Ethnicity, Diversity, and Conflict

Helen Papanikolas

WHEN I WAS A CHILD growing up in a Carbon County mining town in the 1920s, I would pass the Greek coffeehouses on Main Street after attending Greek school. Sitting inside were off-shift miners and sheepmen home for a time between lambing and shearing. They would be reading Greek newspapers, drinking Turkish coffee from demitasse cups, and quarreling over politics in Greece and Greek Orthodox church crises in America.

Farther north on Main Street, a Japanese woman would arrange fish in a display case. If it were Friday, she had more fish than usual to supply the needs of the American, Irish, Slovenian, and Croatian Catholics and the Serbian and Greek Orthodox. One of her steady customers was a Japanese woman who ran a boarding house. Behind the boarding house stood large wooden tubs where Japanese boarders washed themselves after their mine shifts: they were not allowed to use the showers at the mines.

I often heard music coming from the Denver and Rio Grande Western depot where the uniformed Italian marching band met incoming passenger trains. They were hired to serenade immigrant picture brides, sent by their families to marry men they had never seen. The bands also played funeral dirges as they escorted the dead to the graveyard, mainly young men killed in falls of coal and explosions. Immigrants were almost all young then. Behind the hearse their compatriots marched, wearing the sashes or emblems of their Yugoslav, Italian, or Greek lodges.

HELEN PAPANIKOLAS is a fellow of the Utah Historical Society. This essay was given when she received the 1990 Governor's Award in the Humanities, presented by the State of Utah and the Utah Endowment for the Humanities.

Although America was ostensibly a melting pot, the immigrants did not know they were supposed to melt in it. In their neighborhoods they continued their age-old customs: they married and baptized their children in joyous communal affairs; they played their folk songs on ancient instruments; they sang of their nations' tragic history under waves of foreign invaders; they called midwives and folk healers to attend them; and they keened for their dead at the side of open coffins or buried them according to their ancestral customs.

Still, none of these immigrant groups was entirely united in traits and beliefs. The northern Italians and the southern Italians were hostile to each other; the Cretan Greeks were adamantly opposed to marrying mainland Greeks; the Croats, Slovenes, and Serbs (later called Yugoslavs) brought ancient political and religious differences with them. The Japanese did not want social relations with the *etas*, the lowest in their hierarchy. Facing all of them were the Americans, who had been in this country several or more generations than they and who made the laws and rules of the new land.

This was my first experience in diversity, living among many nationalities and races—the Depression-born Works Progress Administration (WPA) would count twenty-eight in my town. This was a world of anxiety for a child of immigrant parents. Stepping out of the home each day meant facing taunts for being different, for being "foreign." Yet being different colored and enriched my life. Other cultures were not strange to me. I did not think them unworthy because they were unlike mine. They were, instead, interesting. All my life I had an understanding of other peoples that I did not have to learn; being born into that multiethnic milieu made it almost instinctive.

Later there would be other experiences in diversity: the pull of two cultures on us immigrant children; the conflict between workers attempting to unionize and employers who were determined that they would not; questions about religion and politics. Diversity is a condition of life. It exists in nature, in the animal world, in every facet of life on this planet. It often brings conflict, but that conflict is not necessarily bad; the results, sometimes immediate but most often seen only after the passage of years, are often good.

When I hear people speak of the generations their ancestors have been in this country, I no longer feel, as I did as a child, that I have only tenuous ties to this land. No, their forefathers, as James Baldwin tells us, "left Europe because they couldn't stay there any longer. . . . They were hungry, they were poor. . . . Those who were making it in England did not get on the Mayflower" (1988, 9). My parents were no different. Adversity moved them to this unknown land; it is how we, their children, became Americans.

I use the word "we" Americans although my family's history in this country began in 1907 when my father arrived in New York without an overcoat. Not until two months later in freezing cold was he able to buy a heavy jacket. He had to spend his first wages on a gun to protect himself. I include myself in the "we" of America because I was born in America, in that Carbon County mining camp, and America's history is also my history. I am as American as those whose forebears came on the Mayflower.

From my vantage point as an ethnic historian, I still hear the peculiar description of America as a "melting pot." This was a flawed presumption one hundred years ago, and time has proved its fallacy. Some cultures remain closer to their ethnicity than others; even when language is lost, customs and religion survive. Many people of multiethnic background continue to consider themselves ethnic Americans, not simply Americans. This diversity is good for America.

