian, the Filipino, the Vietnamese, the Korean, and the Japanese communities.

6.1 Who are Asian Americans?

5.1 The origins of African American literature

The beginnings of African American literature date back to the colonial period in American history, with texts reflecting the experience of the transition from Africa to America, and contrasts between past and present, freedom and slavery, and oral and written traditions. Literary historians often suggest that the earliest recorded work written by an African American author is the poetry of **Phillis Wheatley** (1753–1784) or **Jupiter Hammon** (ca1711–1806) but it is likely that the African American literary tradition started much earlier, in 1746 when the 16-year-old **Lucy Terry** (1730–1821) wrote a poem titled “Bars Fight”.⁹⁸ This poem was transmitted orally for more than 100 years, first appearing in print in 1855, a fact which demonstrates how much remains unknown about the beginnings of African American literature. Even though these are the first recorded works by African American writers, the early works reveal little about the problems of black life in America or about their authors’ status as slaves. The reality of slavery but also the consequences of the Revolutionary War emerged in the Antebellum Period in which the first slave narratives, songs, spirituals, and other writings emerged, and which made an impact on the cultural presence of African Americans.

The first published work by an African American writer is the autobiography *A Narrative of the Uncommon Sufferings and Surprising Deliverance of Briton Hammon, a Negro Man* which was published in 1760. Autobiographies are one of the most popular genres in American literature generally, but they are particularly central to African American literature. Hammon’s 14-page

⁹⁷ Arab American Stories, 2020.

⁹⁸ Nelson 1, 2015.

autobiography describes typical themes of the colonial American period such as the **trauma of slavery** and the experience of **captivity**, but also **conversion** to Christianity. The importance of Hammon's work lies in its testimonial nature which becomes a basis for the African American **slave narrative**.

The slave narrative is a unique genre of African American literature and consists of an account of the life of a fugitive or former slave, either written by the subject themselves or orally recorded by a biographer. It can be also said that the slave narrative is a literature of **discontent**. Slave narratives can be defined as the personal experiences of slaves before and after the Civil War (1861-1865). They aim to arouse the sympathy of their readers in order to encourage humanitarianism, emphasize traditional Christian religious values, and show an acceptance of the ideals of the dominant white society. In general, antislavery literature also had the important effect of exposing the arbitrary nature of racial categorizations and emphasizing the cruelty of slave owners. The genre made a huge contribution to the movement for the liberation of African Americans.

The first slave narrative is attributed to **Olaudah Equiano** and was published to immediate acclaim as *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African Written by Himself* (1789). With a strong anti-abolitionist stance and an intriguing description of Equiano's life in Nigeria, the work was very popular and was translated into Dutch, German, and Russian in the author's lifetime. Its realistic nature serves as a reflection of 18th-century Africa as a "model of social harmony defiled by Western greed and for its eloquent argument against the barbarous slave trade"⁹⁹:

The first object which saluted my eyes when I arrived on the coast was the sea, and a slave ship, which was then riding at anchor, and waiting for its cargo. These filled me with astonishment, which was soon converted into terror when I was carried on board. I was immediately handled and tossed up to see if I were sound by some of the crew; and I was now persuaded that I had gotten into a world of bad spirits, and that they were going to kill me.... When I looked around the ship too and saw a large furnace or copper boiling, and a multitude of black people of every description chained together, every one of their countenances expressing dejection and sorrow, I no longer doubted of my fate; and, quite overpowered with horror and anguish, I fell motionless on the deck and fainted. When I recovered a little I found some black people about me.... I asked them if we were not to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair¹⁰⁰.

Equiano eventually settled in London, England, and spent the rest of his life campaigning against the British slave trade in Jamaica. His narrative serves as important testimony that freedom

⁹⁹ Britannica, 2022.

¹⁰⁰ Equiano

is a basic human right, and that slavery must be abolished.¹⁰¹ Equiano's narrative was extremely popular but also had a real political impact, influencing the genre of the slave narrative in the 19th century and the **abolitionist movement**. Even though the voices of African Americans gradually started to be heard, their narratives often had to include **testimonials** in order to validate such narratives which reveals the suspicion with which African Americans were treated.

An even more influential slave narrative is the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), which was published while Douglass was still technically a runaway slave. In an American society that values hard work and the myth of the self-made man, Douglass's narrative is still a highly successful work. It describes the life of an industrious and intelligent African American man and his struggle to gain dignity and education and does not shy away from describing the physical brutality of slavery. Douglass was born in 1818 in Maryland as the son of a white father and Harriet Bailey (a slave of mixed African and American Indian descent) and over time he became a prominent activist, author, and leader of the abolitionist movement. After the **Emancipation Proclamation** in 1862, he continued to advocate for human rights until his death in 1895. His work served as an inspiration to the civil rights movement of the 1960s and beyond. In his work, Douglass wrote: "*From my earliest recollection, I date the entertainment of a deep conviction that slavery would not always be able to hold me within its foul embrace; and in the darkest hours of my career in slavery, this living word of faith and spirit of hope departed not from me, but remained like ministering angels to cheer me through the gloom.*"¹⁰² In his narrative, Douglass emphasizes the physical and psychological trauma of oppression through extremely realistic, almost naturalistic descriptions of physical violence and dehumanization. He vividly details the physical cruelties inflicted on slaves, including the rape of female slaves by white male owners.

A female interpretation of the slave narrative is provided by **Harriet Ann Jacobs** (1813-1897), who draws attention to the sexual politics of slavery in her work *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Told by Herself* (1861). Jacobs's narrative does not shrink from discussing the sexual abuse of slaves or the anguish felt by slave mothers when separated from their children. Rediscovered during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, Jacobs's autobiography was initially considered to be fictional until its authenticity was confirmed by scholars in 1981.¹⁰³

Other examples of slave narratives or spiritual biographies include *The Narrative of Sojourner Truth* (1850) or **William Wells Brown's** *The Narrative of William W. Brown, a Fugitive*

¹⁰¹ Nelson 11, 2015.

¹⁰² Douglass 2009.

¹⁰³ Britannica 2022.

Slave (1847). The **postbellum** period after the Civil War of 1861–1865 produced another example of a slave narrative which marked the emergence of a very different type of African American literature: the 1901 book *Up from Slavery* by **Booker T. Washington** (1852-1915). Washington was the first African American to be invited to the White House by President Roosevelt (in 1901) and adopted an assimilationist approach, arguing that slavery was a thing of the past and African Americans should integrate into mainstream American society. The literature of the Reconstruction period shows that even though slavery had been abolished, the newly formed country was far from being a place of freedom or equality. The major themes of the postbellum period focus on social, economic, and political themes and also address issues of race, class, and gender.

China

Archaeological findings point to the development of several Neolithic cultures around the two most prominent Chinese rivers, the Yangtze and the Yellow River. The earliest documented dynasty of rulers dates back to around 2000 BCE, however, the first written records of China appear during the rule of the Shang Dynasty (1523–1027 BCE). Of course, it would be incorrect to imagine the “China” of that time as the same expansive country it is nowadays – the ancient kingdom was a much smaller territory mostly concentrated along the Yellow River.

Under the Shang, a system of writing based on pictograms and ideograms was developed, as was an accurate 365-day calendar. The period is also marked by the emergence of bronze working, pottery, and prominent urban architecture. The Zhou Dynasty (1027–221 BCE) saw the rise of the important belief systems which have influenced the country and its people to this very day: Confucianism, Taoism, and Legalism. **Confucianism**, named after the prominent Chinese philosopher and politician (551-479 BCE), emphasized the need for morality in both personal lives and in government, appropriate behavior in social relationships, justice, loyalty, respect for one’s elders, and the value of hard work. While less rigid in terms of rituals and practices, **Taoism** (4th c. BCE) fell in step with Confucianism in that it placed value on achieving harmony with nature and the seemingly random nature of the universe, “the way” – or tao – while appreciating the three basic virtues of Taoism, the “Three Treasures” of compassion, frugality, and humility. **Legalism** (ca. 5th c. BCE) was concerned predominantly with achieving order, security, and stability through strict legal control from the government and the ruler.¹⁰⁴ Another important idea that took its roots in China during the Zhou rule was the “**Mandate of Heaven**” – the belief that “only a just ruler who provided good government was entitled to rule”¹⁰⁵ by the will of the gods, and that the Emperor

¹⁰⁴ Avakian 2002.

¹⁰⁵ Avakian 2002, p. 5.

was regarded as “The Son of Heaven”. In addition, the **family** has always been a highly valued concept in Chinese (and later Chinese American) lives. Ancestors and elders are treated with a great amount of respect and reverence, and the family holds a great deal of influence over its members, with an emphasis on education, obedience, and bringing honor to the family name, in addition to individual self-control.

The Zhou faced major political unrest from the 8th century BCE to the 3rd century BCE. Hundreds of smaller “states” were formed by local military leaders leading to the period known also as the “Warring States Period” when these warlords fought for greater power. The eventual victory of the Qin dynasty and the formation of a somewhat united China marked the end of the Ancient period in Chinese history and the beginning of what we now know as **Imperial China** (221 BCE – 1912 CE). After a long period of unrest and division, the unification consisted of more than just a change of borders. Systems of writing, measurements, weights, currencies, and legal systems had to be unified as well. During the imperial period, the “Four Great Inventions” impacted China’s political, cultural, and economic development and became revolutionary across the world. These four inventions are the invention of **the compass** (between the 2nd century BCE and 1st century CE), the discovery of **paper** (roughly 105 CE) and **printing** techniques (200 CE), and finally **gunpowder** (9th century CE).

After the Mongol invasion in the 13th century, Chinese trade with other countries flourished. The ruling Ming dynasty expected that those countries who traded with China would accept its supremacy and the Mandate of Heaven. The 15th century brought a great expansion in China’s trade and influence through maritime expeditions which reached as far as India, the Persian Gulf, and Africa, including closer neighbors of China such as Siam (Thailand), Vietnam, and other “vassal states”. However, these expeditions were expensive, and China ultimately relinquished its naval supremacy in exchange for other more profitable ventures. The Ming rule ended with the 17th-century invasion of **the Manchu**, the northern Chinese nation who overthrew the Ming dynasty and ruled China until **1910** when the country became a republic; the stereotypical image we often have of Chinese men with shaved heads and one long braid down their backs is derived from the Manchu tradition.

The Manchu rulers were skeptical about trade with Europe, regarding their own country as superior in every respect. However, after British merchants began shipping opium from India to Chinese ports in large quantities, the Manchu government was overwhelmed with chaos, war, famine, and disease, all of which drove many Chinese to try their luck overseas. The opium trade also created armed conflict as the Chinese government attempted to stop the drugs from spreading further into the country, but the British were unwilling to abandon their remarkably profitable

venture. After **the First and Second Opium Wars** (1839-1856) when Chinese ports and the palace in Peking were bombarded first by the British and later also by the American, French, Portuguese and Russian forces, China was forced to open its ports to foreigners and legalize the import of opium.¹⁰⁶

This difficult period of armed conflict, government corruption, population explosion, and high taxation (enforced in order to pay the extremely high reparations demanded from the defeated losing Chinese by the victorious British after the Opium Wars) encouraged more than 2 million Chinese people to seek their fortunes elsewhere between 1840 and 1900. However, not all of the farmers and poor workers who had been driven from their homes and land due to the inability to pay the increasing taxes ended up in the US. The second half of the 19th century saw the rise of what would become known as the “**coolie trade**” – Chinese laborers believed they were going to work overseas as free men but found themselves trapped in virtual slavery as indentured workers in European colonies in the Caribbean, South America, or Africa.¹⁰⁷ This was, of course, a consequence of the British abolition of slavery in 1833 which had left Britain – and the colonies of the British West Indies¹⁰⁸ – in a difficult situation, since the newly freed black slaves were leaving the plantations. The possibility of using Chinese (and other Asian) workers as indentured labor, which technically did not count as slavery, was presented as an ideal solution to the problem.

Between 1838 and 1917, more than 419,000 South Asians went to British West Indian plantations in British Guiana, Trinidad, and Jamaica as “coolies,” or indentured laborers bound under contract. An estimated 140,000 Chinese men also went to Cuba as coolies from 1847 to 1874, and 90,000 more went to Peru from 1849 to 1874.

(Lee 2015)

‘**Coolie**’, a term derived from an Indian (Hindustani) word meaning “slave” or “servant”, was used to denote Asian contract laborers, predominantly unskilled workers from China and India, and is now considered a derogatory racial slur. Aside from indentured servitude, the **Californian Gold Rush** provided a great incentive for many Chinese to migrate to the US; by 1854, roughly 24,000 Chinese were working in the gold fields and this number had risen by a further 63,000 by 1870. However, as the flow of gold from the mines began to dry up, the country quickly adopted an attitude of **hostility** towards all immigrants, the Chinese among them. Legislation aimed at targeting

¹⁰⁶ Avakian 2002.

¹⁰⁷ Avakian 2002.

¹⁰⁸ The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize (formerly British Honduras), Bermuda, Anguilla, Antigua and Barbuda, British Virgin Islands, Dominica, Montserrat, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Cayman Islands, Guyana (formerly British Guiana), Jamaica (formerly Colony of Jamaica), Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands.

immigrants was passed such as the introduction of taxation of those who could not become naturalized citizens (all non-whites, based on an 18th-century law). Mine and factory owners also often preferred hard-working Chinese laborers who were less likely to strike or protest against unfair treatment and low pay, a fact which only added to the pre-existing anti-Chinese sentiment which was often sanctioned by the legal system; in the famous 1853 case of *People v. Hall*, an American murderer's death sentence was revoked simply because three of the four witnesses to the murder were Chinese (as was the victim). This case set a highly dangerous precedent by implying that any crimes committed against non-whites would not be punished if the witnesses were also non-white.¹⁰⁹

Throughout the 19th century, many US cities developed districts favored by Chinese immigrants which were termed "Chinatowns". These districts created new job opportunities through the shops and restaurants which opened in these neighborhoods and through the demand of the new factories which were opening up across the nation and seeking labor (e.g., many Chinese worked as cigar workers). Additionally, Chinese laundries became successful businesses in the mid-19th century – they could be set up without much initial investment and their employees did not require English skills; white Americans, already hostile to the Chinese for "stealing" work in mines or factories, did not object to these laundries due to the simple fact that laundry was considered to be a women's job.¹¹⁰ However, hostility towards the Chinese community continued and culminated in the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882** which prohibited any immigration of Chinese workers to the US, and in the creation of several political parties which built their platform on hatred towards the Chinese. As a result, by the end of the 19th century, Chinatowns had become "cities within cities" – closed communities out of which the Chinese rarely ventured. The unwillingness of the US government to grant citizenship to Chinese immigrants is also apparent in the 14th Amendment which states that the Chinese were still ineligible for citizenship and also in the passing of the Cable Act in 1922 which declared that any American woman who married a man deemed "ineligible for naturalization" would lose her own citizenship. The Chinese Exclusion Act itself was only repealed in 1943, after which 105 Chinese people per year could come to the US; the racially biased immigration quota were finally lifted in full in 1965.

India

With more than 1.3 billion inhabitants, India is the second most populated country in the world. There are 23 official languages and several dozen other languages spoken in the country; Hindi (or

¹⁰⁹ Avakian 2002.

¹¹⁰ Avakian 2002.

more accurately the languages belonging to the Hindi group) is spoken by half of the population as either a first or second language and by more than 40% as the first language. Other significant languages include Bengali, Marathi, Telugu, Tamil, Gujarati, Urdu, Kannada, Odia, and Malayalam. The diversity of languages spoken in India already offers some insight into the sheer range of cultural variety in Indian society which we will examine more closely in the following sections.

According to archaeological finds, humans (or hominids) may have been present in the territory of modern-day India as early as 2 million years ago.¹¹¹ Around 8000 BCE, hunting and gathering slowly gave way to a more settled life of farming, and by 4500 BCE, the number of these farming communities and villages had increased significantly. The **Indus Valley Civilization** (ca. 4000 BCE – 1900 BCE) was one of the most significant civilizations of the era, spanning an area larger than Egypt or Mesopotamia.¹¹² The typical brick houses of the Indus cities had access to water, advanced drainage systems, and “bathrooms”, and based on the size of the buildings, the social structure of the Indus Valley civilization appears to have been more or less egalitarian. The civilization was also among the first to develop a unified system of measurements for weight, length, and time.

The Vedic Age (ca. 1500 BCE – 500 BCE) has been named after the composition of the **Vedas**, the oldest religious texts of Hinduism and the earliest surviving texts of Sanskrit literature, which consist of a collection of mantras, descriptions, and explanations of rituals and ceremonies, and texts on meditation, spiritual worship, and philosophy. The texts of the Vedas would originally have been transmitted orally with the help of memorizing techniques. The two major epics of **Sanskrit literature**, *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* were also composed during this period. The *Mahabharata* is still the world’s longest single poem, with a text approximately eight times as long as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined.¹¹³ Fig trees and cows were sanctified during this time, and the strict social hierarchy of *varnas*, or **castes**, was implemented. Some ethnic groups became marked as outcasts in this system, judged on the basis of their darker skin color and relegated to the dirtiest jobs such as sweeping the streets or handling dead animals, activities which, in turn, made them impure or “untouchable”.¹¹⁴ Members of one caste could not marry into another caste, and the potential for any upward social mobility was practically nonexistent; a person’s entire life, including their future occupation, was decided on the sole basis of their birth into a certain

¹¹¹ McIntosh 2008.

¹¹² McIntosh 2008.

¹¹³ Uberoi 1996.

¹¹⁴ Avakian 2002.

caste. In modern-day India, the caste system is no longer legally enforced, and discrimination based on castes has been banned; affirmative action legislation introduced in education and hiring policies in the second half of the 20th century has contributed to greater equality of opportunity.

The caste system was intrinsic to the practices of the **Hindu religion**. Hinduism is polytheistic; some of the main deities include Shiva, the Destroyer; Vishnu, the blue, four-armed Preserver; and Brahma, the four-faced Creator. Many deities in Hinduism are depicted with four arms or invoking the number four in other ways, and this symbolizes the **four important principles of human life** in many Indian religions; *dharma* (moral and religious duties, righteousness, selflessness – this was also the original name Hindus used for their religion and way of life as such), *artha* (the fulfillment of social and economic needs, material values), *kama* (the fulfillment of biological needs such as pleasure and psychological values) and *moksha* (liberation from the bonds of the world, spiritual values)¹¹⁵.

By the 6th century BCE, the rigid caste system and the power of the priestly class over society came under some criticism. **Siddhartha Gautama**, later known as Buddha, a Hindu noble born in the 6th century, was one of the major critics of the system. His original idea was to reform Hinduism, but his teachings about desire being the root of all evil in life and the need to achieve *nirvana*, i.e., the state of no desire, laid the foundations of new philosophical thought and/or religion: **Buddhism**. The spread of Buddhism throughout a significant portion of Southeast Asia can be attributed primarily to trade along the Silk Road in the first centuries CE.

By the 10th century CE, the expansion of Muslim nations into northern India led to frequent clashes between the two different cultures. The major source of this conflict was the difference in beliefs on tolerance and equality; while Muslims believed in the intrinsic equality of all believers, followers of Hinduism believed in adherence to the caste system. The situation was reversed on the issue of religious tolerance; Hinduism is somewhat tolerant of other religious beliefs, but Islam insists on obedience to the Quran.¹¹⁶ The medieval period was marked by several attacks from Central Asian Muslim tribes, and Muslim rule gradually extended over a significant portion of the Indian peninsula from the 13th to the 16th centuries CE, resulting in a **mixture of Indian and Muslim influences** throughout the art and culture of the Indian subcontinent. In the following period of the **Mughal Empire** (from the 16th to the 18th centuries) there was a deepening reconciliation and coexistence of Muslim and Indian cultures and societies, with some of the most famous pieces of **Indo-Islamic** architecture emerging in this period such as the Taj Mahal, the Red Fort and many other buildings in Delhi. Thanks to its agrarian reforms and the state's efforts to

¹¹⁵ Avasthi, Kate, and Grover 2013.

¹¹⁶ Avakian 2002.

urbanize and industrialize its labor force, the Mughal Empire became one of the leading economic powers of the world.

European interest in trade with Asia had affected India as early as the beginning of the 16th century with the establishment of the first Portuguese trading stations, followed by the Dutch East Indies Company almost a century later. During the 17th and 18th centuries, the British established ports for trade via the **East India Company**, protected by a private army, which was also used to keep friendly local rulers in power. The Company built forts for protection and maintained an army of local soldiers,¹¹⁷ and was in effective control of the entire subcontinent until the so-called Indian Mutiny in 1857. Afterward, the East India Company was disbanded, and its assets together with its control of India were transferred directly to the British crown. At the time, nearly two-thirds of the Indian territory was ruled by the British directly, and the remaining third was ruled by local princes who were closely monitored and controlled by British officials.

The most significant difference between India under Company rule and **the British Raj** (the British rule) was that while the Company had attempted to learn local customs and understand the local people in their native languages, Britain believed strongly in “civilizing” the Indians by forcing them to adopt British dress, customs, and culture while abandoning their own traditions.¹¹⁸ The British government in India did develop India’s infrastructure and trade, building new roads, railroads, and irrigation channels, however, the costs of these expensive projects were borne by locals through increased taxation.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, local farmers were discouraged from growing food and encouraged to start growing cotton for use in British factories. Local industries in India suffered; small artisans and craftspeople could not compete with cheaper, mass-produced British goods, and food production fell sharply, leading to several famines during the period of British rule which killed millions of people. By the mid-19th century, many Indians were impoverished, malnourished, and wishing for a better life elsewhere: much like the Chinese, many Indians were also trapped in the indentured labor system in British overseas colonies.

Despite increasing resistance, British direct rule of India lasted until the end of WWII, when Britain had neither the power nor the financial resources to continue ruling an India which was growing increasingly restless due to sectarian violence between Hindus and Muslims. The beginning of the 20th century had already been marked by voices resisting British rule, the most significant of whom was Mohandas Karamchad **Gandhi** (1869-1948), also known under the honorific Mahatma Gandhi, meaning “venerable” or “great soul”. Gandhi was also known as “the

¹¹⁷ Avakian 2002.

¹¹⁸ Avakian 2002.

¹¹⁹ Lee 2015.

