Reinventing “America”
We must find a new identity or risk a national nervous breakdown

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LAST OCTOBER BROUGHT news reports about a wave of enthusiasm for the “Dick and Jane” books that once served to teach children how to read. For some 15 years, starting in 1940, 85 percent of all U.S. elementary schools used them. The series starred Dick, Jane, their white middle-class parents, their dog Spot, and their life together in a home with a white picket fence.

“Look, Jane, look! See Spot run!” chirped the two kids. It was a house full of glorious family values, where Mom cooked while Dad went to work in a suit and mowed the lawn on weekends. The Dick and Jane books also taught that you should do your job and help others. All this affirmed an equation of middle-class with whiteness with virtue.

Recently museums, libraries, and 80 PBS stations across the country have had exhibits and programs commemorating the series. At one museum, an attendant commented “When you hear someone crying, you know they are looking at the Dick and Jane books.” It seems nostalgia runs rampant among many Euro-Americans: a nostalgia for the days of unchallenged White Supremacy—both moral and material—when life was “simple.”

We’ve seen that nostalgia before in the nation’s history. But today it signifies a problem reaching new intensity. Today it suggests a national identity crisis rendered acute by the fact that the 21st century is almost certain to make Anglos a minority population. That crisis promises to bring in its wake an unprecedented nervous breakdown for the dominant society’s psyche.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in California, which has long been on the cutting-edge of the nation’s present and future reality. California lives up to that questionable distinction again as the stark outline of identity crisis looms in the state once called Golden. Warning sirens sounded repeatedly in the 1990s, such as the fierce battle over new history textbooks for K-12, Proposition 187’s ugly denial of human rights to immigrants, and the assault on affirmative action which culminated in Proposition 209. When it passed, Prop 209 clones had already been proposed in 26 other states and are now likely to be revived, at least in some states.

The attack on affirmative action is not just a politician’s ploy. It isn’t really about affirmative action. Essentially it’s another tactic in today’s reactionary onslaught, which plays on Anglo resentment and fear. A major source of that fear: the fact that California will be less than half Anglos (only 48 percent by the year 2000), with the nation as a whole not far behind. Euro-Americans who worked to pass Prop 209 may have won the election but they didn’t get what they really wanted: to turn back the clock in a host of ways starting with California’s current demographics.

The specter of becoming a minority in the 21st century casts a long shadow for some Anglos. It could mean loss of control. It could, in fearful imaginations, launch vengeful retribution by yesterday’s disempowered. Right now a profound anxiety centers on the Euro-American sense of a vanishing national identity. Behind the attacks on immigrants, affirmative action, and multiculturalism, behind the demand for “English Only” laws and rejection of bilingual education, lies the question: with all
these new people, languages, and cultures, “what will it mean to be an American?”

If that question once seemed, to many people, to have an obvious, universally applicable answer, today new definitions must be found. But too often Americans, with would-be scholars in the lead, refuse to face that need and instead nurse a nostalgia for some bygone clarity. They remain trapped in denial.

An array of such ostriches, heads in the sand, began flapping their feathers noisily with Allen Bloom’s 1987 best-selling book The Closing of the American Mind. Bloom bemoaned the decline of our “common values” as a society, meaning the decline of Euro-American cultural centrality (shall we just call it cultural imperialism?). Since then we have seen constant sniping at “diversity” goals across the land. The assault has often focused on how U.S. history is taught. And with reason, for this country’s identity rests on a particular narrative about the historical origins of the United States as a nation.

THE GREAT WHITE ORIGIN MYTH

Every society has an origin narrative which explains that society to itself and the world with a set of mythologized stories and symbols. The origin myth, as scholar-activist Roxanne Dunbar Ortiz has termed it, defines how a society understands its place in the world and its history. The myth provides the basis for a nation’s self-defined identity.

The origin myth’s omissions are grotesque. It ignores three major pillars of our nationhood: genocide, enslavement, and imperialist expansion (such nasty words, who wants to hear them?—but that’s the problem). The massive extermination of indigenous peoples provided our land base; the transport and enslavement of African labor made our economic growth possible; and the seizure of half of Mexico by war, or threat of renewed war, extended this nation’s boundaries to the Pacific and the Rio Grande. Such are the foundation stones of the U.S. along with an economic system that made this country the first in world history to be born capitalist.

Those three pillars were, of course, supplemented by great numbers of dirt-cheap workers from Mexico, China, the Philippines, Puerto Rico, etc. all kept in their place by varieties of White Supremacy. They stand along with millions of less-than-Supreme white workers and share-croppers.

Any attempt to modify the present origin myth provokes angry efforts to repel such sacrilege. In the case of Native Americans, scholars will insist that they died from disease, or wars among themselves, or “not so many really did die.” At worst, it was a “tragedy,” but never deliberate genocide, never a pillar of our nationhood. As for slavery, it was an embarrassment, of course, but remember that Africa also had slavery and, anyway, enlightened white folk finally did end the practice here.