They came, the immigrants, to a new land so vast that great spaces of wilderness and alluvial earth were known, even to the Native Americans, the Indians, only in the oral tradition of their people. Then over this wide country the immigrant poor and blacks laid down hundreds of thousands of rails, crisscrossing a terrain of prairies, deserts, mountains, and valleys. Under innumerable factory smokestacks, armies of American and immigrant workers labored for a few cents an hour. They felled great forests, dammed rivers, and built roads over mountains so high that the lack of oxygen sickened them.

The immigrants exchanged their brawn for wages. This symbiotic relationship gave America its might. It made us so prideful we became egotistical. Only now have scholars begun to see flaws in Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Walt Whitman's American individualism. These American giants promulgated the "illusion of omnipotence over the clear perception of reality" (Kivisto and Blank 1989, 183). At the ever-increasing immigrant influx from the Balkans, the Mediterranean, and Asia, this individualism reared into fanaticism. Industrialists wanted these millions of poorly paid immigrants to man the mines, mills, and smelters, build railroads and roads, and keep factories running. The illusion of America's omnipotence ignored the necessity of immigrant labor, without which America could not have become a great nation.

The history of immigrants in this country is stark with discrimination, hostility, and anti-immigrant movements—the resurgent Ku Klux Klan in 1923–25 both nationwide and in Utah is the most flagrant example. Yet the immigrants persevered and gave new blood to this country, transformed it with their labor and with the accomplishments of their progeny. They gave America the vitality that characterizes it. We must also acknowledge that not all young immigrant men were

hard working and virtuous. Some saw in America opportunities to make easy money as labor agents, procurers, and gamblers and stigmatized their entire people.

Throughout the years in the new land, the immigrants spoke of their native countries with nostalgia; even the water was better there, colder, more pure. Yet few returned to their homelands to live as they had planned. On visits they were disillusioned; they found fault; the water was not so good as they had thought. They came back earlier than they had intended to their American-born children and grandchildren, some of whom had married people of other cultures. They came back gratefully to this country that was now irrevocably theirs.

Whenever I see an exceptional television program, I watch the credits with pleasure. I see among the Anglo-Saxon, north European, and Scandinavian names, others such as Bonelli, Saccamano, Fragidakis, Manopoulos, Konga, Draculich, Yamasaki, Wong, Touroulian, Moustafa, Droubisky, Lowenstein. I feel a deep pride for these third- and fourth-generation progeny of those millions of immigrants who looked to America as to a guiding North Star. Among those moving names I know there are blacks who still carry the names of white masters. I know there are also Anglicized names arbitrarily given to frightened immigrants by harried Ellis Island clerks who would not take the time to write the difficult names. Other immigrants changed and modified names of their clans for convenience and sometimes for survival in a new land. During the Panic of 1907, my father went by the name George Nelson to keep from starving.

How did it happen that in such a short time the bearers of immigrant names have become prominent in science, business, literature, and the visual arts? Education was the magic. Yes, their forebears had to take freight cars all over the country to look for work; factory owners, mine, and railroad management worked with unscrupulous labor agents, early immigrants among them, to extract bribes in return for jobs. And yes, they lived and worked in abysmal conditions before unions cut their work from six and seven days a week and ten hours a day with wages as low as fifty cents to a dollar a day. They were, though, frugal, left labor to open shops, and spurred their children to get an education that would have been denied them in the Old World.

Most immigrants and their generations have done well in America, but blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans are struggling still. When someone tells me, "Your people pulled themselves up by their bootstraps, let others do the same," I know I am looking at a person who knows nothing about the historic forces that preclude our comparing these groups with European and Asian immigrants. Such remarks are made not only by people who trace their genealogy back to Puri-

tan days, but also by children of immigrants themselves. Blacks were brought in chains, purposely separated from their own tribal people and placed with others with whom they had no common language and history. Their culture was almost destroyed. Kept from schooling, subject to sale, they endured the humiliation of slavery long after the Emancipation. The reasons blacks fare poorly in American life are complex; for our purposes, I quote from the former dean of Columbia Teachers College who said of a black child, "On the day he enters kindergarten, he carries a burden no white child can ever know" (in Hacker 1989, 63).