Father of the Nation” due to his accomplishments in using non-violent, passive resistance against British forces to secure independence for India. His birthday is now celebrated as a national holiday. In 1947, Britain declared that India would be granted **independence** and that power would be transferred from Britain; several months later, India split into two separate countries, India, which does not officially support any specific religion, and Pakistan, which became a Muslim state. In the 1950s and 1960s, many Indians migrated to other countries, particularly to other countries in the Commonwealth.¹²⁰

Mentions of Indians arriving in the US date back to the 18th century; Indians were brought as **indentured servants** to the territory, for instance, in 1790 to Salem, where they worked on wharves and as domestic servants, potentially marrying into the local African American community.¹²¹ The 1900 census records that there were more than 2,000 Indians residing in the US at that time.¹²² After immigrant restrictions were relaxed in the 1960s, larger numbers of Indians began to arrive in the US, and not all of them directly from India; many Indian Americans came from Indian communities in other countries, such as the UK, Canada, South Africa, Caribbean, or the Pacific region, and the influx of Indian immigrants increased steadily throughout the second half of the 20th century. The information technology boom of the late 20th and early 21st centuries changed the face of immigration to the US, particularly so for the Indian population, which is

the most educated of all subgroups, exceptionally so in the fields of science and technology, and therefore is extraordinarily concentrated in a handful of high- skill, high- wage professions. Consequently, Indian Americans constitute the highest income group in the country. It is a population of outliers.

(Chakravorty et al. 2017)

These outliers may have been at first created by a rigid selection system – in India, higher education was historically only available to those who were “urban, educated, and from high/ dominant castes”¹²³ and even from this select group, only a very few passed the examinations to be accepted for specific technical education. In the US too, the immigration system also favored applicants with a specific skillset or education, and this created a unique population of highly skilled and highly successful Indian Americans. Additionally, the gender and marriage norms that these immigrants imported to their US communities may have provided greater financial stability for migrant families.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ Rangaswamy 2006.

¹²¹ Okihiro 2001.

¹²² Okihiro 2001.

¹²³ Chakravorty et al. 2017.

¹²⁴ Chakravorty et al. 2017.

In the 21st century, the largest Indian diaspora populations are found in Myanmar (nearly 3 million), the **USA (ca. 1.7 million)**, Malaysia (ca. 1.6 million), and the UK (over 1 million).¹²⁵ Most of these Indian migrants have retained a strong sense of ‘Indianness’ and a connection to their homeland via *oikumene*, a concept that describes a single global Indian ‘household’ (from the Greek word *oikos*). Unlike many other migrant communities, Indians seem to retain a strong sense of belonging not only due to their ethnic origins, but also because of the very real “ties of family, commerce, religion, profession, and culture”.¹²⁶ This sense of **interconnectedness and interdependence** not only within an individual family but also among the community as a whole is one of the core concepts of Indian (American) society and culture. **Hierarchy** is also intrinsic to Indian American families and the elders (more specifically, the oldest men) are respected as authority figures and decision-makers. **Family loyalty** is emphasized, and overt displays of affection are not encouraged; arranged marriages are still common, with matchmakers and older family members carefully selecting the bride or groom based on many factors such as religion, social status of the family, physical attributes, future plans, or educational achievements.

The Philippines

There is still considerable uncertainty in determining a concise, reliable timeline of the history of the archipelago of the Philippines. The vast majority of artifacts or structures which could have allowed the archeologists to make sense of the prehistory of the country disintegrated or washed away when the sea levels rose after the last Ice Age. However, the surviving evidence points to the arrival of hunters and gatherers in the Philippines as early as 7,000 years ago. The islands were also likely a part of the maritime trade economy connected to China, India, and the Arab and Persian world; there are also clear cultural influences of Buddhism, Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, and Islam,¹²⁷ as well as Catholicism due to the Spanish colonization. Since the country consists of more than 7,000 islands, the Philippines were not historically ruled by a singular, united government but were instead divided into many local communities operating on the basis of kinship and cooperation, with the leaders striving to integrate the other nearby communities by strengthening family or trading ties rather than by outright conquest.¹²⁸ However, this local ruling system also had a serious disadvantage in that they were vulnerable against the larger and more powerful countries of the region, such as China or the Arabs.

¹²⁵ Rangaswamy 2006.

¹²⁶ Rangaswamy 2000.

¹²⁷ Nadeau 2008.

¹²⁸ Nadeau 2008.

The islands gained their modern name of **the Philippines** in the 16th century, when Spanish explorers sailed to the islands, with the Spanish King naming them in honor of his son, Philip II. The Spanish had three main goals in their subsequent colonization of the Philippines; the first was to enter into the profitable spice trade, the second was to establish a conduit for trade between Mexico and China, and the third was to Christianize the population of the islands, with the hope of later Christianizing both China and Japan.¹²⁹ By the second half of the century, the Spanish had become an established regional power, having founded the city of Manila as their colonial capital in 1561 as a base for missionary activity in other islands.¹³⁰ While the Spanish aimed to convert the locals to Christianity, many also tried to learn local languages and traditions. Spanish documents from the period record that many local communities were divided into rulers, commoners, and slaves, with rulers making important decisions and distributing communal property. However, the ruling position was traditionally dependent on the allegiance and loyalty of the commoners, and while power was often handed down through the male line, it was also very easily contested. The arrival of the Spanish changed this custom since it was easier for the Spanish to maintain control if they could cooperate with stable rulers kept in power with the help of armed forces.¹³¹ Filipinos did not quietly submit to the changes that Spain imposed upon their islands; the first rebellion against the Spanish system broke out in 1621, and many more would follow throughout the period of Spanish colonization until the end of the 19th century.¹³² It was during the Spanish period that the first Filipinos traveled to North America, primarily to the regions that were then part of the Spanish colonial empire of New Spain.

In 1898, the United States declared war on Spain, and the American fleet attacked the Spanish at Manila, supporting the ongoing Filipino revolution and struggle for independence. However, after the US troops defeated the Spanish, Filipinos were not excluded from the surrender ceremonies and subsequent negotiations. While the Filipinos believed that they had liberated their country, the US believed that the defeat of the Spanish merely transferred the ownership of the islands to US control. This resulted in the outbreak of the **Philippine-American War** in 1899; three years and many thousands of casualties later, the revolutionary first Philippine Republic was crushed. Although the US administration built schools and infrastructure in the islands, claiming that they were officially preparing the Philippines for eventual self-rule, the language of instruction in those schools was only in English, and the children were taught the history and culture of the

¹²⁹ Nadeau 2008.

¹³⁰ Avakian 2002.

¹³¹ Nadeau 2008.

¹³² Avakian 2002.

United States or, more accurately, American interpretations of that history and culture.¹³³ In addition, the distribution of wealth remained skewed towards the select few, and most Filipinos remained impoverished and landless.¹³⁴

The fact that the Philippines were considered a US territory, however, helped those Filipinos who wished to emigrate to the US, as did the American (or Americanized) education they had received; for instance, Filipino immigration was not subject to the same laws applied to the rest of Asia, even though Filipinos in the US still faced the same anti-Asian violence as the Chinese or the Japanese throughout the 1920s and 30s.¹³⁵ The American occupation was not generally accepted by the local populace, and by the 1930s, voices calling for Filipino independence were growing louder. In 1934, the **Philippine Independence Act** established a ten-year commonwealth in the Philippines as a preparatory phase for the eventual full independence planned for 1946, although the US would continue to operate naval bases on the islands. However, this act effectively ended the early 20th-century wave of Filipino immigration to the US, since the Philippines were no longer considered a US territory and migration to the US was more restricted.

Shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Japanese forces invaded and rapidly occupied the Philippines, proclaiming “Asians for Asians” and presenting the invasion as an attempt to help Asians rise up from under the boot of Western colonialism.¹³⁶ The Philippines were later recaptured by the US, and the islands were granted formal independence in 1945. However, as a result of the war, the infrastructure, housing, schools, and hospitals had been destroyed throughout the islands, and the US issued a large loan to the Philippine government for reconstruction, ensuring the continuing economic dependence of the Philippines upon the US.¹³⁷ The post-war period also marked a new wave of migration to the US, since Filipinos who had served in the army were given the option of becoming US citizens, and they were also permitted to bring their “war brides”, women they had married during their service. The democratic government lasted until 1965 when Ferdinand Marcos was elected president and established an authoritarian regime which lasted until he was overthrown in 1986. The year 1965 was also marked by another wave of immigration triggered by the cancellation of US immigration quotas.

¹³³ Nadeau 2008.

¹³⁴ Avakian 2002.

¹³⁵ Okihiro 2001.

¹³⁶ Nadeau 2008.

¹³⁷ Nadeau 2008.

Vietnam

The current population of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam stands at more than 96 million people, making it the 15th most populous country in the world despite being only 66th in terms of geographical area. Archaeological findings indicate that humans have been living in the region since as early as 10,000 BCE, with the first significant cultures developing around 9,000-7,000 BCE. One of the most significant cultures for the formation of Vietnamese national identity was the Dong Son civilization formed around 850 BCE, which inaugurated significant developments such as bronzeworking and rice farming and introduced several cultural traits which are closely linked to Vietnamese identity such as the famous bronze drums depicting scenes from everyday life of the Vietnamese.¹³⁸

In 207 BCE, **the Chinese invaded** part of Vietnam, but the Chinese commander in charge of the region did not agree with the rule of the Han dynasty which took power in China a year later and broke away to establish his own rule in the land he called **Nam Viet** (“Southern Viet”).¹³⁹ During this period, many Chinese who were also dissatisfied with the Han rule moved to northern parts of Vietnam and introduced Chinese customs, language, and technologies into the region.¹⁴⁰ In 111 BCE, Chinese armies seized the region and Vietnam remained under Chinese rule for the next millennium. The Chinese built infrastructure, improved some aspects of agriculture, and the Chinese language, culture, and Confucianism heavily influenced Vietnamese society. While the Vietnamese did not always accept Chinese rule peacefully and there are many instances of revolt and rebellion in the history of Vietnam, Chinese control of the region lasted until the 10th century CE, when the weakened Chinese were defeated and an independent kingdom was established.¹⁴¹

While Vietnam faced periods of civil unrest and foreign invasions (for example by Mongol, Khmer, or Chinese forces), local culture also flourished in this period. In 1070, the first Vietnamese university was founded in Hanoi. **Buddhism** became the state religion, although the north of the country mostly followed the Chinese version and the southern parts the Indian version, and Vietnamese culture and traditions permeated Buddhism across the country. The borders of Vietnam had also expanded further south by the end of the 18th century.

While **the Portuguese** had been trading with Vietnam since the 16th century and had even created a Portuguese-Latin-Vietnamese dictionary, **the French** had also become interested in Vietnam by the end of the 18th century. While French expansion in Vietnam was initially halted by

¹³⁸ Phillips 2006.

¹³⁹ Corfield 2008.

¹⁴⁰ Phillips 2006.

¹⁴¹ Avakian 2002.

the outbreak of the French Revolution, Vietnam was eventually colonized in 1857, as part of Napoleon III's plan to expand French influence in Asia to compete with the British. The French were supported by the Spanish in the Philippines, who wished to expand the reach of Christianity over the region.¹⁴² By 1887, the entire country had fallen under French rule and had been absorbed into **French Indochina** – a region encompassing Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and parts of modern-day China. In Vietnam, many factories were established as a source of profit for the French, primarily coal mines, rubber plantations/factories, and rice fields, but other ventures such as textile factories or paper mills were also established, with Vietnamese workers often poorly paid and exploited.¹⁴³ The French claimed to have improved the education system, but even as late as the 1930s, four-fifths of the Vietnamese population was still illiterate, with only about 15% of children attending school.¹⁴⁴

Opposition to French rule was widespread in Vietnam and often erupted into rebellions such as that of 1930 which was quickly suppressed by the French. **Ho Chi Minh**, born Nguyen Sinh Cung, was the son of a local official who had found employment on a French ocean liner; he traveled the world and eventually settled in London and later in Paris and Moscow. At the end of WWI, Ho Chi Minh submitted a petition to the allied forces requesting that Vietnam be granted the same self-determination as European countries. In the 1920s, he lived in Moscow and then in China, establishing the Vietnamese Communist Party and working towards the independence of Vietnam. He was arrested for his efforts but oversaw the Vietnamese Revolution which broke out in August 1945, with the goal of eliminating French and Japanese colonial rule in Vietnam. Although Vietnamese independence was declared a month later, the situation was far from stable; Britain, France, and China all had interests in Vietnam while dealing with unrest and difficulties of their own, and the US support for Vietnamese self-determination was questionable at best. In addition, there was considerable disagreement among the revolutionary forces over how the country should be ruled, and Ho Chi Minh's Communist party faced opposition from other nationalist groups. This instability and the determination of the French to retain their colonial possession resulted in the First Indo-China War of 1946-1954, which officially ended with the **Geneva Agreements** of 1954 which created a border along the Ben Hai River which temporarily **divided Vietnam** into Northern Vietnam (Democratic Republic of Vietnam) ruled by the Vietnamese Communist and nationalist rebels, and South Vietnam (State of Vietnam) associated with the French, and by proxy, due to their financial support of the French army, the US. Many Northern Vietnamese, possibly as many as

¹⁴² Corfield 2008.

¹⁴³ Corfield 2008.

¹⁴⁴ Corfield 2008.

1,000,000 people, migrated to the South in 1954-55 in a population transfer permitted under the terms of the Geneva Agreements.¹⁴⁵ North Vietnam, backed by the USSR and China, objected to the division of the country and the US involvement in the South, and soon after the division, initiated a guerilla war on the forces of South Vietnam and their US allies. The Second Indo-China War, also known as the **Vietnam War**, broke out between Vietnam and the US in 1955, resulting in between 1.4 and 3.5 million casualties, approximately half of whom were civilian deaths. The conflict ended in 1975 with the fall of the Southern capital, Saigon, and the divided country was unified under a de facto Northern government.¹⁴⁶

The three decades of constant war had taken their toll on the region and its people, and there was widespread persecution of South Vietnamese officials and those who had collaborated with the US immediately after the fall of Saigon. In the years after 1975, the US sponsored the evacuation of nearly 125,000 Vietnamese who wanted to avoid persecution for their activities with the Southern forces, and the first wave of **Vietnamese immigrants to the US** thus consisted almost exclusively of military officials and urban professionals, followed by a second wave starting in the 1980s which was primarily made up of poor, less educated people from rural areas. Many of these immigrants suffered from PTSD, depression, anxiety, or other mental health issues as a direct or indirect result of growing up in the midst of a savage war, leading to potential difficulties in adjusting to life in their new country.¹⁴⁷ In 1980, the population of Vietnamese Americans amounted to roughly 230,000, but by the end of the 20th century, the number had almost quadrupled, and in 2017, there were roughly **1.4 million Vietnamese** living in the US, with a higher reported rate of naturalization (77%) than that of other foreign-born residents of the US (49%), a slightly lower rate of education and English proficiency, and a higher rate of employment in services.¹⁴⁸

Korea

The presence of early Paleolithic hominids on the Korean peninsula dates back hundreds of thousands of years. The Neolithic culture, ca. 6000-2000 BCE, is mostly known today through the pottery and fishing hooks found in the area; afterward, the people living here transitioned more towards hunting and gathering, as in many other regions of the world. By the end of the first millennium BCE, rice farming had become a crucial feature of Korean life and culture, allowing the region to support a larger population. While some archeological finds point to some degree of

¹⁴⁵ Chan 2006.

¹⁴⁶ Corfield 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Birman and Tran 2008.

¹⁴⁸ Alperin and Batalova 2018.

influence from China, it is generally believed that Korea remained culturally and socially distinct for a significant portion of its history.

Early records show that the first state, Chaoxian (in Chinese) or Gojoseon/Joseon/Choson (in Korean), was already in existence by the 2nd century BCE, although the popular Korean origin myth of Tangun, the first ruler of Korea who ruled for a thousand years, places his birth at 2333 BCE. In addition, Gojoseon is more likely to have been a federation of local tribes rather than an actual state,¹⁴⁹ at least until 109 BCE, when China invaded and conquered the region: “[f]or the next four centuries a northwestern part of the Korean peninsula was directly incorporated into the Chinese Empire, the first and only time the Chinese exerted direct rule in Korea”.¹⁵⁰ This occupation, or rather integration, into the Chinese empire greatly influenced the social, political, and cultural development of Korea.

However, Chinese control did not extend to the entirety of the peninsula; many small states sprang up in the last centuries BCE, and eventually, small local federations gave way to three larger, developed states: the so-called Three Kingdoms (ca. 57 BCE – 668 CE) of Goguryeo, Silla, and Baekje. The kingdom of **Goryeo** unified the peninsula in the 10th century, heralding a period that is widely regarded as one of prosperity, a flourishing of arts and culture, and a golden age of Buddhism; the modern name for the country, Korea, derives from the name of this kingdom. At the end of the 14th century, the **Joseon dynasty** was established and ruled the peninsula until the end of the 19th century, during the course of which Korea underwent great cultural and scientific advancements, particularly after the beginning of the 15th century when *hangul*, the Korean system of writing, was developed to promote literacy among the people. During these times, Korea faced a Japanese invasion and several invasions by the Manchu, yet the period is marked by considerable social, political, cultural, and technological developments; a tax system based on public polls to ensure fairness, Confucianism and Neo-Confucianism, the invention of printing (the first movable type) and important texts on agriculture and Korean medicine date back to this era. Korean women were also entitled to 100 days of maternity leave and Korean men 30 days of paternity leave in the 15th century.¹⁵¹ Chinese influence was not completely absent from medieval Korea, but instead of being considered and treated as a Chinese colony, Korea was considered more of a “little brother” to China.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁹ Seth 2010.

¹⁵⁰ Seth 2010.

¹⁵¹ Lee 2008.

¹⁵² Avakian 2002.

While Korea had established trade with China and Japan, Korean rulers were wary of Western nations like the UK and the US, most likely due to the situation in China with the Opium Wars. Several armed conflicts erupted between the US and Korea when US traders attempted to forcefully open trade with the country; however, by the end of the 19th century, a trade treaty was signed between Korea and the US, and Korean embassies were also established in Russia, Italy, and France. Japan, already on the road to modernization by this time, forced Korea to open its ports and used the excuse of modernization to gain increasing control over Korea; in 1905, Korea became a protectorate of Japan under the provision that Japan would control Korean foreign affairs,¹⁵³ and in 1910, Korea was effectively **annexed to Japan**, remaining in this status until 1945. Japanese government officials made enormous efforts to suppress Korean culture, history, and traditions, even attempting to destroy the Korean language. After Japan's surrender to the Allied Forces in 1945, Korea was divided into two parts: **the North (the Democratic People's Republic of Korea)**, occupied by the Soviet Union, and **the South (the Republic of Korea)**, occupied by the US. This arrangement was intended to be a temporary solution until the US, the UK, the Soviet Union, and the Republic of China could agree on a unified government and return Korea to the Korean people, but reaching this agreement proved to be much more difficult than expected. Eventually, the Korean question was submitted to the United Nations, which declared that the Republic of Korea was the only legally recognized government in the country. In 1950, North Korean forces crossed the 38th parallel and invaded the South, triggering **the Korean War**. The conflict brought immense destruction and suffering to the country, with about 4 million Koreans from both sides killed or missing, around 140,000 US casualties, 15,000 casualties from the UN forces, and about 366,000 Chinese casualties. The war ended with the signing of an armistice in 1953, and the border between North and South Korea was permanently established along the 38th parallel.

Until the second half of the 19th century, not many Koreans left Korea to live elsewhere. Starting in the 1860s, Koreans began to migrate to Manchuria and Siberia to escape the rule and harsh living conditions imposed by the Japanese colonial regime.¹⁵⁴ In the first decade of the 20th century, several thousand Koreans also migrated to Hawaii as **contract laborers** on sugar plantations, and some Koreans lived in the US as students. After the 1910 annexation of Korea by Japan, Korean immigration to the US dwindled, and Korea was also influenced by the anti-Asian quota imposed by the US government. After the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, and the easing of restrictions on migration by the Republic of Korea in the 1970s, Koreans became the second fastest-growing Asian immigrant community in the US, second only to Filipinos.

¹⁵³ Kim 2005.

¹⁵⁴ Seth 2009.

The number of Korean migrants decreased in the 1990s due to the growing economic and social stability and prosperity of South Korea. According to the US Census of 2010, there are roughly 1.2 million people of Korean descent residing in the US, around 60% of whom identify as Christian, and only a small minority (up to 10%) as Buddhist, although the South Korean government's estimates from 2007 point to nearly 2.5 million Korean Americans.¹⁵⁵ Culturally, South Korea has not only taken an interest in preserving the nation's cultural heritage but has also begun exporting its culture across the world, starting with Japan, China, and Southeast Asia, and expanding into the Western world too, a phenomenon known as the "Korean Wave" which includes Korean music industry, cinema, television shows, and comics. It is thus important to note that many Korean American writers might not only be referencing some distant cultural events or traditions of their ethnic homeland but also employing tropes from modern cultural exports which are widely known and accepted across the world.

Japan

The history of early societies in Japan is usually dated back to around 8000 BCE when the culture of hunters and gatherers called the Jomon first developed on the islands.¹⁵⁶ However, humans had arrived in Japan much earlier; until the end of the last glacial period 15,000 years ago, Japan had been connected to the Asian mainland, and humans had migrated into the then peninsula from east, southeast, and northeast Asia. By the beginning of the 5th century BCE, Japan faced a significant wave of immigration from the mainland, most likely from Korea, which changed the region's cultural and societal development and started a new period in Japanese history, due in no small part to the establishment of **rice cultivation** in this period. Around the 3rd century CE, the first significant state emerged in the Yamato Period. Based on Chinese historical texts, we know that the Japanese of the 3rd century wore makeup, lived for up to a century, and upheld class distinctions, but also treated men and women equally, with many women holding positions of power and influence.¹⁵⁷

Between the 3rd and 6th century CE, China and Korea were in constant conflict, and many displaced families, particularly from Korea, arrived in Japan, resulting in another significant social change: the creation of a **centralized government**, and with it, social reform in terms of taxation and a population census and the introduction of land reforms in which every man and woman was allotted a certain portion of land every six years.¹⁵⁸ In addition, Buddhism was brought to Japan

¹⁵⁵ Seth 2009.