In the case of Mexico, reputable U.S. scholars still insist on blaming that country for the 1846-48 war, although even former U.S. President Ulysses Grant wrote in his memoirs that “We were sent to provoke a fight [by moving troops into a disputed border area] but it was essential that Mexico should commence it [by fighting back].” President James Polk’s 1846 diary openly records his purpose in declaring war as “acquiring California, New Mexico, and perhaps other Mexican lands.” To justify what could be called a territorial driveby, the Mexican people were declared inferior; the U.S. had a Manifest Destiny to bring them progress and democracy.

Even when revisionist voices have exposed particular evils of Indian policy, slavery, or the U.S. war on Mexico, those evils remained little more than unpleasant footnotes; the core of the dominant myth stands intact. PBS’s recent eight-part documentary series entitled “The West” is a case in point. It devotes more than the usual attention to the devastation of Native America, but still centers on Anglos. Little attention is given to why their domination evolved as it did and so the West remains the physically gorgeous backdrop for an ugly, unaltered origin myth.

In fact, our myth is strengthened by “The West” series. For White Supremacy needs the brave but ultimately doomed Indians to silhouette its own superiority. Euro-American “civilization” needs the Indian-as-devil to reconfirm its godly mission. Timothy Wight, who served as pastor to Congress in the late 1700s, wrote that under the Indians, “Satan ruled
unchallenged in America” until “our chosen race eternal justice sent.” With that moral authority, the “winning of the West” metamorphosed from a brutal conquest into a romance of persistent courage played out in a lonely, dangerous landscape.

**RACISM AS LINCHPIN**

A crucial embellishment of the origin myth and a key element of the national identity has been the myth of the frontier, brilliantly analyzed in Richard Slotkin’s *Gunfighter Nation* (1992) the last volume of a trilogy. He describes Theodore Roosevelt’s belief that the West was won thanks to American arms, which he saw as “the means by which progress and national-identity will be achieved.” That success, Roosevelt continued, “depends on the heroism of men who impose on the course of events the latent virtues of their ‘race.’ ” Roosevelt saw racial conflict on the frontier producing a “race” of virile “fighters and breeders” that would eventually generate a new leadership class.

No slouch as an imperialist, Roosevelt soon took the frontier myth abroad, seeing Asians as Apaches and the Philippines as Sam Houston's Texas in the process of being taken from Mexico. For Roosevelt, as Slotkin writes, “racial violence is the principle around which both individual character and social organization develop.” Such ideas did not go totally unchallenged by U.S. historians, nor was the frontier myth always applied in totally simplistic ways by Hollywood and other media. (The Outlaw, for example, is a complicated figure, both good and bad.) But the frontier myth usually spins together virtue and violence, morality and war, in a convoluted, Calvinist web. That tortured embrace defines an essence of the so-called American character—in other words, the national identity—to this day.

The 19th century doctrine of Manifest Destiny served to combine expansionist violence with inevitability based on intrinsic racial superiority, in one neat package. Yankee conquest had to be seen as the “inevitable” result of a confrontation between enterprise v. passivity, progress v. backwardness. Even when that justification or the preten-

**Given its obsession with whiteness, which demanded absolute racial purity, the U.S. national identity reserved a special disdain for “half-breed” peoples—above all, Mexicans—even if one-half was European.**

Wanted: A New National Identity

By now it should be clear that we need a new, more truthful origin myth and a redefined national identity. Today’s origin myth and the resulting definition of national identity make for an intellectual prison where it is dangerous to ask big questions,
moral questions, about this society's superiority; where otherwise decent people are trapped in a desire not to feel guilty, which then necessitates self-deception. To cease our present falsification of collective memory should, and could, open the doors of that prison. When together we cease equating whiteness with national identity, could prove liberating for our collective psyche.

A new origin myth and national identity could help pave the way to a more livable society for us all. A society based on cooperation rather than competition, on the idea that all living creatures are inter-dependent and humanity's goal should be balance. Yet the name has been assumed by a single country, in an arrogant echo of its imperialist might to which Canadians and Mexicans are especially sensitive.

The choice seems clear, if not easy. We can go on living in a state of massive denial, affirming this nation's superiority and virtue simply because we need to believe in it. Overtly or covertly we can choose to reaffirm White Supremacy, with minor concessions. We can choose to think the destiny of the U.S. is still manifest: global domination. Or we can seek a transformative vision that carries us forward, not backward. We can seek an origin narrative that lays the ideological groundwork for a multi-cultural, multi-national identity centered on the goals of social equity and democracy. It is our choice; after all, myths are not born but made.

There is little time for nostalgia. Dick and Jane never were “America,” they were only a part of Anglo life in one part of the Americas. Let’s say goodbye to that narrow identity and look ahead. In the end, we have no alternative for the realities of the next century except a courageous transcendence of old assumptions. Will the future be ongoing denial or steps toward that new vision? At times you can hear the clock ticking.