The indigenous culture of Mexico was almost completely annihilated by the Spanish conquest. The Treaty of 1848 ceded huge Mexican territories to the United States. While Hispanics continue to enter the American middle class, the never-ceasing arrival of Mexicans into this land can give the erroneous impression that Hispanics have not progressed.

Indian pride and freedom were nearly obliterated when white settlers plowed the land that had sustained them with seeds, nuts, berries, and small animals. Shunted onto reservations, the Native Americans were unable to live many of their ancient ways and some honored rites languished.

Yet the question persists: Why have the European immigrants done so well even in the face of hostility and severe work and housing restrictions? When reading the microfilms of old newspapers, I often found items about American Indians being fired and replaced by Italians arriving on a railroad construction site; or a labor gang of Greeks replacing blacks who were let go. Was it because the Indians or the African Americans were not good workers? No, the reason is obvious: the darker the skin, the greater the discrimination.

Yet we marvel at Asian students and their superior academic achievement. We are quick to compare blacks, Native Americans, and Hispanics with whites in educational status but would rather not compare Asian and Asian-American students with Americans. I am disturbed by the high number of Asians who meet admission standards in schools such as the University of California at Berkeley but are rejected. The Office of Education is investigating charges that school administrations' "fear of a preponderance of Asian Americans is a replay of attitudes colleges once had about Jews" (in Hacker 1989, 64).

To know why blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans have comparatively few of their number graduating from colleges and why Asians have a great number requires a concerted knowledge about family stability, social patterns, environment, attitudes toward education, and the nation's economic climate. Why are some critics unable to see that

unemployment and low income affect people? For American Indians, unemployment is as high as 96 percent on certain reservations. In 1986, 31.1 percent of African Americans and 27.3 percent of Hispanics had incomes below the poverty level, three times the rate for whites (Commission 1988, 4). Disturbing statistics show an ever-widening gap between living standards of minorities and whites. We have to know the cultural traits and the economic realities of these groups before we make quick assumptions that can only further speed the decline of minority education and participation in American life.

Great strides were made between 1960 and 1980 during the twenty years' war on poverty and the civil rights movement. Stagnation and even reversal began ten years ago when the burgeoning budget deficit and the defense program slashed entitlement programs that were helping minorities. Because education is the key to progress, educators were alarmed. In 1988 the Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life (chaired by Frank H. T. Rhodes, the president of Cornell University, and including state governors, former presidents Carter and Ford, university presidents, and leaders in various fields) reached the conclusion that

> [m]inority Americans are burdened not by a sudden, universal, yet temporary economic calamity, but by a long history of oppression and discrimination. . . . America is moving backward—not forward—in its efforts to achieve full participation of minority citizens in the life and prosperity of the nation. . . . They are tomorrow's one-third of a nation. (pp. vii, 6)

The report concludes,

> The plain and simple fact is that full participation of minority citizens is vital to our survival as a free and prosperous nation. . . . [T]heir numbers will increase. The United States will suffer a compromised quality of life and a lower standard of living. Social conflict will intensify. Our ability to compete in world markets will decline, our domestic economy will falter, our national security will be endangered. In brief we will find ourselves unable to fulfill the promise of the American dream. (pp. vii, 30)

Helping minorities is not merely altruistic and "doing them favors." The entire well-being of our nation depends on facing and eradicating the evils that place young people in ghettos of place and ghettos of the mind. Education brought the American dream to the progeny of immigrants. Education must bring that dream to our racial minorities.

The drop in minority college graduates is tragic. Young people have fewer role models to give them the promise that education is the key to stepping out of the ghetto's mean streets, the *barios*, or being able to survive away from the reservation. How greatly improved, for example, a black child's life would be, Ira Glasser tells us, if more black police officers walked the streets of the ghettos. If black children

could see more black physicians, attorneys, judges, college professors, corporate executives, and foreign service officers, they could know that once they finished their educations, they too would find employment (in Hacker 1989, 63).