¹⁵⁶ Avakian 2002.

¹⁵⁷ Huffman 2010.

¹⁵⁸ Henshall 2004.

from Korea at the same time. By the end of the 6th century, the modern name for Japan, Nippon or Nihon (the Land/Source of the Sun) had been adopted. The first Japanese texts detailing the mythological origin of the country, *Kojiki* (Records of Ancient Matters) and *Nihon Shoki* (Chronicles of Japan), date from the 8th century and were intended to establish the **divine origins of the Emperor** as a direct descendant of the Shinto gods, especially the Sun goddess, Amaterasu.¹⁵⁹ The imperial family at the time promoted Buddhism far more strongly than Shintoism, yet they chose Shinto gods to legitimize their divine origins, an excellent example of Japanese pragmatism and compartmentalization when it comes to religion. Even in 21st-century Japan, people often use the rituals and customs of one religion in one situation and follow another religion for another specific context.¹⁶⁰

Shinto, or “the way of gods”, developed early in Japanese history from the older beliefs of the indigenous people. *Kami*, gods or spirits, were the embodiment of various elements of nature; each mountain, river, or other natural feature has a guardian spirit or a protector god, and many Shinto rituals are aimed at appeasing these gods and warding off evil spirits.¹⁶¹ Some of the fundamental concepts of Shintoism include the divine origin of the islands, the worship of ancestors as guardian spirits, and the absence of Manichean-type “good versus evil” duality common in other religions or cultures; in Shinto, gods, and humans alike are not seen as either inherently good or evil but instead act with certain characteristics either impulsively or rationally.¹⁶² Based on Shinto beliefs, Japanese people are also seen as different from other nations, an impression that may contribute to the development of a strong sense of nationality and belonging but which can also reinforce xenophobia and chauvinism.¹⁶³

The concept of the divine origin of the Emperor is reminiscent of the Chinese Mandate of Heaven, although there is one significant difference between the two; while the Chinese Emperor was seen as the “Son of Heaven” chosen by the divine powers to rule, it was also widely understood that if the Emperor failed to provide a just and stable government, the heavens would show their displeasure through natural disasters or civil disorder. This would mean that the Emperor has lost the favor of the heavens and thus the right to rule. However, the Japanese imperial family was believed to be directly *descended* from the gods and as such, could never truly lose their claim to

¹⁵⁹ Andressen 2003.

¹⁶⁰ Henshall 2004.

¹⁶¹ Huffman 2010.

¹⁶² Andressen 2003.

¹⁶³ Andressen 2003.

divinity.¹⁶⁴ This difference allowed the Japanese imperial dynasty to retain the throne, even if their power declined significantly after the 10th century.¹⁶⁵

During **the Heian period** (8th -12th c.), power still officially lay in the hands of the Emperor, but most of the actual ruling power had been transferred to a class of high-ranking officials and aristocrats, either as a result of conflicts or due to the difficulties of properly centrally administrating a country made up of several thousand islands into one centralized government. The highest rank after Emperor was that of a *shogun* – a commander-in-chief who held the military power and most of the ruling power. Shoguns were officially supposed to serve the Emperor’s interests, however, more often than not the shogun in power followed his own plans for the country, utilizing a decentralized and feudalist system of local rulers and local armies of warriors known as samurai. From the establishment of the first Shogunate in the 12th century, Japan was de facto ruled by a shogun until the 19th century.

The Heian period is widely seen as a golden age of Japan in terms of culture. While the Chinese system of writing was still used throughout this period, by the 10th century, two phonetic alphabets, *hiragana*, and *katakana*, had been developed, and court literature flourished.¹⁶⁶ Several literary forms were established, such as the novel, the narrative tale, and essays. Interestingly, female courtiers were the leading forces in the development of Japanese literature; for instance, one of the greatest novels of the Heian period, if not of Japanese literature in general, is Lady Murasaki’s novel *The Tale of Genji* from the end of the 10th century.¹⁶⁷ The subsequent Muromachi Period was also significant for the development of typically Japanese cultural items, such as ink paintings, ikebana flower arrangements, bonsai tree cultivation, tea ceremonies, and traditional Japanese forms of theatre, most of which had roots in the philosophy of Zen, a sect of Buddhism which dominated the Japanese court at the time.¹⁶⁸

In 1543, a storm forced several **Portuguese** traders to seek shelter on a Japanese island; trade with Portugal was soon established, bringing firearms and Christianity to Japan. Portuguese also became the first language that had a dictionary in Japanese, since the missionaries and traders believed they could reach the Japanese population more easily if they understood the language properly. New crops were also introduced, such as pumpkins, corn, potatoes, sweet potatoes, tobacco, and cotton.¹⁶⁹ Some Japanese warlords used the newly acquired weapons to launch

¹⁶⁴ Beasley 1999.

¹⁶⁵ Beasley 1999.

¹⁶⁶ Brown 1993.

¹⁶⁷ Avakian 2002.

¹⁶⁸ Avakian 2002.

¹⁶⁹ Andressen 2003.

unsuccessful invasions of China and Korea which set the foundation for a pattern of distrust and enmity that exists between Japan and Korea even to this day.¹⁷⁰

Foreign trade was almost completely cut-off in the 17th century, with the **Tokugawa Shogunate** of the early 1600s until the mid-19th century fearing that local lords ruling remote areas of Japan would gain too much power through international trade. In addition, the rising popularity of Christianity in areas with established foreign trade led rulers to worry about future colonization by Western powers. For these reasons, a policy of **national isolation** was enacted in 1639; all foreign trade and Christianity were effectively banned, and Japanese people were prohibited from leaving the country or from returning to Japan if they had been living abroad. Nagasaki remained the only Japanese port open to European trade but it was limited to one Dutch ship per year (compared to approximately 26 Chinese ships arriving at the same port each year).¹⁷¹ The two centuries of isolation greatly influenced the course of Japanese history, culture, and social identity. New forms of art and literature emerged during this period, such as the **haiku** poem, the tradition of geisha as entertainers, and new forms of theatre. Even greater emphasis was put on the **virtues of loyalty, respect for authority, and social responsibility**, although the latter value can be traced back even earlier to the period when entire families or groups of people would be killed as punishment for disloyalty. This trait may have influenced the Japanese sense of social/group responsibility and also the persistent habit of hiding the problems of any group from the eyes of others and avoiding conflict or offense by never being too direct.¹⁷²

By the mid-19th century, the system of the Shogunate was weakening both politically and economically in the wake of a series of famines, the growing population, and the discontented samurai class who were being paid less and less. The rulers of Japan were still dedicated to keeping the country closed to foreigners, especially in the light of growing western influence in Asia and events such as the Opium Wars in China, but more and more voices were advocating opening the country up to the world, particularly in order to share in the scientific developments of the West. Throughout the 18th century, several attempts were made by the British and the US to open up trade relations with Japan, but they were all unsuccessful until 1853 when the US Commodore Matthew Perry sailed into the Japanese harbor of Yokohama with four large steam ships subtly threatening to use force if the Japanese refused his requests: “more humane treatment for castaways, the opening of ports for provisions and fuel, and the opening of ports for trade”.¹⁷³ Japan was thus forced to

¹⁷⁰ Andressen 2003.

¹⁷¹ Andressen 2003.

¹⁷² Andressen 2003.

¹⁷³ Henshall 2004.

open its doors to foreign influence and sign treaties with the US which were unfavorable in several major aspects to the Japanese. The treaty with the US was quickly followed by treaties with Britain, Russia, France, and Holland.

The period from roughly 1860 to the beginning of World War II in 1937 was perhaps the most tumultuous in Japanese history; as the system of government was transformed from the Shogunate to a constitutional democracy, most aspects of traditional Japanese life also changed, such as a new education system, Western styles of dress, the emergence of a class society and societal structures, and the reconstruction of the economy and legal system.¹⁷⁴ The forcible opening of the country revealed the technological and military shortcomings created by the long period of isolation, making Japan vulnerable to foreign threats. The main issue of the time thus became not only the stabilization of the country's economic and political situation but also intensive development in order to match foreign powers in terms of technology and firepower. In the next 70 years, Japan managed to transform itself from an isolated, feudalist country into one of the world's great powers; between 1904 and 1905, Japan defeated Russia in the Russo-Japanese War and gained control of Korea and Manchuria. This period became known as **the Meiji Restoration**.

Migration became possible with the opening of the borders: many Japanese people were sent abroad after 1868, particularly to the US, to acquire technological knowledge and western education. By the turn of the century, there were roughly 25,000 Japanese people living in the United States. Between 1907 and 1924, the immigration of unskilled workers from Japan was limited, although businessmen, students, and spouses of Japanese immigrants already resident in the US could still enter the country. Many Japanese women entered the US as "**picture brides**". The parents of the men who were living in the US would carefully select girls they believed suitable for their sons and send pictures; if the man liked the picture, he would send his own photo back and a ceremony would take place in Japan in the absence of the groom, and the bride would then travel to the US to join her new husband.

Japanese immigration after 1924 was severely restricted by the same **Immigration Act** that affected immigration from other Asian countries; due to these restrictions, the differences between the **Issei** (first-generation Japanese Americans, born in Japan) and the **Nisei** (second-generation Japanese Americans born in the US) became even more pronounced in terms of language abilities, cultural integration, and citizenship status, since the first-generation Issei were effectively banned by the government from acquiring naturalized status or citizenship while the Nisei, born in the US,

¹⁷⁴ Andressen 2003.

were automatically regarded as citizens, albeit facing racial discrimination and being barred from entering some public places.

In addition to the quota limiting immigration, Japanese Americans also faced mistrust and hatred as a result of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The US declared war on Japan the next day, and within the week, almost 1,400 Japanese Americans were detained by the FBI and classified as “dangerous enemy aliens” – essentially non-US-citizens living in the US.¹⁷⁵ In February 1942, Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt created **internment camps** for German, Italian, and Japanese aliens, as well as for anyone of Japanese descent, a program intended to remove people whom the state considered as a potential threat from the west coast. It is estimated that 110,000-120,000 Japanese people of the first, second, and third generations were removed to the camps, being subjected to poor living conditions and humiliation on a daily basis. 40% of internees were children and 70% were American citizens.¹⁷⁶ Japanese American soldiers were largely discharged from the US Army, although some volunteers remained, either joining the **100th Infantry Battalion** or the newly formed, segregated **442nd Regimental Combat Team** in Hawaii. These units fought in North Africa and Italy, suffering high casualties but also earning awards for bravery; by the end of the war, the two Japanese units, later merged into one, were among the most highly decorated units in the US military, “with eighteen thousand individuals earning awards for bravery, ninety-five hundred of them Purple Hearts”.¹⁷⁷

The exclusion order was officially repealed in 1944, however, many camps remained open for more than a year, the last closing in March 1946. The Japanese who had been interned for three years in harsh conditions had often been deprived of their property and were unsure about their life outside of the camps and about the reception they would receive from white Americans. The people who had been interned received some compensation for the property they had lost, but this only amounted to about 10% of its value.¹⁷⁸ In addition, the Japanese American identities were challenged further by the political, ethical, and moral implications of the August 1945 atomic bombing of the Japanese cities of **Hiroshima and Nagasaki**. After WWII and the repeal of immigration quotas with the **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965**, Japanese immigration increased again in the second half of the 20th century: according to the Census Bureau, there were around 773,000 Japanese Americans living in the US in 2018.

¹⁷⁵ Robson 2013.

¹⁷⁶ Robson 2013.

¹⁷⁷ Robson 2013.

¹⁷⁸ Robson 2013.

6.2 Becoming Asian American

Asian immigrants have faced a wide range of problems upon their arrival in the US, but they also encountered some common issues, such as the language barrier or racist attitudes on both a personal and official level. Whether arriving as indentured servants via the “coolie trade”, as refugees from armed conflicts, or as a result of their own country’s current relations with the US, Asian immigrants were often met with distrust, suspicion, or outright hatred, and for a long time were unable to obtain access to many rights such as naturalization or voting rights. Under the **Naturalization Act of 1790**, only “free white persons” were eligible for naturalization as citizens in the US; even in the 1920s, a number of court cases upheld this Act to the detriment of Asian immigrants. However, second-generation Asian Americans born in the US were considered citizens, a ruling which often created some tension between the first and the second generation in Asian families. The Immigration Act of 1917, also known as the **Asiatic Barred Zone Act**, imposed further restrictions on Asian immigration, banning all immigrants who were illiterate or deemed mentally inferior or ill.

The second half of the 20th century, after the passing of the **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965**, was marked by the increase in immigration after the easing of restrictions, and immigration increased in this period from several Asian countries which were suffering from the effects of conflicts. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s also highlighted the issues of equality, and many Asian Americans joined the protests to end the discrimination against African Americans, thereby influencing them to reconsider their own position in US society. The Asian American Movement, which coined the term “Asian American” in order to unite various ethnic groups for political purposes, started independently in several regions of the US, with protests first arising due to the perceived exclusion of Asian American identities and histories from school curricula and from the education and experiences of Asian American children.

Although legislation has effectively banned discrimination based on race or ethnicity in terms of voting, employment, education, and housing, Asian Americans still face challenges in changing their perception among the white majority. For instance, a survey from 2001 revealed that one in four Americans had a “very negative” attitude towards Chinese Americans, and an additional 43% of those asked had a “somewhat negative” attitude.¹⁷⁹ One of the stereotypes still prevalent in the contemporary portrayal of Asian Americans is that of the “**model minority**”, the belief that Asians or Asian Americans are somehow more capable of achieving success in Western society than other minorities. This stereotype often leads to the achievements of Asian Americans being downplayed or, perhaps even worse, used as an example to other, less “successful” minorities,

¹⁷⁹ Yi and Kim 2001.

thereby creating an atmosphere of hostility towards Asian Americans not only from the white majority but from other minorities as well. In the “model minority” stereotype, Asian Americans are often depicted as not only highly successful and intelligent but also as law-abiding, submissive and non-threatening due to their apolitical stance, an interpretation that serves to dehumanize Asian Americans as purely one-dimensional characters and which frequently creates anxieties and pressure among Asian Americans not to speak out against oppression or injustice. Furthermore, the “model minority” myth has often been based on the success (i.e., higher education attainment and high-paying positions) of 20th-century immigrants who arrived at a time when immigration was very often limited based on education and abilities, and the current generation of Asian Americans may have trouble repeating these achievements.

The “model minority” stereotype and the perceived passivity and submissiveness of all Asians have also led to the emergence of the phenomenon known as the “**Bamboo Ceiling**” (in some cases known as the “Sticky Floor”). The term was coined in 2005 to address the problems many Asian Americans face in the workplace, namely that they are less likely to be promoted to any executive position due to the belief that they are incapable of leadership due to their inherently submissive nature. Even in fields in which Asian Americans have been believed to excel, such as IT, software development, or science in general, Asian American graduates have found themselves trapped in low-ranking positions with little or no opportunity for upward mobility. Research conducted by MIT in 2020 has shown that the issue of the bamboo ceiling is becoming even more complicated: based on “analyses of chief executive officers, field surveys in large US companies, student leader nominations, and elections, and experiments”, the study showed that while East Asians (e.g., Chinese) were less likely than South Asians (e.g., Indians) and whites to achieve leadership positions, South Asians were more likely to do so than whites. The study hypothesized that this may be due to the cultural attitudes and standards for assertive communication among East Asians which differ from those of South Asians and white Americans.¹⁸⁰

Questions for discussion:

- 1. Which historical event do you believe to be the most important to the formation of Asian American identities? Why? Do you believe there is one cohesive Asian American culture?**
- 2. Which Asian American cultural items and practices may be reflected in Asian American literature?**

¹⁸⁰ Lu, Nisbett and Morris 2020.

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7. Asian American Literature

Key words: generation gap, hybridity, Orientalism, Yellow peril, Issei, Nisei, Sansei, internment, generation 1.5, Chinatown

Warm-up:

1. Asia is the world's largest continent. Which Asian American ethnic groups are most dominant in the contemporary USA?
2. Do you know any Asian American writers and their works?
3. Why do you think it is difficult to define Asian American literature and its most distinctive features?

After studying this chapter, students should be able to understand the following:

1. To define Asian American literature
2. To identify the most representative authors and their works
3. To understand the complexity and diversity of the themes present in contemporary Asian American literature

Of all of the ethnic literatures of the US, Asian American literature is perhaps the most challenging to define. Firstly, Asians in America have long been viewed as newcomers, and, as you saw in the previous section, they have typically been subject to discriminatory immigration legislation; for example, in 1924, Congress passed an **Immigration Act** which severely restricted immigration from Asia to the United States. Another reason lies in the geographical, linguistic, and cultural diversity of the vast continent of Asia which makes it problematic to describe Asian Americans as a single minority; a total of 22 million Asian Americans trace their roots back to more than twenty countries in East and Southeast Asia and the Indian subcontinent, each with their own unique histories, cultures, languages and other characteristics.¹⁸¹ Asian Americans are also divided along class, ethnic, linguistic, geographical, gendered, and sexual lines, so much so that those sensitive to such differences would agree with Lisa Lowe's description of the "heterogeneity, hybridity, multiplicity" of the ethnic identity; as David Palumbo-Liu insists, a slash that runs between its two keywords – Asian/American – would perhaps be more appropriate.¹⁸² However, the situation

¹⁸¹ <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>

¹⁸² Song 2015

changed in the 1960s and 1970s when more and more Asian American writers started to express their literary and artistic ambitions. The first anthology *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* was published in 1974 but its focus was limited only to authors from East Asia. The 1965 Immigration Act which effectively dismissed all immigration quotas also contributed to the emerging generation of Asian Americans from other parts of the world's largest continent such as India or the Pacific islands. While remaining aware of the problems involved in using the "umbrella" term of Asian American literature, we nonetheless accept that the category represents a significant body of writing and there is no doubt that it is an integral part of American literature. In the following chapter, we will concentrate on the most significant authors from each of the most populated groups: **the Chinese, the Indian, the Filipino, the Vietnamese, the Korean, and the Japanese.**

7.1 Chinese American literature

Chinese American fiction emerged out of a wide range of genres such as autobiography, myth, and family history. The blending of the two cultures and histories has resulted in a unique ethnic literature that deals with the processes of assimilation and the generation gap and which responds to discrimination and the distortion of stereotypes.

The 1924 Immigration Act which set quotas on the immigration of Asians to America led to a fall in the population of Chinatowns all over the United States. This situation is depicted in the excellent novel *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) by **Louis Chu** (1915-1970) whose main character is a second-generation Chinese- American man who is unable to produce an heir. The novel uses the vernacular specific for Chinese Americans, **Cantonese English**, and was adapted into a movie by the acclaimed movie director Wayne Wang (1989). Many Chinese American novels are set in the specific socio-historical space of Chinatown, and this creates an interesting connection between place and identity. The district of San Francisco known as **Gold Mountain** is home to one of the most important Chinese American communities. Writers who make use of **Chinatowns** as a key setting include **Gish Jen** in her work *Typical American* (1991), **Fae Myenne Ng** in her novel *Bone* (1993), and **Sigrid Nunez** in her work *Father on the Breath of God* (1995).

Perhaps the two most significant Chinese American writers are **Maxine Hong Kingston** and **Frank Chin**, authors whose view on Chinese American literature also captures the essence of what it means to be both Chinese and American. While Maxine Hong Kingston calls for the revision of traditional Chinese myths in order to show female agency, Frank Chin considers the myth to be a representation of stability.

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976) by **Maxine Hong Kingston** is a collection of five stories more often read as a novel that deal with both Chinese and female identities narrated through family stories. The “ghosts” in the title of the collection have multiple meanings; they can refer to the “dead” ancestors, those whose stories have been forgotten or repressed; to the people who have been left behind in China and who are now only “alive” to the immigrants as memories; but also to the immigrants themselves who feel a profound sense of dislocation and who move among their new countrymen with a sense of unbelonging, with the feeling that their presence has at most an ephemeral impact on the American political, economic, social and cultural landscape.¹⁸³ It is one of the most widely read works of Chinese American literature despite the criticism which has been leveled at it by other writers such as Frank Chin who accused Kingston of appropriating Chinese mythology to appeal to American audiences. Her other notable work worth mentioning is the novel *China Men* (1980).

Frank Chin (1940) is a novelist and a short story writer but predominantly a playwright who is considered to be the pioneer of Asian American theater. In his novels, *Donald Duk* (1991) and *Gunga Din Highway* (1994), Chin exploits images from popular culture to show the stereotypical image of the Chinese in the American imagination. Chin’s most popular play is *The Year of the Dragon* (1991).

Another author who also articulates the issues of feminism and female identity across several generations of women in both a Chinese and American context is **Amy Tan**, best known for her novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995) and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (2001). Tan revives Chinese traditions and myths and relocates them into contemporary Chinese American society to highlight the problematic representation of Chinese women in both cultural contexts.

Another author whose work develops the breakthroughs pioneered by both Kingston and Tan is **Gus Lee** who has published two autobiographical novels: *China Boy* (1991) and *Honor and Duty* (1994).

On the other hand, we also witness writers who focus on men’s experiences in contemporary America. In her portrayal of the Chang clan in *Mona in the Promised Land* (1996) **Gish Jen** explains that even although Chinese American women are free from the constraints of traditional Chinese society, this is not always the case for men.

As the largest group of Asian immigrants to the United States, Chinese Americans are often portrayed stereotypically, but anti-Chinese sentiments have given way to a more positive image of

¹⁸³ Nelson 126-127, 2015

the Chinese among mainstream US society. Historically, the anti-Chinese image was based on white fears of an influx of immigrants, and these largely unfounded concerns over the possibility of the “Yellow Peril” supplanting the white majority in the US resulted in the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882.¹⁸⁴ Detailed research into these inaccurate images is well presented in Ronald Takaki’s book *Strangers From a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (1990) in which he calls for the need to include ethnic diversity into the American educational curriculum.

7.2 Japanese American literature

Language, generations, and the periods preceding and following World War II are useful reference points when examining Japanese American literature.¹⁸⁵ Like other Asian American literatures, Japanese American literature also entered the wider American consciousness in the 1960s and 1970s, but its origins are connected with the traumatic bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941 which brought the US into the Second World War but also led to popular anger being directed at Japanese Americans. The internment camps in which over 120,000 Japanese Americans were detained had a strong impact on the generation of **Nisei** and the subsequent generations of Japanese born in the USA. The treatment of this historical trauma is depicted expressively in **John Okada**’s novel *No-No Boy* (1957) which illustrates the trauma of **hyphenated identity** in historical memory. The title of the novel refers to the main character Ichiro’s refusal to join the US armed forces leading to his incarceration despite the fact that he had already been imprisoned in an internment camp. Ichiro represents the dilemma of many Japanese Americans in the aftermath of WWII and is unable to embrace either of his identities. Another character in the novel is a war veteran named Kenji with whom Okada questions the meaning of war heroism. Another interesting author to be mentioned is **Toshio Mori** (1910-1980) who was the first Japanese American to publish a book of short stories in the United States. **Hisaye Yamamoto**’s (1921-2011) collection *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1949) also explores the tension between first-generation Japanese immigrants and their Americanized children. She also explores the female experience from arranged marriages in the Issei generation to the more modern Americanized Nisei reality. Although she is now primarily seen as a writer of children’s literature, **Cynthia Kadohata** became famous for her road novel *The Floating World* (1989) which deals with the nomadic experiences of her Japanese American family. Another female author who writes about the displacement of Asian immigration is **Karen Tei Yamashita** (*Tropic of Orange* (1997)). A special place is also occupied by **Japanese Hawaiian writers** such as **Milton Murayama** or **Lois Ann Yamanaka**. More contemporary writers have also

¹⁸⁴ Nelson 142, 2015

¹⁸⁵ Nelson 266, 2015

returned to examine the long-term effects of internment such as **Julie Otsuka** in her work *When the Emperor Was Divine* (2002).

7.3 Indian American literature

The life of **Ved Mehta** (1934-2021) is certainly deserving of the attention of students of American literature, especially those who are interested in the genre of memoir and autobiography. Even though he was born blind and came to America as a 15-year-old boy, he managed to become one of the most popular memoirists in America and in his works often comments on India's social and political situation.

Global women's identities are explored in the poetry and novels of **Meena Alexander** (1951-2018) which describe the status of exiled women and the dislocation felt by those who move across cultures and borders.¹⁸⁶

The most notable subgenre in American Indian literature is certainly fiction, represented mainly by **Bharati Mukherjee** and **Jhumpa Lahiri**. **Mukherjee** (1940-2017) is often called "the Grande Dame of Indian diasporic fiction" and played a key role in raising the profile of South Asian literature as a whole.¹⁸⁷ Most of the characters in her novels are females who are in the process of transformation, finding a new identity that crosses the boundaries between their country of origin and their new home. From her first novel *The Tiger's Daughter* (1972) to her last work, *Miss New India*, published in 2011, Mukherjee deals with the female immigrant experience and the sense of nostalgia for the home they have left behind. A more experimental literary approach is found in the multi-versal works of **Vikram Chandra** (1961-). A representative example of this experimentation is his novel *Red Earth and Pouring Rain* (1995) which tells stories spanning Asia, Europe, and America over more than three centuries.¹⁸⁸

Jhumpa Lahiri (1967-) believes that she has always "existed in a linguistic exile".¹⁸⁹ Her stories and novels focus on the physical and psychological dislocations suffered by immigrants. She juxtaposes Indian and American identities in order to understand an individual's cultural roots, prioritizing the senses of belonging and place over those of not belonging and of displacement. Her fiction is set in New England, Calcutta, or Rome, and she also writes in Italian. Her first collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 2000 when she was just 33 and is firmly anchored in the realist tradition. Her first novel, *The Namesake*, follows the main character

¹⁸⁶ Nelson 466, 2015

¹⁸⁷ South Asian literature also encompasses the literatures of Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Maldives, Bhutan and Bangladesh.

¹⁸⁸ Benson 1182, 2005

¹⁸⁹ Allardice 2021

Gogol, the son of Bengali immigrants, as he seeks his fortune in New York; the book was adapted into a film by the acclaimed director Mira Nair. Her second novel, *The Lowland*, a family saga stretching from 1950s Calcutta to New England decades later, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize in 2013. **Anita Desai** (1937-) is a short-story writer and novelist whose novel *Journey to Ithaca* (1995) focuses on a pilgrimage through the ashrams of India, examining both sacred and profane places in the subcontinent. Her more American novel *Fasting, Feasting* (1999) depicts the contrasts between American and Indian culture. **Anjana Appachana** (1972-) is also a short story writer and novelist. Her work *Incantations and Other Stories* (1992) depicts the lives of Indian women and their everyday problems and the growing gap between modern and traditional Indian women. **Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni** is also a very popular poet and writer whose works have been adjusted also for film, television and opera.

7.4 Vietnamese American literature

Le Ly Hayslip is perhaps the most prominent contemporary Vietnamese American writer thanks to her two volumes of memoirs *When Heaven and Earth Changed Places* (1989) and *Child of War, Woman of Peace* (1993). The books were adapted into the film *Heaven and Earth* (1993) directed by Oliver Stone, the third in his trilogy of films on the Vietnam War after *Platoon* (1986) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989). Hayslip's view on the Vietnam War is taken from both perspectives and is also unusual in that it offers an account of the life of a Vietnamese peasant woman. Her main theme is forgiveness, and she honors the integrity and value of Vietnam War veterans and survivors, regardless of their ideological position.¹⁹⁰

More negative portrayals of the Vietnamese experience in Vietnam itself appeared in the 1980s with a group of writers who related their experiences in re-education camps in Vietnam. **Nguyen Ngoc Ngan**'s memoir *The Will of Heaven: A Story of One Vietnamese and the End of His World* (1982) and **Doan Van Toai**'s *The Vietnamese Gulag* (1986) are examples of this type of testimonial. The colonial oppression of Vietnam is described by female Vietnamese American authors such as **Anna Kim-Lan McCauly** and **Nguyen Thi Tuyet Mai** who remind American readers that the American colonization of Vietnam had been preceded by the French. The need to educate American audiences about the reality of Vietnam is also apparent in the work of the novelist **Tran Van Dinh** in works such as *No Passenger on the River* (1965) or her second novel *Blue Dragon White Tiger* (1983). **Andrew Pham** belongs to the so-called **Generation 1.5** which marks the generation of Vietnamese who migrated as children from Vietnam to America. His novel *Catfish*

¹⁹⁰ Nelson 496, 2015

and *Mandala* (1999) portrays his own bike trip from San Francisco to Hanoi in which he questions the issues of his identity. **Barbara Tran**'s *In the Mynah Bird's Own Words* (2002) reimagines the lives of her Vietnamese relatives in a series of vignettes, while **Monique Truong** reinvents history in her novel *The Book of Salt* (2003) in which her main character, a Vietnamese cook, serves Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein. **Lê Thi Diem Thúy** is a writer and performer whose semi-autobiographical novel *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) has an episodic structure in which the narrator explores the role of the child as a translator for their immigrant parents.¹⁹¹

7.5 Korean American literature

Korean American literature did not occupy a significant place in American Literature until the 1990s, but even before the Korean American Renaissance, there had been several writers who represented this ethnic group. The first generation is represented by writers such as **Richard E. Kim**, whose first novel *The Martyred* (1964) is the only Asian American novel nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature, or the female Korean writer **Induk Pakh** (1896-1980), whose works reflect on Korean history and the cultural complexity of the nation's Japanese, Chinese French, Dutch, Russian and American heritage. The theme of war and the colonization of Korea is also an important aspect of the work of **Kim Yong Ik** (1920-1955). We should also mention **Younghill Kang (1898-1972)** and his books *The Grass Roof* and *East Goes West*.

The second wave of Koreans arrived in the US during the Korean War (1950-1953) but numbers were very small due to strict immigration laws. Once this legislation was lifted in 1965, three different generations of Korean immigrants emerged: Il Se (the first generation), I Se (the second generation) but also Il Cho O Se (Generation 1.5). The latter group, immigrants who were born in Korea but who had moved to the US in their childhood, began to go through a complex process of defining and articulating their own identities from different perspectives that represented each generation's experiences.¹⁹²

Post-1965 writers such as **Kim Ronyoung** (1951-1982) show the contrasting perspectives of Korean and American identities in *Clay Walls* (1986). The genre of autobiography and memoir is represented by authors such as **Margaret K. Pai**, **Peter Hyun**, **Soon Nyul Choi**, and **Mary Paik Lee**. Experimentation with literary forms and genres can be seen in the works of **Theresa Hak Kyung Cha** (1951-1982) in her novel *Dictée* (1982). The female voice which first emerged with Induk Pakh continues in **Willyce Kim**'s collection of poetry *Eating Artichokes* (1972) or in **Cathy Song**'s poetry *Picture Bride* (1983). More contemporary writers include **Min Jin Lee** whose novel

¹⁹¹ Watch the author's TED Talk: ["Origin Song": lê thi diem thúy at TEDxSitka](#)

¹⁹² Nelson 291, 2015

Pachinko (2017) is a moving account of Koreans living in Japan during the colonial occupation, World War II, and its aftermath. In her novels *Comfort Woman* (1997) and *Fox Girl* (2002), **Nora Okja Keller** examines the multigenerational trauma suffered by Korean “comfort women” who were used as sex slaves for Japanese and American troops during WWII. **Chang-Rae Lee** is currently one of the most successful American Korean writers. His debut novel *Native Speaker* (1995) captures the confusion over the issues of identity, assimilation, and language.¹⁹³ As we can see, the variety of forms and themes in Korean American literature confirms its strong presence within the contemporary American literary context.

7.6 Filipino American literature

Early Filipino American fiction is represented by the fictionalized autobiography of **Carlos Bulosan** (1913-1956) titled *American Is in the Heart* (1947). The work examines racism and the collective memory of early Filipino immigrants and Bulosan’s own experiences with both Filipino and American society. **Bienvenido Santos** (1911-1996) grew up in the Manila slums and after his novel, *The Praying Man* about political corruption was banned in the Philippines, he went into voluntary exile in the United States. In his early fiction *The Man Who (Thought He) Looked Like Robert Taylor* (1983) he depicts the lives of early Filipino immigrants (manongs). The complexity of the colonial presence of Japanese, Spanish, and Americans in the Philippines is depicted in **Stevan Javellana**’s (1918-1977) novel *Without Seeing the Dawn* (1947). As **Linda Ty-Casper** noted, “if a country’s history is its biography, its literature is its autobiography”. This idea is clearly demonstrated in her trilogy titled *Awaiting Trespass*.

Another female voice who responds to the events of Philippine history is **Ninotchka Rosca** whose work *When the Rainbow Goddess Wept* (1994) examines the Japanese colonization of the islands, a theme which is also addressed by **Cecilia Manguerra Brainard**. More contemporary female authors include **Jessica Hagedorn** whose successful novel *Dogeaters* (1990) is a depiction of the Philippines under the authoritarian regime of Ferdinand Marcos.

Contemporary Filipino American literature focuses more on transcultural identity and interethnic relations as is seen in the works of writers such as **Peter Bacho**, **Brian Ascalon Roley**, and **Bino Realuyo**. Roley’s novel *American Son* (2001) narrates the story of two biracial brothers who aim to make it in America but who end up as a part of a gang. **Han Ong**’s *Fixer Chao* (2001) opens up the issue of the American inability to distinguish between different Asian ethnic groups in America.

¹⁹³ Nelson 292, 2015

Reading and discussion:

Watch the 2006 film adaptation of *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri and answer the following questions:

1. What is the significance of the name Gogol for a character who is the child of Bengali immigrant parents?
2. Describe the transition of the main character's American-Bengali identity. How representative is such a transition compared to other ethnic identities?

Read the short story "Seventeen Syllables" by Hisaye Yamamoto and answer the following:

3. What are the conflicting values of the Issei and Nisei generations portrayed in the story?
4. What historical events are portrayed in the story?
5. What is the significance of haiku in the story?

Watch the 1989 film adaptation of *Eat a Bowl of Tea* by Louis Chu and the 1993 film adaptation of *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan and answer the following:

6. What major social changes in the Chinese American community are portrayed in both films?
7. How is Chinatown as a sociohistorical place of Chinese Americans depicted in both films?
8. What is the generation gap which is portrayed in both films?

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8. Latinx, Hispanic, and Chicano/Chicana Culture and Literature

According to the 2010 census, there are over 60 million Hispanic people living in the US, together comprising 18% of the total population. The term itself derives from the Latin word for the Iberian Peninsula, “Hispania”, and is currently used to denote countries – and people – with cultural and historic links to Spain due to the Spanish colonization of the Americas. It is also necessary to note that a Hispanic, or Hispanic American person, can be of any race. While the terms “**Hispanic**” and “**Latino/Latina/Latinx**” are often used interchangeably, they denote slightly different categories, and certain groups within these categories prefer different terms, with about half of all Hispanic/Latinx people preferring to describe themselves according to their country of origin, for example, Puerto-Rican, Colombian, etc. The term “Hispanic” generally denotes people from, or linked to, Spanish-speaking countries, both in Latin America and Spain itself, which presumably excludes those Latin American countries with Portuguese as their main language; the terminology “Latino/Latina/Latinx” excludes people from Spain or other non-Latin-American countries but includes the non-Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America.¹⁹⁴ Research shows that the number of people of Hispanic descent may, in fact, be far higher than the official figures suggest – when entering their data in the national census, individuals can state their own chosen ethnicity, and data from 2015 shows that about 11% of the Hispanic population do not identify as Hispanic or Latinx (predominantly those of the third- and fourth- or higher generations).¹⁹⁵ For the purposes of this chapter, we will use the term “Latinx” (a gender-neutral/general variety, since “Latino” and “Latina” are tied to masculine and feminine word forms, respectively) unless we are discussing a specific person or a group of people who specifically identify themselves as Hispanic. In addition, during the 1960s and 70s, many people of Mexican descent in the US began using the label “Chicano/Chicana” to denote pride in their ethnic origin and the adherence to their own culture, as opposed to the more assimilationist term “Mexican American”: “Chicanos defined themselves as proud members of a brown race, thereby rejecting, not only the previous generation's assimilationist orientation but their racial pretensions as well”.¹⁹⁶

More than 60% of the Hispanic population of the US in 2010, around 37 million people, had **Mexican** origins. Other significant groups with a US population numbering over 2 million include the **Puerto Rican** (5.7 mil), **Cuban** (2.4 mil), **Salvadoran** (2.3 mil), **Dominican** (2 mil), and **Colombian** (2 mil) minorities. This chapter reviews the history and culture of these countries, in

¹⁹⁴ Martinez and Gonzalez 2020.

¹⁹⁵ Lopez, Krogstad and Passel 2020.

¹⁹⁶ Lopez 2009.

which the Spanish heritage was often combined with the original Native American roots and also with the African heritage brought to the region of Latin America via the Atlantic slave trade.

8.1 Who are Latinx Americans?

Mexico

Mexico is currently the 10th most populous country in the world, with a total population of approximately 128 million people. The history of the region is extremely rich and varied. As with much of the continent's earliest population, the first people arrived in the region around 12,000 years ago via the Bering Strait. Between 7,000 and 1,500 BCE, farming and agriculture developed, most notably the cultivation of maize and other cereals. One of the earliest significant cultures to emerge in the region was **the Olmec culture** (ca. 1,200-600 BCE). The Olmecs were likely the first culture to construct large ceremonial sites, a fact which demonstrates that they were a highly developed culture both politically and religiously since a large labor force was needed for their construction and maintenance. Many aspects of their religious practice survived over the centuries and permeated other cultures such as the Mayans, the Aztecs, and the Zapotec; shaman-kings held the leading positions in society, and all elements of nature and the cosmos were seen as infused with **spiritual energy and power**, which humans sought to access through **discipline, fasting, meditation, and bloodletting**. The jaguar was a particularly powerful symbol for the Olmecs; as an animal that lives in the jungle, can swim, and hunts both day and night, the jaguar incorporated land, water, air, light, and darkness in a single symbol.¹⁹⁷ The symbols of the eagle and of the flying snake, also found in the later Mesoamerican cultures, likely originated in Olmec belief too. All Mesoamerican cultures adopted a specific **ball game** as a religious practice, accompanied by human sacrifice – this game most likely formed a connection to a rain god and to the ritual of rainmaking.¹⁹⁸ The Olmec legacy in later Mesoamerican cultures and religions is evident in several key concepts:

the belief that meditation, austerities, and sacrifice could enable the attainment of a superior spiritual state; that contact could be made with the reality beyond the human and physical world; that ceremonial sites reflected supernatural sanction for earthly cultures; that humanity not only existed in conjunction with cosmic powers and deities, but also shared identities with them; and by their development of a religious complexity founded on rain and agricultural fertility.

(Hamnett 1999, p.28)

¹⁹⁷ Hamnett 1999.

¹⁹⁸ Hamnett 1999.

By 400 BCE, the Olmec culture was in decline, and other cultures were emerging, notably the **Zapotec** civilization near the Olmecs, and the **Mayan** civilization in the south, which survived until the arrival of the Spanish in the 16th century. By 250 CE, a written language was already being recorded in stone carvings and calendars were also in use.¹⁹⁹ The ancient city of **Teotihuacán** (150 BCE – 750 CE) was the sixth largest city in the world at the height of its power, with monumental pyramids, a rigidly symmetrical urban plan that included canalized rivers, and a strict grid system of streets, access to large amounts of obsidian out of which people at the time built tools, and an advanced trade system.²⁰⁰ By the beginning of the 13th century, most of these Classical-era cities had been abandoned or were in decline, giving way to a new culture, **the Aztecs**. Their 19-island lake kingdom was built by expanding the islands by caking mud on top of rafts, building elaborate systems to prevent flooding, and constructing aqueducts to provide better access to fresh water; the capital, **Tenochtitlán**, was eventually conquered and destroyed by the Spanish conquistadors; the site then served as the basis for the present-day **Mexico City**.²⁰¹ The Aztecs forced alliances on some of their most powerful neighbors and conquered others, and the myth of their origin is still symbolized on **the Mexican flag**; according to this myth, the nomadic ancestors of the Aztecs saw **an eagle devouring a snake**, which symbolized the end to their wandering and the settling of a homeland.²⁰²

The Spanish conquest of the Americas began with the arrival of Christopher Columbus in 1492 on a voyage sponsored by the Catholic monarchs of Spain. Columbus' fleet initially landed in the Caribbean, but these islands were found to lack the gold and levels of wealth that the Spanish had hoped for, and therefore the Spanish expanded their reach, eventually landing on Yucatan in 1517 and believing it to be just another island. However, the development of the civilization in Yucatan far surpassed any that the Spanish had encountered in the Caribbean, and the region seemed abundant in gold. **Hernán Cortés** was commissioned by the Spanish governor of Cuba to explore the region in more detail and to trade with the natives. However, Cortés did much more than trade; using groups of shipwrecked Spanish sailors who were fluent in local languages and weaponry unknown to the natives such as firearms, cannons, and steel armor, Cortés managed to intimidate, threaten, negotiate and overpower thousands of natives.²⁰³ **Moctezuma** (also known as Montezuma), the then ruler of the Aztec empire, sent gold gifts in an attempt to appease the conquistadores, but this only convinced the Spanish of the vast wealth of the region and encouraged

¹⁹⁹ Foster 2007.

²⁰⁰ Foster 2007.

²⁰¹ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁰² Foster 2007.

²⁰³ Foster 2007.

their desire for conquest. With the help of local non-Aztec natives who were dissatisfied with the Aztec rule, Cortés made it to Tenochtitlán, where he took Moctezuma hostage and lived there for six months, melting down priceless Aztec artworks into gold ingots and continuing to demand more and more gold. Eventually, fighting broke out when Cortés' commander mistook preparations for a religious celebration for an uprising and began massacring the Aztecs, Moctezuma among them. The Spanish were forced to retreat but returned a year later, and in 1521, Tenochtitlán fell and was burned to the ground, with the site serving as the location for **Mexico City**, the new capital of the Spanish empire in the Americas, which had spread from California to Chile by the end of the 18th century.²⁰⁴

With the conquest of Mexico, the native culture of raising cereal crops was rejected, since the Spanish relied heavily on livestock. The natural exchange of crops native to the Americas and Europe took place. The New World introduced Europeans to tomatoes, cocoa, potatoes, maize, red pepper, peanuts, cashews, squash, cranberries, and avocados, while the Old World brought to the Americas such crops as wheat, grapes, olives, apples, peaches, oranges, and also livestock – pigs, sheep, goats, chicken, goats, donkeys and horses.²⁰⁵ The Columbian, or Atlantic, Exchange also included less beneficial goods: rats, alcohol, smallpox, and influenza from Europe, and syphilis, tobacco, and coca from the Americas. The epidemics of disease likely played a significant role in the Spanish conquest of the “New World”; after the fall of Tenochtitlán, the population of the Spanish was still relatively small compared to the native population, but as the introduced diseases ravaged the Americas, the Indian population decreased sharply from an estimated 25 million in the 1520s to about 1.2 million by the 1620s.²⁰⁶

The Spanish also aimed to **Catholicize** the entire region, regarding the natives as “pagans” – not evil as such, but certainly in need of some spiritual guidance. Some elements of the Aztec religion were compatible with Catholicism; both religions baptized young children by bathing them, both were closely entwined with the political workings of the state, both practiced the consumption of spiritual sacrifice, worshipped a virgin mother as a god, practiced fasting, pilgrimages, and utilized the imagery of the cross.²⁰⁷ For this reason, Christianity was often layered onto pre-existing religious beliefs of the natives rather than replacing them entirely. **Land ownership** was often organized through a system similar to the pre-Columbian arrangement; soldiers were awarded land and the privilege to direct the work of the people inhabiting that land. This system, known as

²⁰⁴ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁰⁵ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁰⁶ Hamnett 1999.

²⁰⁷ Kirkwood 2005.

encomienda, resulted in the creation of a system of slavery which technically held that the Indians were free while also forbidden from moving away.²⁰⁸ The societies of the New World adhered to a strict racial hierarchy; the Spanish born in Spain represented the top tier of society, closely followed by the Creoles, the Spanish born in the New World. *Mestizos*, or “mixed race” people born to Spanish and Indian parents, were further classified into as many as sixteen categories depending on their parentage; meanwhile, the Indians were regarded as the lowest level of society, a belief which persists today in the second-class status of native citizens in modern Mexico.²⁰⁹

By the end of the 18th century, Spain’s position in Europe was weakening and it was increasingly economically dependent on its colonies, while the colonies themselves became increasingly self-reliant. Mexico was one of the richest colonies at the time, and the increasing Spanish demand for money and resources was perceived as a sign of weakness by the Mexican elites as well as the general populace. By the early 1800s, many influential voices in Mexico were voicing the opinion that the country should be independent, and after Napoleon I invaded Spain in 1808, the legitimacy of Spanish rule in Mexico was brought even more into question, sparking off a series of regional conflicts and rebellions known as the **Mexican War of Independence** (1808-1821). The rebellion was initially led by Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, a Creole-born priest who mobilized poor Indians hoping for better living conditions and who became a symbol of the Mexican struggle for independence.²¹⁰ The Spanish forces were overthrown and the Treaty of Córdoba was signed on August 24, 1821, formally recognizing Mexico’s independence.²¹¹ The region was reorganized as the Mexican Empire, but this was soon replaced by the establishment of the First Mexican Republic in 1824 known as the United Mexican States. **Texas** was greatly influenced by the recent arrival of English-speaking settlers from the US and rebelled against the Mexican leadership. After the famous siege and subsequent massacre of the Alamo which earned the rebel Texans support from the US, Texas declared independence from Mexico in 1836, remaining so until the US annexation in 1845, a move which also challenged the traditional borders between Texas and Mexico by overstating the extent of Texan territory. Mexico responded to these provocations, and the **Mexican-American War** of 1846-1848 broke out. Mexico eventually lost more than half of its territory, receiving only \$18 million in exchange, and Mexico City had been bombarded and invaded.²¹² Many Hispanic people and native Mexicans thus became Mexican-Americans simply due to the shifting of the US borders, which now encompassed Texas, New

²⁰⁸ Kirkwood 2005.

²⁰⁹ Kirkwood 2005.

²¹⁰ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²¹¹ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²¹² Foster 2007.

Mexico, Colorado, Utah, Nevada, Arizona, and California. However, the lives of Mexicans in the newly annexed territories were often difficult; many lost their land either to the Anglo-Americans moving into the territory or to the high property taxes.²¹³

The second half of the 19th century in Mexico was characterized by little or no improvement in the conditions of the poor – usually, natives – and by the search for a national identity, with artists, poets, and writers of the time often reaching back to the culture, traditions, art forms and heroes of the pre-Columbian era for inspiration.²¹⁴ In politics, the two groups of the Liberals and the Conservatives (or Monarchists) vied for dominance; **Benito Juárez** became the first Mexican president of indigenous origin in 1857 and held the office until his death in 1872, but his presidency was wracked by several conflicts, such as the **War of the Reform** between the Liberals and Conservatives, and **the French invasion** of Mexico in 1861-1867, in which Mexico gained the support of President Lincoln and the US soon after the end of the American Civil War. The French invasion and the Battle of Puebla in 1862 when a smaller Mexican force defeated the French imperial army, is still commemorated every year with a celebration known as **Cinco de Mayo**, i.e., the 5th of May, the date of the battle; the event celebrates Mexican-American culture and is perhaps even more popular in the US than in Mexico itself.

Mexico finally experienced a period of stability and effective government after 1867, but the first half of the 20th century brought both reforms as well as conflicts and revolutions; the Mexican Revolution of the first two decades of the 20th century led many Mexicans to seek stability and economic mobility in the US.²¹⁵ However, with the onset of the Great Depression, the Mexican Repatriation Program was introduced between 1929 and 1936, with 400,000 and 2,000,000 Mexicans being deported from the US, many against their will; as many as 60% of those deported were US citizens by birth.²¹⁶ Relations with the US somewhat improved in the following decades due to efforts made on both sides; for example, a 1941 agreement secured an exclusivity agreement on oil, with Mexico undertaking to provide oil for the US market alone on terms that were favorable for Mexico. After 1942 and the onset of labor shortages as a result of the war, there was an increased need for workers in sectors such as agriculture, and the US government established the Bracero program in which the US paid the cost of transportation for Mexican workers, *braceros*. Many of these workers returned to the US repeatedly, and by 1964, more than 5 million Mexicans had gone through the program (although the exact figures are unclear due to the numbers of repeat migrants)

²¹³ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²¹⁴ Foster 2007.

²¹⁵ Foster 2007.

²¹⁶ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

and hundreds of thousands settled in the US.²¹⁷ Much like other poor workers such as Filipinos or African Americans, Mexican immigrants faced prejudice and difficult living conditions; those who decided to settle in the US eventually formed **worker unions** that aimed to improve the conditions of workers in the US. Many Mexican workers adapted to life in the US either via assimilation into the majority/white American culture, or through adherence to and pride in Mexican traditions. In the 1960s-70s, the Chicano movement developed via worker unions, legal groups, and student organizations, and reclaimed the previously derisive term “Chicano” as a source of pride in Mexican heritage. Between 1980 and 2010, the number of Mexican immigrants in the US rose from around 2 million to 11.7 million.²¹⁸

Puerto Rico

The territory of Puerto Rico is an archipelago in the Greater Antilles to the east of the Dominican Republic and takes its name from the largest island in the group. It is estimated that the first inhabitants arrived on the islands as early as 2,000 BCE; many varied groups of immigrants from across Central and South America arrived in Puerto Rico throughout the centuries and introduced new cultural practices, sometimes supplanting the previous culture altogether.²¹⁹ By the time of Columbus’ arrival, the population consisted predominantly of the **Taino** people who may have been related to the Maya, due to their use of ball courts similar to those of the Mayan culture, evidence of large communities, advanced agricultural techniques, and elaborate religious practices that can be traced back to the Taino period.²²⁰ The Tainos had settled most of the Great Antilles by the time of Columbus’ arrival, including Puerto Rico, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, and Jamaica.²²¹ Historians long believed that these indigenous people had simply died out after the arrival of the Europeans, but recent linguistic and genetic research has suggested that the indigenous populations merged with the new settlers to a greater degree than was previously believed. The Taino people did not wear clothes but often coated their skin with plant mixtures and oils to repel bugs – this gave their skin the distinctive red color that the Spanish mistakenly attributed to the natives at large. Of the Taino language, some words survive in present-day English and Spanish, such as barbecue, canoe, hammock, hurricane, and tobacco.²²²

²¹⁷ Kirkwood 2005; Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²¹⁸ Migration Policy Institute 2018.

²¹⁹ Flores 2009.

²²⁰ Flores 2009.

²²¹ Keegan and Carlson 2008.

²²² Flores 2009.

After the Spanish conquered Puerto Rico, Jamaica, and Cuba at the beginning of the 16th century, the new Spanish colonies represented a place of opportunity for lower-ranking nobles and younger sons of noble families, whose prospects back in Spain were less than promising. In Puerto Rico – or, as it was initially called, San Juan Bautista – governors were replaced fairly often. As in other Spanish colonies, the system of *encomienda* was established on the island, and the natives were used as a cheap labor force. In 1517, the first larger shipment of African slaves was sent to Puerto Rico and other Spanish colonies, but the slave population of Puerto Rico was relatively low due to the fact that the initial boom in gold mining had quickly reverted to agricultural production rather than the more slave-intensive trades in sugar, ginger, and coffee; in fact, by the second half of the 16th century, the Spanish government had to provide stipends and subsidies for people to remain on the island. After 1664, the majority of Africans on the island consisted of slaves who had escaped from English, Dutch or French colonies and who had been granted asylum in Puerto Rico.²²³

Piracy emerged in the Caribbean almost as soon as the Spanish conquered their first colonies; French corsairs first attacked the Spanish ships bringing gold back to Europe in 1519, and during the **Golden Age of Piracy** (1650-1730), they were joined by English and Dutch buccaneers, as well as Spanish pirates hired to protect the Spanish interests. The Spanish attempted to protect their shipments and their colonies, but this meant raising the taxes for the colonists, who generally regarded this as unfair. In addition, many pirate ships traded at better prices than the Spanish merchants, and pirates were often welcome in smaller Puerto Rican ports.

The situation in Europe at the beginning of the 19th century meant that Spain was quickly losing its power over its New World colonies; by 1826, the territory of New Spain had been reduced to only Cuba and Puerto Rico, and many Spanish loyalists fled to Puerto Rico, transforming the island to a **plantation economy** based mainly on the production of sugar, tobacco, and coffee.²²⁴ Towards the end of the century, many Puerto Ricans were calling for independence, and the island was granted autonomy from Spain in 1897, with the first general elections held in 1898. Several months later, the island was **occupied by US troops** as a result of the **Spanish-American War**, after which Puerto Rico was officially ceded to the US. Puerto Rican leaders at the time were hoping for US citizenship for their people and even the status of a US state but this never came to pass. Instead, the people became more impoverished as more and more Puerto Rican land was converted to sugar plantations, and many sought to escape this situation by way of migration; as a result, the Puerto Rican population of New York City rose from less than two thousand in 1910 to nearly 70

²²³ Flores 2009.

²²⁴ Flores 2009.

thousand in 1940.²²⁵ Migration was made easier by the **Jones Act of 1917**, under which Puerto Ricans were to be regarded as US citizens, although they could not vote in all US elections while residing on the island.²²⁶ To this day, Puerto Rico remains a US territory, but several **referendums** on gaining US statehood have been held since the 1960s, with increasing numbers of voters voting in favor of incorporation into the US. Currently, Puerto Ricans have no elected representatives in Congress, but they are not exempt from conscription and have served in every war conducted by the US since WWI.²²⁷

Cuba

The modern population of Cuba heavily reflects the island's colonial past and it is now nearly impossible to accurately determine the ethnic makeup of the population in precise numbers. Cubans largely share European, African, and indigenous/Native American ancestry, and about 1% of the 11-million population is Asian, predominantly Chinese. Cuba is one of the world's few remaining socialist states, with the Communist Party described as the foremost power by the 2019 Cuban constitution.

The Spanish colonization of Cuba began with Christopher Columbus' 1492 voyage; throughout the 1510s, **Spanish settlements** were established in Cuba, transforming the island into a Spanish base for further explorations of the Americas.²²⁸ The native population of hunters/gatherers and fishermen, estimated by historians at around 100,000 people before Columbus' arrival, was affected by the *encomienda* system also used in Mexico and other regions of New Spain. In the 1520s, Spain began importing African slaves to Cuba, but it soon became evident that there were no substantial reserves of gold and silver on the island and Spanish explorers switched their focus to other regions, with Cuba serving as a trading post and stopover on the way to more lucrative destinations for the next three centuries.²²⁹ At the beginning of the 18th century, tobacco became the primary export, but the decline in the **sugar trade** in other colonies due to trade regulations and events such as the St. Domingue (Haiti) rebellion allowed Cuban plantation owners to gain a foothold in the world sugar trade; by the 1860s, Cuba had become the world's largest sugar producer.²³⁰ By the early 19th century, Spain had agreed to limit the slave trade, but Cuban sugar production was heavily dependent on cheap labor, and slavery was not abolished on the island until

²²⁵ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²²⁶ Ayala and Bernabe 2009.

²²⁷ Santiago, Kustov, and Valenzuela 2020.

²²⁸ Berbeo 2010.

²²⁹ Staten 2005.

²³⁰ Staten 2005.

1886.²³¹ In the 19th century, Cuba faced several rebellions and uprisings, and the island came under increasing US economic influence, paving the way for the hopes of gaining independence from Spain.

The rebellion against Spanish rule began in 1868, with the rebel forces comprised of free Africans, slaves, Dominican and US volunteers, and plantation owners. Spain attempted to suppress the liberation efforts and even entered into an open war with the US by the end of the century. However, the conflict officially ended with the defeat of Spain and the signing of the **Treaty of Paris of 1898**, in which Spain renounced sovereignty over Cuba, ceded Puerto Rico and Guam to the US, and sold the Philippines to the US for the sum of \$20 million.²³² While the US had previously stated that they had no wish to control Cuba, the Treaty of Paris nonetheless left the island under US control; the US was permitted to intervene in Cuban affairs in order to “maintain Cuba’s independence”,²³³ directly controlled access to the Panama Canal via Cuba, and restricted the diversification of Cuban economy and industry due to the US reliance on Cuban sugar production. These conditions continued to apply even after the US occupation technically ended in 1902, with the election of the Republic of Cuba’s first president.²³⁴ The first half of the 20th century in Cuba was marked by frequent unrest despite significant economic growth and improved social conditions due to the heightened rates of corruption, nepotism, social inequality, and organized crime. Between 1952 and 1959, Cuba was once again caught in a revolution led by **Fidel Castro**, a young lawyer who opposed the corrupt government and organized several strikes and attacks. After initial setbacks and the failure of many of these attacks, Castro led a successful guerilla campaign known as the **Cuban Revolution**, deposing the incumbent President Fulgencio Batista in 1959. Castro promised massive reforms, first as Prime Minister (1959-1979) and later as First Secretary of the Communist Party (1961-2011). The next decades in Cuban history were dedicated to the creation of “order out of revolution, [and] the need to uphold a revolutionary faith in the implementation of that new order”.²³⁵ Relations with the US soured after 1959 for a number of reasons, including US support for the Batista regime during the revolution, differing opinions of economic interests, and the US criticism of the new government’s retribution towards their opponents.²³⁶ The post-revolution years were also characterized by a steady flow of nearly 250,000 Cuban migrants to the US, most of them middle- or upper-class, well-educated, and middle-aged;

²³¹ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²³² Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²³³ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²³⁴ Staten 2005.

²³⁵ Bethell 1993.

²³⁶ Bethell 1993.

even after the borders with the US were closed due to the Missile Crisis in 1962, many Cubans chose to immigrate via Mexico or other nearby countries.²³⁷

In 1961, the US aided Cuban exiles to invade the island and attempt to overthrow the Cuban revolutionary government in an operation known as the Bay of Pigs invasion, but the landing ended in failure. Subsequently, the US launched “Operation Mongoose”, a covert operation aimed at reinforcing the opposition’s militant groups and sabotaging the new Cuban government.²³⁸ These events served to increase Castro’s mistrust of the US and set the stage for what would be known as the **Cuban Missile Crisis** of 1962, when the USSR sent nuclear missiles to Cuba, a move that was perceived as an immediate threat by the US. The threat of nuclear war was finally averted by an agreement between the US and the USSR – the Soviets would remove the missiles in exchange for the US promise not to invade Cuba and to retract their own missiles stationed in Turkey.²³⁹

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, Cuba was struck by a severe economic crisis and famine due to the loss of the country’s primary trade partner. As a result, many Cubans attempted to seek their fortune in the US, often traveling by boat; in 1992-93, nearly 7,000 *balseros* (“rafters”) crossed the Straits of Florida, often on makeshift boats and rafts, to seek asylum in the US.²⁴⁰ The sharp **increase in Cuban immigration** led to an adjustment in US immigration policy; before 1995, all Cubans who reached US territorial waters were allowed to stay, whereas after 1995, the US adopted a “wet feet, dry feet” policy, in which Cubans who set foot on US soil would be allowed to stay and seek permanent residency, but those intercepted in territorial waters would be returned to Cuba or to a third country. The policy remained in place until 2017, when President Obama ended this practice, stating that the US would deport any illegal immigrants from Cuba who did not qualify for humanitarian relief, a policy that was already in place for illegal immigrants from other countries.²⁴¹

El Salvador

The Republic of El Salvador, located in the middle of Central America, is the smallest country in mainland Latin America, with a population of 7 million. The history of the region’s settlement dates back to 10,000-6,000 BCE, with the first major settlement, Chalchuapa, established around 1,200 BCE. Initially isolated due to its geographic location, the Olmecs and later the Maya started to enter

²³⁷ Duany 1999.

²³⁸ Stern 2012.

²³⁹ Stern 2012.

²⁴⁰ Staten 2005.

²⁴¹ Gomez 2017.

the region and influence its development.²⁴² In 250 CE, a volcano erupted near Chalchuapa and made the surrounding area nearly uninhabitable for almost two centuries, leading to a period of migration and halting the cultural and social development of El Salvador in comparison to the rest of the Maya empire.²⁴³ In the 11th century, the region was conquered by the Pipil, an indigenous people belonging to the Nahua group, who founded several prominent cities. By the time of Columbus' arrival, the Pipil confederacy, known as **Cuscatlán**, spanned most of El Salvador and parts of Honduras and Guatemala.²⁴⁴ A small population of the Pipil people still lives in modern-day El Salvador, and the past decades have seen renewed interest in Pipil heritage and language.

The Spanish conquistadors discovered El Salvador in the 1520s. By the time of their arrival, nearly half of the native population of the region had already been killed by the spread of European diseases from Mexico in the north. However, the conquistadors were still confronted by several smaller kingdoms and city-states and also faced revolts in previously conquered regions, and El Salvador was not fully conquered until 1528, with the last significant Indian revolt for several centuries breaking out in 1547.²⁴⁵ Pedro de Alvarado, the conquistador who subdued the region, named the province El Salvador ("The Savior").

Much like in the rest of the Spanish colonial empire in Latin America, the system of *encomienda* was introduced, and the native population was held in servitude to the Spanish; non-native crops and animals were introduced, and the religious hierarchy of the Catholic Church replaced the native religious structures. For nearly three centuries, the economy of El Salvador was almost entirely dependent on **indigo**; afterward, **coffee** became the main product of the country. As in other Spanish colonies, this emphasis on a single crop led to poverty and a precarious economic and social position, with most of the suffering falling on the shoulders of the native population. The Mexican War for Independence in 1821 served as a source of inspiration for other Central and Latin American nations which sought to establish themselves as sovereign nations; the **Captaincy General of Guatemala**, a Spanish colony spanning modern-day Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala and part of Mexico, proclaimed its independence from Spain on September 15, 1821, with the **Act of Independence of Central America**. This region briefly became a part of Mexico in 1824, after the Mexican republican uprising, and the countries became **the United Provinces of Central America**, eventually separating into the countries of Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica by 1840.²⁴⁶

²⁴² White 2008.

²⁴³ White 2008.

²⁴⁴ White 2008.

²⁴⁵ White 2008.

²⁴⁶ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

The second half of the 19th century was marked by ongoing armed conflict: El Salvador fought with Guatemala five times, Honduras four times, and Nicaragua once, in addition to suppressing more than a dozen military revolts within the country itself.²⁴⁷ Economic power resided mostly within the hands of an oligarchy known as “The Fourteen Families”, although, in reality, the actual number of these elite families or clans who held most of El Salvador’s coffee plantations, sugar mills, banks, and received nearly 50% of the country’s income was far higher.²⁴⁸ By the beginning of the 20th century, Salvadoran society was increasingly militant, with the poor protesting against their living conditions and the oligarchs attempting to protect their plantations and other sources of income. This period also saw the rise of economic migration to the US. The country was led by authoritarian leaders and military dictators from the coup in 1931 until the eve of the **Salvadoran Civil War** (1979-1992).

By the end of the 1970s, many revolts and uprisings had broken out in Salvadoran society; many of these were suppressed with the aid of the US which wished to prevent war and violence in Central America but would also often fail to verify information that the authoritarian government of El Salvador had presented when asking for support. In 1980, the US sent \$6 million in military aid to El Salvador, but within the next decade, this had increased to almost \$4 billion.²⁴⁹ The war caused the displacement of many Salvadorans – almost half a million people fled to the US and another half million to Honduras, Mexico and Guatemala. The number of migrants to the US continued to grow in the 1990s and 2000s, a result of the unification of families which had already migrated and several natural disasters in El Salvador, such as earthquakes and hurricanes.

Dominican Republic

The island of Hispaniola in the Greater Antilles is divided between two sovereign states, Haiti and the Dominican Republic, with the latter being the larger of the two. In the Pre-Columbian era, the island was inhabited by the Taino people and divided into five chiefdoms. Upon his arrival in 1492, Christopher Columbus named the island “The Spanish Island” (“La Isla Española”), a name which later became adapted into “Hispaniola”.²⁵⁰ Over the next few years, Columbus established the settlement of Isabella, the first Spanish settlement in the Americas, and Santo Domingo, which is now the Dominican Republic’s capital, and the oldest surviving European settlement in the Americas.²⁵¹ The system of *encomienda* established a precedent for the rest of Spain’s colonial

²⁴⁷ White 2008.

²⁴⁸ LeoGrande and Robbins 1980.

²⁴⁹ White 2008.

²⁵⁰ Roorda, Derby, and Gonzalez 2014.

²⁵¹ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

holdings in the Americas, and so did the atrocities committed against the native Tainos, from execution and mutilation for often imaginary crimes, to the murder of children and the rape of Taino women by Spanish soldiers. The first African slaves in the Caribbean arrived in Hispaniola in 1502, and the first sugar mill in the Caribbean was established on the island in 1516.²⁵²

By the beginning of the 16th century, most Spanish settlers had moved to other locations in the rapidly growing New Spain. This allowed many English and French pirates to settle along the coasts of Hispaniola, and French influence had spread so widely that by 1665, France had gained control over **Saint-Domingue** (Haiti), with the colony being formally **ceded to France** in 1697. The Spanish part of the island experienced rapid economic decline, while Saint-Domingue flourished, and throughout the 18th century, Spain made unsuccessful attempts to retake the French part of the island.²⁵³ In 1804, Saint-Domingue gained independence and was renamed Haiti after one of the original Taino names for the island; the Dominican Republic followed, after many failed attempts, and declared **independence in 1844**, although the Haitian government failed to recognize their neighbor's independence until 1855 and launched several military campaigns against the Dominican regions, mostly out of worry that the newly-formed state would be taken over by foreign forces, namely France, Spain, the US or Britain.²⁵⁴ After a brief period of independence marred by conflicts, the Dominican Republic, then called Santo Domingo, briefly reverted to the status of a Spanish colony between 1861 and 1865. The constant disagreements and conflicts between the Dominican nationalists and Spanish sympathizers resulted in a guerilla war and the re-establishment of the Dominican Republic as an independent nation, with the support of the US. Between 1865 and 1869, the Dominican Republic had 20 different presidents, indicating the instability and level of internal conflict within the country.²⁵⁵ The Dominican Republic became a military state in an attempt by one of its presidents to consolidate power; however, the same president left the country heavily indebted to foreign powers by the end of the 19th century.²⁵⁶ As a result, the Dominican Republic turned to the US, and in 1906, a treaty was signed that would give the US control over Dominican customs revenue for 50 years in return for the US assuming responsibility for the debt.²⁵⁷

Further unrest resulted in the **occupation of Hispaniola by the US** between 1916 and 1924;²⁵⁸ while regarded unfavorably by most Dominicans, the era of US occupation stabilized the

²⁵² Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁵³ Phillips 2010.

²⁵⁴ Matibag 2003.

²⁵⁵ Phillips 2010.

²⁵⁶ Phillips 2010.

²⁵⁷ Phillips 2010.

²⁵⁸ Matibag 2003.

country's economy, established an effective National Guard, and built a network of roads throughout the island.²⁵⁹ After several years of independence after the end of WWI, the country reverted back to dictatorship under the leadership of **Rafael Trujillo**, whose regime lasted until 1961 and while the Trujillo regime did bring about improvements in terms of healthcare, education, and transportation in the country, it is considered one of the bloodiest dictatorships of the 20th century, with the massacres of Haitians in the region of the border region resulting in the deaths of tens of thousands of people.²⁶⁰ After the fall of the Trujillo regime, immigration to the US rose sharply; in the 1960s-1980s, many Dominicans sought to escape unemployment and political persecution, and the Dominican population in the US increased from around 12,000 in 1960 to 169,000 in 1980, reaching approximately 880,000 in 2010.²⁶¹ Although the Dominican Republic has managed to make some progress towards fair and free elections in the 21st century in comparison to the allegedly rigged elections held throughout the 1960s-1990s, the country is still struggling with significant corruption in the government and its institutions and serious economic issues.²⁶²

Colombia

The Republic of Colombia is a country in the northern region of South America with a population of more than 50 million. The earliest traces of human presence in the area date back to 12,500 BCE, with the first settlements developing between 5000 and 1000 BCE. The area was inhabited by many nations and cultures, but no single group gained significant political dominance over the region. The Chibcha or Muisca Indians, whom the Spanish conquistadors encountered upon their arrival in the area, ruled through stable political structures with many towns, villages, temples, and palaces. The region of Colombia was nearly abandoned by the Spanish after the discovery of Peru and its wealth, but the Spanish crown wished to retain its position of power in the northern area of South America and sent several expeditions to explore inner Colombia.²⁶³ The city of **Bogota**, named after a powerful Muisca ruler of the time, was established in 1539, and several Spanish forces struggled to control the region. While there were no significant deposits of silver or gold, the lands were fertile, the indigenous population numerous, and there were emerald and salt mines that had been established by the Muisca.²⁶⁴ The conquest of Colombia was marked by relatively little violence

²⁵⁹ Phillips 2010.

²⁶⁰ Matibag 2003.

²⁶¹ Zong and Batalova 2018.

²⁶² Phillips 2010.

²⁶³ Burkholder 2010.

²⁶⁴ Burkholder 2010.

towards the natives, but the spread of European diseases still devastated the Muisca population.²⁶⁵ The system of *encomienda* was also established in Colombia.

In 1717, the Spanish king declared the establishment of the Viceroyalty of New Granada, which encompassed modern-day Colombia, Panama, Venezuela, and Ecuador, with Bogota as its capital.²⁶⁶ Throughout the 18th century, the inhabitants of New Granada frequently protested the rising prices of tradeable goods as well as the increased taxation burdens imposed by Spain. This discontent culminated in the declaration of Colombian independence in 1810 and the creation of the Republic of Colombia.²⁶⁷ Several civil wars followed, resulting in a brief reconquest of New Granada by the Spanish, the resumption of independence, and the secession of Venezuela and Ecuador.²⁶⁸ In November 1903, **Panama** also seceded from Colombia with the help of the US whose interests lay in ensuring the building of the Panama Canal. The situation soured **US-Colombian relations** until 1921 when the US agreed to pay \$25 million in exchange for Colombia's recognition of Panamanian independence.²⁶⁹ At the beginning of the 20th century, Colombia's economy expanded dramatically due to the growth of **coffee exports**; by the 1920s, coffee made up almost 80% of all Colombia's exports.²⁷⁰ The first half of the 20th century was marked by conflicts between the Liberal and Conservative parties; the instability lasted until the 1950s when a power-sharing consensus was reached. As a result of these conflicts and the consequent economic instability, many more Colombians chose to migrate to the US than ever before.²⁷¹

8.2 Becoming Latinx American

The traditions of people from Latin America and the Caribbean have been shaped by the influence of several distinct cultures: the Native cultures of their respective regions, the African cultures of the people brought to the Americas via the Atlantic Slave Trade, and the traditions brought – and often enforced upon the native populations – by the Spanish.

Spain itself has historically been a cultural melting pot of cultures; between 3000 BCE and 711 CE, the Iberian Peninsula was home to Iberians, Phoenicians, Celts, Greeks, Carthaginians, Romans, Visigoths, Vandals, and Muslims.²⁷² In the 8th century, Spain was conquered by the Moors,

²⁶⁵ Burkholder 2010.

²⁶⁶ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁶⁷ LaRosa and Mejia 2017.

²⁶⁸ LaRosa and Mejia 2017.

²⁶⁹ LaRosa and Mejia 2017.

²⁷⁰ Luzardo-Luna 2019.

²⁷¹ Burkholder 2010.

²⁷² Ochoa and Smith 2008.

Muslim Berbers from North Africa. Islam brought many specific cultural features to Spain, and the depth of the influence is still visible today in places like the Alhambra Palace in Granada; the Moorish era influenced many aspects of Spanish culture including philosophy, astronomy, mathematics, medicine, literature, art and architecture. Soon after the arrival of the Moors, the process of the Christian Reconquest of Spain (**Reconquista**) began, with Christian forces attempting to retake Spanish territories – a process that would span nearly four centuries until 1492. The Reconquista may be perceived as one of the main reasons for Spanish activities in the Americas; having freshly re-conquered Spain, the conquistadors, the explorers and soldiers sent to the New World, were often men who had fought many battles against the Moors and who were thus inclined to treat the American natives based on their experiences in the war against the Moors.²⁷³

The **Native influences** on Latinx lives can nowadays be perceived not only in the visual arts but also in the staple dishes of South American and Caribbean cultures. The traditional native crops grown in the region before the arrival of the Spanish still play a crucial role in everyday cuisine in Latin America: potatoes, tomatoes, corn/maize, red peppers, peanuts, beans, and cacao. The **religious practices** of the continent also reveal the various different cultures which came into contact in the Spanish colonial empire; for instance, Afro-Cuban religions such as *Santería* represent the merging of Catholic and African religious practices.

The process of “becoming” American differs from one group of Latinos and Latinas based on their country of origin. While some, such as the northern Mexicans, became American due to the political shifting of the borders in the 19th century, others have been forced to travel in harsh conditions to escape the poverty or political upheaval of their home countries. In the US, many Hispanic immigrants have faced **prejudice** or even outright violence; to this day, many non-Hispanic Americans hold prejudiced views of Hispanics as hot-blooded, lazy, and unstable or associate them with organized crime.²⁷⁴ The rates of **immigration** from Central and South America remain high, partly due to the dependence of the US economy on migrant **farm labor**; only about 25% of agricultural workers are US citizens, over 50% are illegal migrants, and 76% of all agricultural workers were born in Mexico.²⁷⁵ Farm laborers and other unskilled workers are often paid wages that keep them below the poverty line; in addition, the poor **language** skills of immigrants and the generally lower levels of education in the Hispanic community may contribute

²⁷³ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁷⁴ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁷⁵ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

to the higher rates of poverty among these groups, with this poverty impacting other spheres of life such as health, crime, and education.²⁷⁶

The **cultural practices** of the Latinx community can be roughly summarized by several key terms and concepts which also apply, to some degree, to many Latinx/Hispanic families which are resident in the US. The first term, *familismo* (familism), describes the importance of family to Latinx cultures – obedience and *respect* for authority figures in the family are expected, as are sacrifices and hard work for the sake of the family. It should be noted here that this concept of family is not limited to the immediate family and the closest relatives, but often includes extended families as well as close friends, neighbors, and others.²⁷⁷ Another important concept is that of *personalismo*, which places an emphasis on personal rather than institutional relationships, the promotion of pleasant, meaningful, and nonconfrontational social relationships, and the importance of physical touch and physical proximity for the development of deeper interpersonal connections.²⁷⁸ The strong emphasis on positive social relationships is rooted in the concept of *simpatia*, or “kindness”; the avoidance of conflict and the effort to build harmony, social support, and social acceptance are important values for many Latinx/Hispanic people.²⁷⁹ *Espiritism* is the belief that life and health are influenced by body, mind, and spirit, and that good or evil spirits can affect one’s life and well-being; there is a strong tradition of spiritual healing within many Latinx/Hispanic communities.²⁸⁰ *Fatalism* is closely connected to the previous notion of good and evil spirits; negative events in life are often seen as a divine punishment that must be endured.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. Which historical event do you believe to be the most important to the formation of Hispanic and Latinx identities? Why?**
- 2. Which Hispanic and Latinx cultural items and practices may be reflected in Hispanic, Latinx, and Chicano American literature?**

²⁷⁶ Ochoa and Smith 2008.

²⁷⁷ Antshel 2002.

²⁷⁸ Ortiz 2017.

²⁷⁹ Ortiz 2017.

²⁸⁰ Antshel 2002.

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9. Hispanic and Chicano/Chicana American Literature

Key terms: pocho, barrio, Chicano/Chicana, corrido, bilingualism, pueblo, interference, mestizo

Warm-up:

1. Do you know any Hispanic American writers?
2. Can you give a brief explanation of the historical development of the American Southwest?
3. Do you think that there are any distinctive features in Hispanic American literature that differentiate it from other ethnic literatures?
4. Which of the key terms are you familiar with?

After studying this chapter, students should be able to understand the following:

1. To identify the basic distinctions in Hispanic American literature.
2. To name the major authors and their works.
3. To identify the most distinctive themes of Hispanic American literature

As you learned in Chapter 4 of this book, due to the great variety of geographical, historical, and linguistic identities of what we call Hispanic there is still no general consensus on the meaning of the term **Hispanic American literature** and it is therefore often used in a somewhat confusing manner. The term “Hispanic” generally refers to people who are from Spain or somehow linked to the country but also includes the Spanish-speaking part of Latin America, encompassing the literature of Puerto Ricans, Cuban Americans but also immigrants to the US from Central and South America.

The term **Mexican American literature** is used for writings by authors who are of Mexican descent but who have closer cultural connections to Mexico. Another distinction is made in the case of **Chicano/Chicana American literature**, the work of authors of Mexican descent who are more culturally allied with the United States and with Native Americans. It is important here to draw a clear distinction between Hispanic American literature and Latin American literature, which exists solely in Spanish and in translation in the USA, written by writers who do not live in the US.²⁸¹ The complexity of the definition of the term only confirms how varied and exciting Hispanic American literature has become since its renaissance in the second half of the 20th century. Today, the term Mexican American and Chicano American literature are used interchangeably.

²⁸¹ Kolář 2003

Hispanic specifically concerns Spanish-speaking Latin America and Spain. Latino and Latina, or the gender-inclusive term Latinx, specifically concern those coming from Latin American countries and cultures, regardless of whether or not the person speaks Spanish.²⁸²

One of the most important groups in Hispanic American literature is undoubtedly that of **Mexican American** writers. The early period of Mexican American literature was predominantly marked by the genre of **autobiography**, such as **José Antonio Villarreal's** autobiographical novel *Pocho* (1959) described the hardships of the *pochos*²⁸³ and their immigrant experience. Another example of Mexican American autobiography is **John Rechy's** *City of Night* (1963), a poetic narrative that portrays the dark side of America through the eyes of an unnamed hustler as he travels the country. The novel gave a voice to marginalized identities in American society and showed that Mexican Americans should not be viewed as a homogeneous ethnic group. **Chicano American literature** focuses more on the tradition of the *corridos*, popular ballads of the mid-19th century that recounted the heroic exploits of bandits, rebels, and vaqueros. The **corrido tradition** was also a precursor to the Chicano poetry of the 20th century, laying the foundations for a poetic that fuses the oral and written forms, music, and word. In the corrido we can see the mixing of Spanish and English, thereby creating a new language with which to express a new reality.²⁸⁴ Today, Chicano American literature is represented by works such as **Rudolfo Anaya's** *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), **Sandra Cisneros'** *The House on Mango Street* (1985), **Denise Chavez's** *The Last of the Menu Girls* (1986), **Tomas Rivera's** *And the Earth Did Not Devour Him* (1987), and the poetry of **Jimmy Santiago Baca, Loma Dee Cervantes, and Leroy V. Quintana**. Repeated references are also made to a mythic Aztec homeland as being central to Chicano identity; in geographical terms, this vanished haven is almost always located in the Mexican territory lost in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.²⁸⁵ The true emergence of Chicano literature started with **the Chicano Renaissance** (1965-1975) when Felipe de Ortego y Gasca coined the term including works that were linked in some way with the so-called *el Movimiento*.²⁸⁶

The leading author of Chicano American literature is **Rudolfo Anaya** (1937-2020), a writer who is best known for his 1970s trilogy of novels, *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972), *Heart of Aztlan* (1976);

²⁸² see more in <https://www.dictionary.com/e/hispanic-vs-latino/>

²⁸³ Pocho – the term used for an American of Mexican parentage, but also as a pejorative term to describe Chicanos and those who have left Mexico. (<https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Pocho>)

²⁸⁴ Suarez 2000

²⁸⁵ The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo was signed on Feb 2nd, 1848 and ended the war between the USA and Mexico.

²⁸⁶ El Movimiento aka The Chicano Movement advocated social and political empowerment through a flowering of chicanismo or cultural nationalism.

and *Tortuga* (1979). All three of these works focus on the theme of growing up as a Hispanic American in US society. The novel *Bless Me, Ultima* deals with the connection between earth and nature reflecting the spirituality of a place, more specifically rural New Mexico, and links this to the indigenous culture of Native Americans. The novel remains one of the key texts in the formation of Chicano identity. A more urban setting is present in **Sandra Cisneros**'s short story cycle *The House on Mango Street* (1984), more specifically the Hispanic neighborhoods or barrios of Chicago. Cisneros draws on her own experiences growing up in San Antonio, Texas; she painted her own house in neon purple color thus violating the city's historic preservation code but claiming the bright color as a key part of her Mexican heritage. In addition to the depiction of life in the **barrios**, Cisneros also addresses the issues of poverty, cultural suppression, self-identity, and gender roles. The author who is often neglected is **Alejandro Moralese** whose great novel *The Rag Doll Plagues* (1992) is certainly worth reading.

Another aspect of Hispanic American literature is offered by authors from **Puerto Ricans** who reflect on their island experience and the contrast with life in the US. This strand of literature includes works such as **Judith Ortiz Cofer**'s *The Line of the Sun* (1989) and **Piri Thomas**' *Down These Mean Streets* (1967) which in turn paved the way for works by Latino writers such as **Ed Vega**'s *Casualty Report* (1991) and the poetry of **Victor Hernandez Cruz**, **Miguel Algarin** and **Sandra Maria Estevez**. Earlier representatives of Puerto-Rican American literature are represented by **Pedro Pietri** who documents the life of the Puerto Rican community in his collection of poetry *Puerto Rican Obituary* (1973). Mexican American poetry reflects the variety and diversity of the geographical, linguistic, and cultural presence of Mexican Americans in the United States with the *mestizaje* (or "mixture") element. The themes of exile and longing for home are tangible in the literature of **Cuban American** writers such as **Roberto G. Fernandez**'s *Raining Backwards* (1988), **Elias Miguel Munoz**'s *The Greatest Performance* (1991), **Cristina Garcia**'s *Dreaming in Cuban* (1992), the Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Mambo Kings Play Songs of Love* (1989) by **Oscar Hijuelos** along with the poetry of **Gustavo Perez Firmat**, **Ricardo Pau-Llosa**, and **Carolina Hospital**.

The contributions of **Dominican**, **Colombian** and **Guatemalan** communities to Hispanic American literature include works such as **Julia Alvarez**'s *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* (1991) **Jaime Manrique**'s *Twilight at the Equator* (1997), **Francisco Goldman**'s *The Long Night of the White Chickens* (1992) and **Junot Diaz**'s *Drown* (1996). Julia Alvarez and Junot Diaz have both written about the trauma of the Dominican dictatorship under Rafael Trujillo. Junot Diaz is perhaps the best-known contemporary Dominican American writer whose work focuses mainly on

the real-life immigrant experiences and the difficulties of the cultural transition from their impoverished home countries to the US.

The central point of unity among Latin American writers is **language**, with Spanish, Portuguese, but also a variety of indigenous native languages being blended together with English to create a complex linguistic variety. While they may speak with different accents and use different expressions, they all share the experience of **bilingualism**. The ability to communicate in two languages, and more importantly, to think and feel in two languages, often results in the phenomenon of individuals being unable to express themselves fully in only one. Linguists term this issue “**interference**” and generally view it as a negative trait or a shortcoming. Nonetheless, Hispanic American writers and readers of Hispanic American literature assert that the intermingling of two languages is an effective means of communicating what could not otherwise be expressed.

9.1 Bilingual and interlingual expression

Pinto poetry, a style of poetry shaped by prison conditions and prison culture is another important element of the Chicano Renaissance. Among the major authors who write about the dehumanizing effect of incarceration are **Raul Salinas**, **Abelardo Delgado**, and **Ricardo Sanchez**. However, it is not only Hispanic poets who focus on the sense of place as a key element of their ethnic identity. The concept of **Aztlán**,²⁸⁷ a metaphoric and spiritual place of connection rather than a concrete geographical region, often appears in the works of Hispanic American writers. The return to the metaphorical place of origin is often conveyed via magic realism which shapes the contours of the cities and *pueblos*. Along with a sense of place which is always on the edge of two countries of cultures, we can say that another typical feature of Hispanic American writing is the so-called **border experience**, an important metaphor for understanding the *mestizaje*²⁸⁸ of Chicana/o experience of cultural survival. This is a controversial issue among Hispanic Americans, especially writers of literature, since it deals with the question of assimilation. How much of their culture should Hispanic Americans be willing to lose or suppress in order to assimilate into mainstream society? The answers to this important question vary, yet it is an issue that all Hispanic American writers tackle either directly or in more subtle ways. The work which looks for the answers is **Gloria Anzaldúa**’s work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (1987).

Hispanic American literature is embedded in the history of the American Southwest, the region which encompasses the states of Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, parts of California, Colorado,

²⁸⁷ Aztlán refers to the ancestral home of the Aztec people, a region with an uncertain geographical position

²⁸⁸ *Mestizaje* or *mestizo* is a term which refers to people of mixed European and Indigenous American ancestry

Nevada, and Utah. The processes of colonization and migration to this area were very different than in other parts of the continent, and this is one of the reasons why we need to distinguish between Hispanic and Latino literatures. This results in the dual use of the language, both English and Spanish, and their regional varieties, with bilingualism emerging as one of the key features of Hispanic American writing. Mexican Americans also have a tripartite identity – Spanish, Indian, and *mestizo* (mixed). Another theme that prevails is the conflict between Anglo and Latino cultures together with the historical struggles to avoid oppression and imprisonment. The quest for identity and the need to preserve family and community, gender, and culture can be found in many works of Hispanic American literature. Generally, we can place Hispanic American literature into the genre of border narratives which is a term used to describe the writings of immigrant groups who have come to feel trapped between their native cultures and the culture of their new home country; while they are tied to both, they cannot be said to belong fully to either.²⁸⁹ One of the reasons for this sense of in-betweenness is the consequences of the Mexican American War (1846-48) which triggered the migration from Mexico which continues into the present day. This process has created a series of stereotypes that appear in literature but also in popular media, with the use of characters such as the male Latino lover, the bandit, the drug runner, and the gang member. These clichés have caused Mexican Americans to be seen as an alien or marginalized group of people. The film industry also perpetuates these stereotypes, especially in the genre of the western which often serves as a justification for the US intervention in Mexico. Fortunately, writers of Hispanic American literature have made great steps in raising awareness of the real identities of this diverse ethnic group.

²⁸⁹ Nelson 108, 2005

Reading and discussion:

Watch the 2012 film adaptation of *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya and answer the following:

1. What is Ultima and why is it so important for Chicano American identity?
2. How is the mestizo identity portrayed in the movie?
3. How does a sense of place contribute to Chicano American identity?

Read Sandra Cisneros's short story "Woman Hollering Creek" and answer the following:

1. Can you find examples of bilingualism in the story?
2. What elements of feminism can be found in the story?
3. What is the difference between Hispanic, Latino, Mexican and Chicano literatures?
4. What is the key work in the formation of Chicano identity?
5. Which author focuses on the urban setting of barrios in her works?
6. What are the different meanings of the word mestizo?
7. What do we call poetry which is shaped by prison conditions and prison culture?

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10. Jewish American History and Culture

Determining the extent of the Jewish population in the US (and in the world as a whole) is made difficult by the fact that the term “Jewish” can mean different aspects of identity, referring to either **religion, ethnicity, or nationality**. The estimates from 2015-2018 vary between 4.4 million in terms of religious affiliation alone and nearly 7.5 million when accounting for ethnicity, heritage, and children born to Jewish parents, a figure which amounts to roughly 2% of the American population.²⁹⁰ Around 89% of the Jewish American population are white and non-Hispanic,²⁹¹ but it is still important to note that more than 1 in 10 Jewish Americans identifies as black, Hispanic, or “other” in terms of race, and these intersections of race, religion, and ethnicity may have played a crucial role in the development of Jewish American identities and is also reflected in Jewish American literature. More than half of the Jewish American population lives in just three states: New York, California, and Florida. Similarly, 91% of Jewish American adults reside within the top 40 **metropolitan areas** of the US.²⁹²

The Jewish American population, like other ethnic and religious groups, is not entirely homogenous in their traditions and religious practices. Jews as a religious and national group can trace their history back to the second millennium BCE; Jewish communities were formed in Persia and Babylon between the 6th and 4th century BCE, and in the first millennium CE, diaspora communities were formed throughout Europe as well.²⁹³ Migration patterns and intermingling with local populations have contributed to a wide variety of traditions, cultures, and even language differences among the Jewish people. Based on national origin and heritage, several distinct Jewish groups can be distinguished. Firstly, the **Ashkenazi** Jews, whose ancestors arrived in the US from mostly Eastern and Central Europe and who comprise the majority of American Jews; secondly, the **Sephardic** Jews from the Mediterranean region; thirdly, the **Mizrahi** Jews from the Middle East and North Africa; and lastly, other smaller groups of Jewish Americans whose origins lie in Italy, Central Asia, the Caucasus region, Turkey and Ethiopia. This chapter will focus predominantly on the history and culture of the Ashkenazim and Sephardim.

In addition, Jewish Americans differ in the ways in which they observe the religious traditions of Judaism. In the 19th and 20th centuries, three distinct Jewish denominations were formed based on differing approaches to Jewish traditions: **Reform Judaism**, the more traditionalist

²⁹⁰ Dashefsky and Sheskin, 2016; Tighe et al., 2019.

²⁹¹ Tighe et al., 2019.

²⁹² Tighe et al., 2019.

²⁹³ Atzmon et al., 2010.

Orthodox Judaism, and the **Conservative** movement which falls somewhere in between.²⁹⁴ This chapter will offer a brief discussion of all of these movements, their history, and their position in the contemporary US.

10.1 Who are the Jewish Americans?

Sephardim

The distinction between the Sephardim and Ashkenazim was originally based on how communities followed *halakhah* or traditional Jewish law. Those who followed the rulings of the Spanish sages in terms of tradition, principles, and rulings were termed Sephardic (based on the Hebrew word for Spain), while those who followed German, French, and Polish sages were Ashkenazic. Nearly all of those who followed the Ashkenazic tradition were concentrated in the Christian world of Europe and America, and those of the Sephardic tradition lived in Arab or Muslim countries, in the Middle East or North Africa.²⁹⁵

The Bible states that the Jewish nation originated in the mythical “Land of Israel”, an area that roughly corresponds to several kingdoms established in the region of the Southern Levant. **The Kingdom of Israel**, sometimes referred to as the “Northern Kingdom”, was established in the 10th century BCE and spanned regions of modern-day Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Palestine, and Syria. In the 8th century, the Kingdom was conquered by the Assyrians, and many of the elite were driven into exile.²⁹⁶ **The Kingdom of Judah** or the “Southern Kingdom”, was a neighboring state to the Kingdom of Israel in the region that is nowadays part of Israel and Palestine. This Kingdom was established in around the 8th century BCE and retained its independence until the **Babylonian** conquest in 587 BCE, during which the population of Judah suffered through an exile from their native lands, and was later conquered again in the **Hellenistic era** by the Macedonian Empire of Alexander the Great in the 4th century BCE. Jewish life was greatly influenced by the rules and regulations set forth by the empire which controlled the region at the time.²⁹⁷ In addition, the Assyrian conquest of the Kingdom of Israel and the Babylonian conquest of the Kingdom of Judah set the stage for the creation of one of the central concepts of Jewish life for millennia to come: the Jewish **Diaspora**, the settlement of Jewish people in lands beyond Israel. From the 3rd century BCE onwards, Jews began to **migrate** to other parts of the world, mostly to Egypt, Asia Minor, and a smaller number to southern Europe but after 70 CE there was an increase in migration to southern

²⁹⁴ Diner 1999.

²⁹⁵ Medding 2008.

²⁹⁶ Ahituv 2006.

²⁹⁷ Visotzky and Fishman 1999.

Europe.²⁹⁸ This widespread migration resulted in a wide variety in the ways in which Jewish people practiced their religion; for instance, in the Roman Empire, Judaism as a religious practice both influenced and was influenced by Christianity and Roman religions.²⁹⁹

Jewish communities existed in the Iberian peninsula for much of the first millennium CE, “under pagan Rome, under the Christianized Roman Empire, and under the Christianized Germanic conquerors of Iberia”.³⁰⁰ Arab and Muslim migration to the Iberian Peninsula also coincided with the migration of **Jews from Syria, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula** in the 8th to 10th centuries.³⁰¹ Due to the long-established coexistence of Jews and Muslims in Asia Minor and the Middle East, the Iberian Jews were ready and willing to cooperate with the Muslim conquerors of Iberia and often provided invaluable assistance to the authorities. Under Muslim rule, the Iberian Jews of the 10th and 11th centuries often lived in prosperous, well-organized communities and significantly developed their traditions and learning.³⁰² The shift of power and the Reconquista of Spain by the Christians thus posed a specific problem to the local Jews; not only were the Christians regarded as a less developed civilization, but they posed a threat due to their less favorable attitudes to Judaism.³⁰³ As the Christians consolidated their control in the formerly Muslim territories, the local Jewish communities suddenly found themselves under Christian rule, but Jews continued to be treated with a certain amount of protection and limitation, recognized as a distinct religious group but also forbidden from “endangering” the dominant faith.³⁰⁴ These limitations often led to medieval Jews living in rather close-knit, self-governing communities.

Throughout the 12th and 13th centuries, Iberian Jews shifted their allegiance to Christian rulers as those gained more and more power over the peninsula. However, while Jewish elites proved invaluable allies both economically and politically, their influence was also met with increasing suspicion and discontent from those Christians who wished to impose Christian rules of living, a move that led to increasing hardships for the Jews.³⁰⁵ By the end of the 14th century, many Iberian Jews were choosing to convert to Christianity as a means of avoiding religious persecution and pogroms, but in 1492 the Catholic monarchs of Spain jointly issued the Alhambra Decree, also known as the **Edict of Expulsion**, which forced all practicing Jews out of Spanish territories.³⁰⁶

²⁹⁸ Wexler 1996.

²⁹⁹ Wexler 1996.

³⁰⁰ Visotzky and Fishman 1999.

³⁰¹ Wexler 1996.

³⁰² Visotzky and Fishman 1999.

³⁰³ Visotzky and Fishman 1999.

³⁰⁴ Visotzky and Fishman 1999.

³⁰⁵ Visotzky and Fisherman 1999.

³⁰⁶ Ray 2013.

Many Iberian Jews migrated to Italy, Greece, or North Africa, and with the colonization of North Africa by Spain and Portugal, many of these Jews played the roles of allies, translators, merchants, and political allies to the Spanish and Portuguese, similar to the roles of their ancestors during the Reconquista.³⁰⁷

The first Sephardic Jews to arrive in the Americas settled in the colonies as merchants, sailors, and translators, sometimes with Spanish or Portuguese expeditions (this was mostly the case for the *conversos*, Jews who had converted to Christianity), or with French, Dutch or English settlers, as many Sephardim had moved to these countries after the expulsion. By the end of the 16th century, there is evidence of established Jewish communities in Brazil, Suriname, Santo Domingo, and Jamaica. In 1654, twenty-three Jews landed in **New Amsterdam**, fleeing from Brazil after the Portuguese reconquest; after the English conquered New Amsterdam in 1664, Jews were deprived of the right to engage in trade and establish synagogues.³⁰⁸ Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, the Jewish presence in the territory of the modern United States was limited, and communities were often established only to disband several decades later. In the first census in 1790, Jews comprised less than 0.1 of the total population, roughly 2,500 people of mostly Sephardic tradition, although, by the second half of the 18th century, the Ashkenazim from Central Europe were beginning to arrive.³⁰⁹ However, the Ashkenazi migration was a steady trickle rather than a concentrated, large-scale migration for quite some time, and these ethnic Ashkenazi were often incorporated into the Sephardic communities until well into the 19th century.³¹⁰

Upon their **arrival in the US**, the differences between Ashkenazi and Sephardim communities as a result of their **different histories** were immediately apparent. While both groups spoke Hebrew for religious purposes, many words were pronounced differently by the Sephardim, who also used Spanish and Portuguese, and the Ashkenazi, who spoke Yiddish, a Jewish language based on German. Many Sephardim rituals were held at the synagogue while the Ashkenazi often practiced at home. The Sephardim were also less strict in the observation of their traditions, perhaps due to their history of living among Christians or even converting to Christianity for some time. Additionally, the Ashkenazi migrants were usually poorer, and the Sephardim sometimes considered them as lower class.³¹¹ However, since the numbers of Jews in the US were still relatively low, the two groups focused on their **similarities rather than their differences**; the two

³⁰⁷ Ray 2013.

³⁰⁸ Norwood and Pollack 2007.

³⁰⁹ Norwood and Pollack 2007.

³¹⁰ Norwood and Pollack 2007.

³¹¹ Diner 1999.

communities observed the same holidays and rituals, adhered to the same traditional Jewish laws, and studied the same religious texts.

Ashkenazim

The Ashkenazi speak Yiddish and trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe and Germany; indeed, the term “Ashkenazi” is derived from the Hebrew word for Germany. Currently, the majority of the international Jewish population, and also much of the Jewish population of the US, are of Ashkenazi descent. Recent genetic research has suggested that the Ashkenazi share an ancestry derived from a mixture of European and Middle Eastern genomes.³¹²

The Jewish communities who migrated to Europe from the 3rd century BCE mostly settled in the Mediterranean, with some settling as far away as the Iberian Peninsula but many of them remained in the areas of modern-day Greece and Italy, within the borders of the Roman Empire. Throughout the first millennium CE, these small-scale, closed communities comprised the majority of the Jewish population. Jewish troops often formed part of Roman garrisons, establishing small communities near the Roman camps.³¹³ By the 6th century, significant Jewish communities had been established throughout **Francia**, an empire spanning the modern-day territory of France, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, and Germany. While some rulers, such as Charlemagne in the 9th century, were in favor of Jewish settlement and offered the Jewish population some protection, the Roman Catholic Church in general attempted to keep the Jews separate from Christians and passed several regulations and edicts placing restrictions on the lives and religious practices of Jewish people in Christian areas. Jews often faced humiliation, degradation, or violence, and by the 13th and 14th centuries, many chose to move to **Poland and Lithuania** to escape the religious persecution and pogroms of France and Germany. After settling in this region, the communities developed the Yiddish language, a hybrid of German and the Slavic languages of Poland and Lithuania.³¹⁴ Another hypothesis traces the roots of the Ashkenazi Jews to the **Khazars**, a nation from the south of Russia, some of whom had converted to Judaism. After the conquest of their territory by Kievan Rus, this group may have moved towards Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania in the 9th and 10th centuries, developing the Yiddish language through contact with German settlers in Poland.³¹⁵ It is likely that both these hypotheses are true to some extent since the significant growth

³¹² Carmi et al. 2014.

³¹³ Ahituv 2006.

³¹⁴ Ahituv 2006.

³¹⁵ van Straten 2011.

of the Ashkenazi population of Poland and Lithuania in this period cannot be explained by the intermingling of these two waves of immigration alone.

Poland was a relatively safe haven for Jewish people during the late Middle Ages; throughout the rest of Europe, the persecution of Jews was quite common, often on fabricated charges such as **blood libel** (the belief that Jewish communities stole Christian children and tortured or sacrificed them), the **desecration of the host** (the belief that Jews stole Holy Communion wafers for use in magical rituals), or accusations of the **poisoning of drinking wells** and causing plague outbreaks.³¹⁶ As early as 1264, Polish rulers began issuing legal protection against blood libel and some other forms of persecution; although there were cases of anti-Semitic attacks or blood libel accusations throughout Poland and Lithuania over the following centuries, these episodes of violence were far less numerous than in other parts of Europe. For instance, in the 15th century, Jews were officially expelled from Krakow, but they were still permitted to reside in the suburbs of the city. For this reason, the Jewish population in the area of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth grew substantially between 1500 and 1650 – estimates range from 10,000 to 30,000 at the beginning of the 16th century, and between 200,000 - 450,000 by 1650.³¹⁷ In 1648, the **Chmielnicki Revolt** of Cossacks, Ukrainian peasants, and Crimean Tatars swept through Poland and many nobles and members of the clergy were massacred, along with many Jews, who were disliked by the peasantry due to their positions of estate managers, advisors or moneylenders. As a result, the Jewish population in Poland fell sharply, partly due to the massacres and partly due to migration back to the west in order to escape the killings.³¹⁸

In the last decades of the 18th century, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was dissolved and partitioned among the Habsburg Monarchy, the Kingdom of Prussia, and the Russian Empire. As a result, Russia, which previously had a relatively low population of Jews, acquired territories with substantial Jewish communities. Russia sought to assuage the fears of the Christian middle-class by establishing **the Pale of Settlement**, specific areas in which Jews were permitted to live, and restricting their migration to other parts of Russia.³¹⁹ For the next century, the Russian government did little to interfere with Jewish internal affairs, and the Jewish communities were largely self-governing. Towards the end of the 19th century, roughly 5 million Jews lived in Russia, 90% of them within the Pale.³²⁰

³¹⁶ Ahituv 2006.

³¹⁷ van Straten 2011.

³¹⁸ Scheidlin 1998.

³¹⁹ Ahituv 2006.

³²⁰ Ahituv 2006.

However, the relationship between Jewish and non-Jewish communities was strained for decades, and this tension often broke out into violence. Many groundlessly blamed the Jewish community for the **assassination of Tsar Alexander II** in 1881 and a series of **pogroms** erupted which were not only tolerated but seemingly encouraged by the government itself. Antisemitic sentiments rose not only in Russia but across Europe throughout the beginning of the 20th century. As a result, approximately **one-third of the eastern European Jewish population** fled the region for the US in hopes of fairer treatment between the outbreak of the first pogroms in 1881 and the passing of **the Johnson-Reed Act** of 1924. This Act was passed by the US Congress to limit the number of people from each country who could immigrate to the US each year; the quotas for the countries with large Jewish populations, primarily Russia and Poland, were extremely low.³²¹

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews did not tend to form separate communities. The Sephardi took on the role of community leaders, even if by the end of the 18th century, the Ashkenazi outnumbered any other Jewish group in the US. Although there were minor differences in religious practice or pronunciation, most of the main rituals remained the same for both groups, such as the establishment of a separate Jewish cemetery outside of towns, the use of ritual baths, or the establishment of synagogues.³²²

10.2 Becoming Jewish American

The first Jewish people to arrive in the territory of the modern US were a group of 23 migrants who had fled religious persecution in Brazil and landed in New Amsterdam in 1654. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, Jewish communities were gradually established, and the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim generally coexisted within one community on the basis of common religious beliefs and practices. The entire population of American Jews numbered only several thousand people at the beginning of the 19th century, but with the influx of German Jews over the course of the century, the population had soared to about 150,000 on the eve of the Civil War. By this time, many Jews in the US had chosen to abandon some of those **Orthodox** traditions and religious practices that reduced their chances of successfully integrating into American society and improving their social status. As a result of these aspirational hopes, two new denominations emerged in the Jewish community: **Reform Judaism** and **Conservative Judaism**.

Until the 1830s, the only synagogues and religious communities available to the American Jews were **Orthodox**, usually following the Sephardic tradition. However, it was challenging to

³²¹ Diner 1999.

³²² Diner 1999.

adhere strictly to all aspects of Orthodox life outside the synagogue; for instance, many items indispensable for the maintenance of an Orthodox religious life were unavailable in the US, such as sacred texts or kosher wines and meats. The small population of Jews in the US in this period made it difficult, or often impossible, to find a suitable Jewish spouse. Similarly, the desire for economic success pushed many American Jews to break the rule of the Sabbath and work on Saturdays. The early Jewish communities in the US also suffered from a lack of rabbis and religious leaders: the first ordained rabbi only arrived in the US in 1840. These pressures forced the Orthodox leadership to splinter into two groups. One sect urged its devotees to resist acculturation and preached strict adherence to the rules, at times going as far as to ban people from religious services for not observing all the rites properly, while the second group accepted the need for acculturation as a part of life in a new country. The arrival of increasing numbers of Eastern European migrants from the 1880s onwards seemed to shift the numbers of believers in favor of the Orthodox denomination but, as was mentioned earlier, many of the Eastern Europeans who attempted to adhere to the Orthodox way of life they had been used to in Poland or Russia soon abandoned many of these traditions in favor of improving their economic situation or becoming more closely integrated into American society.

From the beginning of the 19th century, some Jews in the US and Germany began to argue that the observation of Judaism in everyday life had to be changed in order to accommodate modern ways of living and encompass modern science and progress. This group, known as the **Reformers**, decided to eliminate the obligation to observe a full day of prayer after someone's death; this practice had originally been intended to bring the dead back to life, but the Reformers believed that the idea of resurrection was in conflict with modern science and logic. Many Reform ideas were also based on the notion that Jewish religious rules were too rigid and not in tune with the American way of life and that unless there was some form of accommodation with the demands of modern life, many Jews, particularly the younger generation, would become estranged from their own roots; if Judaism wanted to survive, it had to incorporate some American values and traditions. In 1885, a conference of Reform rabbis was held in Pittsburgh, with the assembled rabbis announcing that the observance of some laws was no longer necessary and that Jews were to be considered "no longer a nation but a religious community". This development radically altered the views on what it meant to be Jewish in the US.

In 1886, a group of wealthy Jews who had been born in the US or living in the country for a longer period of time founded an organization and a rabbinical school for young Jewish men, out of which would emerge the third distinct denomination of American Jewry in the 1910s and 1920s: **Conservatism**. By the 1950s, this had become the largest Jewish denomination in the US, blending

the reformist thoughts of adapting religious rites to meet the needs of modern life, but still placing a much stronger emphasis on adherence to Jewish law (*halakhah*) than the Reformists. For example, in Conservative synagogues, men still prayed with their heads covered by a prayer shawl, whereas in Reform synagogues, men could leave their heads uncovered.

The 21st century has brought even greater change to American Jews: for instance, the 2008 financial crisis has significantly affected all Americans, and Jewish Americans were not exempt from this crisis. Jewish communities have witnessed a certain decline in their importance, or rather a transformation of Jewish communal life; many young Jews are less likely to observe all religious rules, although modern Orthodoxy is also seemingly on the rise.³²³

Most of the Jewish denominations follow similar rituals and traditions and observe the same holidays, whether they actively celebrate them or not. One of the most important holidays of the year is **Yom Kippur**, the Day of Atonement, observed even by many secular Jews; this day in late September or early October is traditionally spent fasting and praying in order to repent for one's sins. **Hannukah**, the Festival of Lights, commemorates the rebuilding of the Second Temple of Jerusalem and is celebrated in December; common rituals include playing a game with a *dreidel*, a wooden spinning top, and the lighting of the **menorah**, the traditional Jewish candelabrum. For Hannukah, a menorah with nine branches is used, although the traditional menorah that, together with the Star of David, is often depicted as a symbol of Judaism has only seven branches. **Passover**, a spring holiday commemorating the Exodus from Egyptian slavery and God's "passing over" of Jewish houses during the last of the ten Plagues of Egypt, is another major holiday, celebrated for seven or eight days. Passover rituals include the eating of unleavened bread called *matzo*, the fasting of first-born sons, and holding the Passover **seder** – a special family dinner that includes the reading of specific Jewish texts and the consumption of four glasses of wine.

The Torah commonly refers to the "written Torah", the five books of Moses of the Hebrew Bible, but the meaning of the word is sometimes used to incorporate both the written Torah and the "oral Torah", the rabbinical interpretations of the written texts handed down from generation to generation. In some cases, the Torah can even refer to the entire set of Jewish laws, religious teachings, and discussions, since the word itself means simply "teaching" or "doctrine". Some parts of the oral Torah are also summarized in the **Talmud**, a series of rabbinical writings, some of which date back to the Babylonian era. These texts go beyond mere commentary on the Torah and discuss Jewish law, *halakhah*, ethics, philosophy, traditions, and folklore.

³²³ Windmueller 2016.

Education was previously limited to boys only, with students traditionally learning Hebrew and the Torah in a Jewish school called a **cheder**. This education typically ended with a **bar mitzvah** at the age of 13-14, a ritual through which the young boy was admitted as an adult member of Jewish society. In non-Orthodox communities, the ceremony is also held for girls under the term **bat mitzvah**. The next step in Jewish education would be the **yeshiva**, a school where young people (again, only males in most Orthodox denominations) study the Torah, the Talmud, *halakhah*, and various philosophies, often in pairs and learn how to analyze and critique other students' thoughts and interpretations of the texts.

Questions for discussion:

- 1. Which historical event do you believe to be the most important to the formation of Jewish American identities? Why?**
- 2. Which Jewish American cultural items and practices may be reflected in Jewish American literature?**

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11. Jewish American Literature

Key terms: Yiddish, shtetl, schlemiel, Ashkenazim, Sephardic, Zionism, Judaism, Diaspora, diaspora, pogroms, the Holocaust, JAP, nebbish

Warm-up:

1. Are you familiar with any Jewish American writers?
2. Is there any connection between central and eastern Europe and Jewish American literature?
3. Can you think of any features in Jewish American literature that distinguish it from other American ethnic literatures?

After studying this chapter, students should be able to understand the following:

1. To identify the common themes in Jewish American literature.
2. To see a connection between European and American traditions in Jewish American literature.
3. To identify the seminal influences on Jewish American literature
4. To identify new directions in contemporary Jewish American literature.

Jewish American literature is recognized as a distinctive part of American literary history, and its development has been the focus of extensive academic research focusing on the historical forces that defined the lives of Jewish immigrants to America, their adherence to or rejection of Jewish religious and cultural heritage, and the universality of specific Jewish themes in literature. As a result, there is a vast collection of literature reflecting upon the impact of this particular minority on the mosaic of multicultural America. In the following chapter, we aim to offer a brief account of the development of Jewish American literature and its strong connections to eastern and central Europe, since so many of the writers of the first generation of Jewish Americans who paved the way for the current literary generation immigrated to the US from these regions. Despite the attention devoted to Jewish literature in western academia, the Jewish literary and cultural presence is still somewhat neglected in some parts of eastern and central Europe despite its long history.

There is an apt symbolism in the appearance of the Jewish imagination in American literature with **Emma Lazarus'** famous 1883 sonnet titled "The New Colossus" which she wrote to raise funds for the construction of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty. The famous lines "*Give*

me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe” (The New Colossus³²⁴) not only reflect the destiny of many immigrants who hoped to find a new home in America but also depict the longing for home which Jews dispersed around the world have long felt. The connection between America as a promised land to immigrants who have been forced to leave their homes for economic, social, or religious reasons and the dispersal of the Jews around the world in search of a new home resonates powerfully and draws attention to the complex nature of Jewish identity. The beginnings of Jewish American literature can be traced back to 1945 when authors such as **Philip Roth** and **Saul Bellow** entered the canon of American literature, but their success and recognition were built on the foundations laid by earlier generations of writers such as **Henry Roth** and **Abraham Cahan**. Their predecessors were European Yiddish storytellers such as **Mendele Mocher Sforim**, **Sholem Aleichem**, and **I. L. Peretz** whose works related to stereotypical Jewish characters such as milkmen, tailors, and matchmakers, transforming the humble everyman into a literary hero. One example of the continuing influence of these characteristically Jewish tales on modern US culture is Aleichem’s work *Tevye the Dairyman* which was adapted into a hugely successful Broadway musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (1964).

Before mentioning further developments in Jewish American literature, it would be useful to consider the complicated question of defining what we mean by the term “Jewish”. In the earlier chapter on Jewish American culture, it was noted that Jewishness comprises a variety of complex religious, ethnic, and even national characteristics and concepts. As we have seen, there are differences between, for example, **Ashkenazim** and **Sephardic** Jews but also between followers of the Orthodox and Reformed traditions in addition to other types of Jewishness. The use of the language is an even more complicated issue. **Yiddish** is one of many Germanic languages that form a branch of the Indo-European language family and was the language used by the Ashkenazim, the Jews of central and eastern Europe.³²⁵ Written in the Hebrew alphabet, it became one of the world’s most widespread languages and was spoken in most countries with a Jewish population by the 19th century. Yet it is not the only Jewish language, as there are also Hebrew and Aramaic or Ladino, the two other major literary languages of Jewish history.³²⁶ The 1978 Nobel Prize for Literature winner Isaac Bashevis Singer was one of the most popular Jewish American writers, but his works were written in Yiddish and translated into English. How should he be categorized? As a Yiddish writer? As a Jewish writer? Singer was born in Poland and only moved to the US in his early thirties; is he then an American writer or a Polish writer?

³²⁴ Lazarus 2002

³²⁵ Wade 1999

³²⁶ Britannica 2013

Stephen Wade explains that in order to make sense of how to define Jewish American literature, we should understand that it is a body of writing which is written in English by Jewish-American writers who take as their themes and preoccupations questions of Jewish life and identity within the social and ideological fabric of American society. But what are these specific themes and preoccupations? Wade argues that on the level of great universal literary discourse, they are **the Holocaust, Zionism**, the life and fate of European Jewry, assimilation, and religious practice.³²⁷ The ever-present theme of exodus in Jewish history means that the notion of shifting settlement, impermanence, and separateness is basic to an understanding of the literature of Jewish America.³²⁸ Nevertheless, we will show that these notions have been expanded upon by the latest generation of Jewish American writers who examine the issues of identity, sexuality, and local and global issues related to what it means to be Jewish in contemporary America.

In order to fully understand contemporary Jewish literature, we need to go back to the early years of the 20th century and the works of writers such as **Abraham Cahan** and **Henry Roth** who paved the way for the authors of the second and third generations.

Cahan and **Roth** were primarily interested in the immigrant experience, an experience which they themselves had undergone. The immigrant duality of identity and the sense of being reborn into a new world are underlying themes in Jewish American Literature. Between 1880 and 1920, more than 2 million Jews migrated to America, mainly from the modern-day territories of Russia, Ukraine, Poland, Lithuania, and other regions of Eastern Europe. Many of these immigrants came from Russian **shtetls**,³²⁹ gradually stagnating settlements of enclosed communities of Jews who were legally prevented from owning land or from making any social or career progress in Russia and which were often the target of **pogroms**.³³⁰ **Cahan** was born in 1860 in Lithuania which was then a part of Tzarist Russia. and emigrated to the United States in 1882 settling in the Lower East Side of New York, joining thousands of other Jews who had escaped very poor conditions in their homelands and who found work in sweatshops and factories in the US. He emerged as a leading writer but also an editor of the Yiddish newspaper *The Jewish Daily Forward* which became a leading newspaper among Jewish immigrants. The transition between the Old and the New World and the transition from a traditional European Jewish community to early 20th-century America is depicted in **Cahan**'s most representative novel *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917).

³²⁷ Wade 1999

³²⁸ Wade 1999

³²⁹ **SHTETL** (pl. **shtetlakh**; Russ. **mestechko**; Pol. **miasteczko**; Heb. שְׂטֵטל), Yiddish diminutive for *shtot* meaning "town" or "city," to imply a relatively small community; in Eastern Europe a unique socio-cultural communal pattern (Encyclopedia Judaica).

³³⁰ Wade 1999

Anzia Yeziarska (1881-1970) was nicknamed “the Cinderella of the Tenements” mainly due to her realistic depiction of Jewish immigrant life in the Lower East Side of New York City at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. However, she herself also lived a remarkable life. Yeziarska was born to an Orthodox Jewish family in a Polish shtetl but migrated to America, where she defied her father’s insistence on adopting a traditional women’s role and instead became a teacher. She later became a successful writer, including a brief career as a screenwriter in Hollywood. Her unwillingness to submit to established gender roles is reflected in her collection of short stories *Hungry Hearts* (1920) which became a bestseller. Yeziarska also examines specific aspects of female development in the context of Jewish American culture in her novel *Bread Givers* (1925). Following the positive reaction to **Mary Antin’s** autobiography *The Promised Land* (1912) and **Abraham Cahan’s** *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917), Anzia Yeziarska published her first novel *Bread Givers* (1925) hoping to repeat the success of her earlier collection of short stories *Hungry Hearts* (1920). Despite the fact that *Bread Givers* was published in 1925, it can be considered the first **Jewish American female Bildungsroman**. Although largely ignored upon publication, Yeziarska’s depiction of the formation of a female Jewish American identity gained a wider audience as interest in both women’s rights and immigrant experiences grew in the later twentieth century.

The ambivalent relationship between the Old and New Worlds among Jewish Americans is also portrayed in **Henry Roth’s** novel *Call It Sleep* (1934) which depicts the radical assimilation of second-generation Jewish immigrants into US society. The novel is set in the Lower East Side and relates the story of the Schearl family, a family of recent immigrants from Europe. The main character is David, the son of the family, who is forced to deal with his father’s despotic behavior and who gradually learns the truth about his parents’ European past. The novel is notable for how Roth connects Jewish life in Europe with the family’s new life in America. Other works from this period include the **proletarian novel** by **Michael Gold** *Jews Without Money* (1930) and **Clifford Odet’s** play *Awake and Sing!* (1935). Satire was another important genre in this period, such as **Nathaniel West’s** *The Day of the Locust* (1939) whose main character, Homer Simpson, was one of the inspirations for the eponymous cartoon character. Feminist issues were also addressed in works by the Pulitzer Prize winner **Edna Ferber** and **Fannie Hurston**.

The period of transition from the 1930s to the 1950s saw the emergence of writers who take a greater interest in American life such as **Bernard Malamud**, **Saul Bellow**, **Philip Roth** or the previously mentioned **Isaac Bashevis Singer**. The second generation of Jewish immigrants felt far more at ease in American society and culture and wanted to assimilate even further. As a result, they gradually felt less strongly attached to the cultural traditions and conventions of the Old World

which their parents tried to keep strong and alive. The period of transition between the themes of the old immigrant world in the 1930s and that of the assimilated generation in the decades before the 1950s and the emergence of Philip Roth is represented, among others, by the works of Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud. Mainstream American literature embraced several Jewish authors, for example, the poet and short story writer **Delmore Schwartz** and Nobel Prize winner **Isaac Bashevis Singer**. It is important to point out, however, that Singer is an exceptional case in terms of the themes prevailing in this period since he focuses more on the magical aspect of Judaism and merges reality with fantasy. Similarly, Bernard Malamud also contrasts the themes of the magical world of the Jewish past with American reality.

Isaac Bashevis Singer (1902-1991) holds a special place in Jewish American literature. He belongs to both the first and second generations of Jewish American writers and although he originally wrote in Yiddish, his translated works enjoyed considerable popularity all across the world. His evocative descriptions of the vanishing world of the shtetl before the Holocaust and his use of Yiddish folklore and grotesques won him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1978.³³¹ His most notable works are his novels *The Family Moskat* (1950), *The Magician of Lublin* (1979), and also the popular collection of short stories *Gimpel the Fool, and Other Stories* (1957) in which he uses classic **schlemiel** characters. His novel about Jewish refugees in New York in the late 1940s, *Shadows on the Hudson*, was published posthumously in 1998.

Bernard Malamud's (1914-1986) concept of faith and doubt but also his stories of celebration and expiation offer an account of the Jewish American experience in both religious and secular terms. The usual setting of his works is the Lower East Side of New York in the first half of the 20th century, but his writing has a timeless and allegorical quality.³³² Drawing on the duality of Jewish identity, Malamud places his characters into ambiguous situations where the lines between reality and magic are often blurred. Malamud was also known for his short stories such as those found in his collection *The Magic Barrel* (1958) in which the characters are forced to deal with antisemitism and also self-hatred. Malamud's first novel *The Natural* (1952) is considered to be one of the finest baseball novels written and was made into a movie in 1984. Other notable novels include *The Assistant* (1957) and *The Fixer* (1966), with the latter being awarded a Pulitzer Prize for Literature. Malamud's stories about faith and doubt go beyond the Jewish American experience and can be perceived as a reflection on universal human dilemmas.

From the publication of his first collection of short stories and the novella *Goodbye, Columbus and Other Stories* in 1959, **Philip Roth** (1933-2018) immediately set the tone of his

³³¹ Read his Nobel lecture at: <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1978/singer/lecture/>

³³² Wade 64, 1999

future writing which is provocative, satirical, but also ambiguous in the extent of the assimilation and nostalgia for the world of the first generation of Jewish immigrants. While his assimilated characters are distancing themselves from the Old World of their fathers, they still long for the spiritual richness of Jewish thought. Roth is preoccupied with the issue of identity: what it means to be a Jew, an American, but also what it means to be a man.³³³ He embraced universal issues related to identity as such and this has made him one of the most prolific and successful American writers of the 20th century. He published more than thirty novels covering a variety of themes, mainly identity, sexuality, and mortality. Philip Roth stands out from other writers of his generation not only in terms of his wide literary output but also for his willingness to use satire to mock the values which previous generations had held so dear. In the controversial *Portnoy's Complaint* (1969), Roth plays with the stereotype of the overbearing Jewish mother, **JAPs** ("the Jewish American princess"), Jewish dietary laws, and the sexual inhibitions of Jewish orthodoxy. The gently moralizing humor which is typical of much Yiddish writing is given a completely new quality in Roth's novel. *Portnoy's Complaint* is a genuinely shocking novel; it attacks, exposes, and re-evaluates the values of the previous generation. After the success of this novel, Roth went on to publish other novels in which he used his literary alter egos of Nathan Zuckerman or David Kapesh in books such as *An American Pastoral* (1997), *The Human Stain* (2000), *I Married a Communist* (1998) and *An Anatomy Lesson* (1983). The theme of mortality becomes increasingly present in his later works such as *The Dying Animal* (2001), *Exit Ghost* (2007), and *Everyman* (2006). Philip Roth peeled away the layers of Jewish self-awareness in postmodern America.³³⁴

Saul Bellow's early fiction also focuses on the struggles of a Jewish artist in postwar America in works such as *The Adventures of Augie March* (1953). Bellow's characters also dwell in two different worlds, one related to Jewish traditions and the other more contemporary world of intellectuals who are more assimilated. This approach is not wholly surprising since Bellow did much to introduce the work of Sholem Aleichem to a wider American readership and also translated Singer's story *Gimpel the Fool*. The depictions of the little mensch or schlemiel archetype as a kind and simplistic figure in the works of Mendele, Aleichem, Peretz, and Singer are replaced by the neurotic intellectual schlemiel typified by the character of Herzog in Bellow's eponymous 1964 novel. Nerutic schlemiel also appears in his novel *Seize the Day* (1956). Bellow also wrote about Holocaust in his novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (1970).

Roth's theme of repressed sexuality in *Portnoy's Complaint* is echoed in **Erica Jong's** novel *Fear of Flying* (1973). The novel presents the story of a Jewish journalist Isadora whose fear of

³³³ <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/22/obituaries/philip-roth-dead.html>

³³⁴ Wade 55, 1999

flying is both physical and metaphorical. The novel addresses some fundamental notions of the role of women within Judaism, especially in relation to the expectations of traditional Jewish life and the conflicting need for self-expression and independence. Other female authors of this period include **Cynthia Ozick** (1928-), **Grace Paley** (1922-2007), and **Tillie Olsen** (1912-2007) whose works focus on the unfulfilled artistic aspirations of working women.

A central theme of Jewish writing is the focus on education and intellect. The emphasis on discussion, argumentation, and constant questioning is related to the Talmudic tradition, an approach which is particularly apparent in Sholom Aleichem's stories and in more intellectual disputes in the works of **Woody Allen**, **Leslie Fiedler** who is more of a literary critic, and **David Mamet**.³³⁵

Even though **Woody Allen (1935-)** is best known as a filmmaker, his literary achievements are also noteworthy, and he has written an extensive number of articles, sketches, essays, but also short stories and plays. His best-known collections of essays and plays are *Without Feathers* (1972) and *Getting Even* (1971). Allen's literary and cinematic works are concerned with satirical portrayals of Jewish identity, especially the stereotype of the Jewish New York intellectual and his constant conflict between his Jewish origins and American secularity. The result of these humorous ramblings on the nature of romance, family, and existence is linked to the dichotomy between the immigrant experience and the American experience and helped the re-emergence of the traditional schlemiel archetype into a more intellectual **nebbish** character. Although his early comedy films include little if any Jewish material, Allen's skill as a satirist of the foibles of Jewish and non-Jewish families was established with his 1977 film *Annie Hall*. Portrayals of neurotic Jewish men were almost completely transformed into images of nervous but sweet and responsible men in television programs of the 80s and 90s. His latest addition to Jewish American literature is his autobiography *Apropos of Nothing* which was published in 2020 despite ongoing controversies surrounding his private life.

Other writers who deal with the concept of memory and writing but also the process of assimilation are **Paul Auster** and **Leslie Fiedler**. While Paul Auster is better known in the European literary context, Fiedler is especially well-known for his diverse writings dealing with Jewish identity such as his literary criticism collection *Fiedler on the Roof* (1991).

³³⁵ During our classes on History of American Literature we read Mamet's play *Oleanna*.

11.1 Towards the end of the 20th century

In the last two decades of the 20th century, Jewish American literature saw a **renewed interest** in the topic of Jewish identity, both in terms of the variety of writers and forms of writing and also in the multiplicity of themes. Although most Jewish American authors in this period addressed themes that were very similar to those of the previous generations, they saw these issues from the perspective of a generation that has enjoyed all the privileges of having been born in America but nonetheless felt that the past of their grandparents or even great grandparents needed to be readdressed. Notwithstanding this general trend, the issue of immigration continued to increase in relevance in Jewish American fiction towards the end of the 20th century. This aspect of the contemporary immigrant expanded the boundaries of Jewish American identity since the protagonists depicted in immigrant fiction as writers themselves were forced to come to terms with their own multifaceted identities. Leaving aside the immigrant aspect, Andrew Furman points out that “these third-generation and post-aculturated writers are simultaneously attempting to widen the concerns of Jewish American literature from those of immigrant adjustment of the first generation and the experience of marginality of the second generation to topics that are more connected to Judaism”.³³⁶ Furman identifies a shift in the focus of contemporary Jewish American literature and predicted that this new generation will increasingly emphasize the Jewish side of the Jewish American identity, thereby creating what he calls the “Jewish Jewish American novel”.³³⁷ Furthermore, he suggests that “an unprecedented number of young Jewish Americans, raised largely ignorant of Judaism, have become part of the (returnee) phenomenon, meaning that a significant amount of today’s third and fourth American Jews return to Judaism, and most notably embrace the particularistic features accompanying Orthodox Judaism”.³³⁸ Many such writers were active in the 1980s; for instance, **Nessa Rapoport** (*Preparing for Sabbath*, 1981), **Rebecca Goldstein** (*The Mind-Body Problem*, 1983), **Steve Stern** (*Lazar Malkin Enters Heaven*, 1986), **Tova Reich** (*The Master of the Return*, 1988) and **Robert Cohen** (*The Organ Builder*, 1988) (Ibid.). As Furman points out in his work *Contemporary Jewish American Writers and their Multicultural Dilemma* (2000), many authors in the 1990s also addressed a variety of themes; for example, **Gerald Shapiro** (*Bad Jews*, 1999), **Steve Stern** (*The Wedding Jester*, 1999), **Melvin Jules Bukiet** (*Signs and Wonders*, 1999), **Pearl Abraham** (*Giving Up America*, 1999), **Nathan Englander** (*For the Relief of Unbearable Urges*, 1999), **Tova Mirvis** (*Ladies Auxiliary*, 1999), **Ehud Havazalet** (*Like Never Before*, 1998), **Eileen Polack** (*Paradise, New York*, 1998), **Ross Feld** (*Zwillig’s Dream*, 1999). As

³³⁶ Furman 199, 1997

³³⁷ Furman 31, 2000

³³⁸ Furman 17, 2000

the phenomenon of return suggests, the themes which are implicitly addressed include the legacy of the Holocaust, for example, *Eve's Apple* (1997) by **Jonathan Rosen**, or the return to the European milieu and the Holocaust in **Joseph Skibell's** *A Blessing on the Moon* (1997). The legacy of the Holocaust is also addressed in **Art Spiegelman's** **graphic novel** *Maus* (1980). The legacy of the Holocaust is also well depicted from the 2nd generation perspective (children of the survivors) such as Melvin Jules Bukiet and his novel *After* (1996) or Thane Rosenbaum's collection of short stories *Elijah Visible* (1996).

Other themes include **Jewish gay identities** as in **Lev Raphael's** *Dancing on Tisha B'Av* (1990) or the attempt to escape from the ultra-orthodox way of life as in **Pearl Abraham's** *The Romantic Reader* (1995). Similarly, in her novel *Kaaterskill Falls* (1998), **Alegria Goodman** depicts the tensions between ultra-Orthodox ritual and law and her characters' longing to immerse themselves in the secular world. Relationships between blacks and Jews are explored in **Paul Hond's** debut novel *The Baker* (1998). A perspective from outside the familiar urban environment is provided by **Benjamin Taylor** in his novel *Tales out of School* (1995) which traces the immigration and assimilation of Jews in Texas.³³⁹ Other prolific authors from this period include **Thane Rosenbaum, Eva Hoffman, Dara Horn, Gary Shteyngart, Jonathan Safran Foer, Lara Vapnyar**, and the Canadian-born **David Bezmozgis**. Some of the female authors already mentioned represent a new wave of feminist voices in Jewish American fiction. **E. M. Broner, Joanne Greenberg, Anne Roiphe, Marge Piercy, Norma Rosen, and Leslea Newman** "bring an array of competing ideologies and anxieties – feminism, community activism, sexual orientation, maternity – all contributing to an evolving process of defining place and identity in contemporary Jewish American literature".³⁴⁰ This is by no means an exhaustive list of the themes, authors, and their works, a fact that only confirms that Jewish American literature is very much alive and a fertile ground for further exploration.

One of the most representative writers of the contemporary generation of Jewish American authors is **Jonathan Safran Foer** (1977). Jonathan Safran Foer's novel *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) fulfills all of the criteria used to define Jewish American fiction. Its main concern is the issue of Jewish identity in the postmodern American context while also examining the complexity of Jewish memory and continuity. In terms of narrative and stylistic strategies, Safran Foer makes masterful use of broken English, the interpretation of which has become the concern of translation studies. From a formal point of view, there is no doubt that the novel can be placed within the postmodern literary context, especially due to the diversity of genres that it employs; the novel

³³⁹ Furman 213, 2000

³⁴⁰ Aarons 134, 2021

simultaneously falls into the categories of the epistolary novel, the bildungsroman, the road novel and also metafiction, while it also makes use of other modernist techniques, such as fragmentation, time travel and the mapping of collective history. Drawing on the influences of Thomas Pynchon, John Barth, and Philip Roth among others, the novel often relies on blending realism with fantasy in a style reminiscent of the portrayal of shtetls in the fiction of Isaac Bashevis Singer.

As you can see, Jewish American literature is still very diverse not only in the themes it addresses such as alienation, assimilation, the revival of traditions, and the tensions between tradition and modernism but also in terms of its geographical locations, with the first and third generations oscillating between Europe and America and the desire of the contemporary generation to return to the themes of Holocaust survivors and their children.

Reading and discussion:

Watch the 1971 film adaptation of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof* and answer the following questions:

1. Tevye the Milkman represents an old archetype of the Jew character before the emergence of modernity. How are the major aspects of his Jewish identity depicted and how does this depiction differ from the newer aspects of Jewish identity represented by his daughters?
2. What similarities can you draw between the situation in Europe in the late 19th and 20th centuries and the more contemporary situation at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st centuries?

Read Philip Roth's short story "The Conversion of the Jews" and answer the following questions:

3. How does the story raise the issue of irreverence?
4. Roth employs satire to criticize the formalism and hypocrisy of Jewish religious practice. Can you find examples of this satire in the text?
5. How does the Holocaust feature indirectly in the story? Bear in mind that the collection *Goodbye to Columbus* was first published in 1959.
6. How is the process of assimilation of American Jews related to the process of conversion?
7. How is the concept of doubt elaborated in order to ensure a stronger faith?
8. Comment on the statement that "faith is an extremely private matter".

Read Cynthia Ozick's short story "The Shawl" (<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1980/05/26/the-shawl>) and discuss the following questions:

9. What does the shawl symbolize?
10. How is the guilt of surviving portrayed in the story?
11. Discuss the traumatic experience of Rosa and her post-traumatic reaction.
12. Discuss the importance of the remembrance of the Holocaust or other historical traumas in contemporary arts and culture.

Watch the 2005 film adaptation of *Everything is Illuminated* and answer the following questions:

13. How are Alex's expectations of American identity portrayed in the movie?
14. What traumatic historical events are hidden from the post-Soviet generation in Ukraine?
15. What is "illuminated" in the movie for both Alex and Jonathan?

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