The Commission on Minority Participation in Education and American Life offered six strategies to improve minority education: it challenges (1) institutions of higher learning to recruit, retain, and graduate minority students; (2) national leaders to restore national solvency; (3) the presidency and elected officials to lead efforts to assure minority advancement; (4) private and voluntary organizations to initiate new and expand existing programs to increase minority participation; (5) each major sector of our society to contribute a new vision of affirmative action; and finally (6) minority public officials, institutions, and voluntary organizations to expand their leadership roles (1988).

Too often, however, minority graduates forget their people's needs. Yet when we learn that Ronald G. Coleman, associate vice president for diversity and family development and associate professor of history in ethnic studies at the University of Utah, is a nationwide authority on black history; when we look at the work of Victoria Palacios and other Hispanic professors and attorneys; when we see Native American leaders like the late Fred Conetah leading an awakening of Indian self-realization, our pride knows no bounds.

One of the most severe blows to minority children is that fewer minority students are preparing for teaching careers. This is a particular problem for minority students, the Commission reports, "but it also is a loss for majority students who otherwise only rarely may be exposed directly to minority citizens in professional roles" (1988, 13).

Carlos Fuentes, a leading Mexican writer, diplomat, and son of a diplomat said, "Cultures perish when deprived of contact with what is different and challenging" (1988, 93). Diversity in the schoolroom gives enrichment, makes students aware of the commonality of experience with those whose skin color is different and whose customs and perceptions are often more interesting than theirs. I remember being teased as a child because my family ate lamb, a symbol of Christ, on Easter; one of my ethnic Italian friends was ridiculed because he ate spaghetti. Time and World War II (when American GIs returned from foreign countries with expanded vision and some with brides) changed that: ethnic food has become American food. Missionaries of all denominations, and in Utah mainly Mormon, also return with changed views on ethnic peoples. The Brigham Young University "Culturegrams," short monographs on the traditions of various countries, are of inestimable value to missionaries, government officials, and our armed forces particularly.

We can look back now on that celebrated American individualism of which we would be justly proud if it were pure, untainted by the unwitting arrogance that American culture, views, standards, and perceptions are the right and proper ones to hold. Americans looked upon immigrants and racial minorities as inferior, even primitive, peoples. Americans have had, the pioneer anthropologist Ruth Benedict tells us, the notion that people rose from simple, primitive stages and arrived at a civilized state (in Caffrey 1989, 135). Yet even so-called primitive societies are highly complex and possess all the good and bad traits that supposedly civilized peoples do. How can we possibly say that the Native American view of the land is inferior to ours? The Indians believe the land has been given us to use, not to own, not to desecrate; it is holy.

Other nations realize the importance of knowing foreign languages to facilitate discourse between nations, to understand the mores and cultures of these countries. We in the United States have hardly been concerned with learning the languages and cultures of others. Americans see other nations through American eyes. This attitude has served us badly in diplomacy and in wars. Most often appointed for political repayment, diplomats are given crash courses on the countries to which they are assigned and are often a source of embarrassment to our government.

The tragedy of Vietnam continues to be minutely, tenaciously examined. Daniel Ellsberg said of his days as a prowar government official: "There has never been an official of Deputy Assistant Secretary rank or higher (including myself) who could have passed a freshman exam in modern Vietnamese history, if such a course existed in this country" (in Mirsky 1990, 29). In his book *Flashbacks: On Returning to Vietnam*, Morley Safer says, "Had the people in civilian and military command even the most rudimentary understanding of the [Vietnamese] history and language, this awful business would likely not have happened" (in Mirsky 1990, 29). How can we forget the high-ranking American army officer who told us that death did not have the same meaning for the Vietnamese as for us Americans. Life, he said, is cheap to the Vietnamese.

Our government still has not learned much about the Middle Easterners. The roots of their religious fanaticism, their ancient cultures, are measured by American standards. The historic struggles of the Middle East from Turkey's domination to protectorates under the British and French continue to be blank to Americans. Government officials show their ignorance when they speak of humiliating a Middle Eastern people. The Middle Easterners know considerably more about our culture because they send their young people here in great numbers for higher education.

We do not know what the United States would be like if blacks had not been brought from Africa in chains, if the Spanish had not traveled north from Mexico into Indian land and built settlements throughout the West, and if all immigration had ceased at the end of the last century. The nation would have been peopled by the British, Dutch, and Scandinavians, and by a lesser number of Germans and Swiss. Such a nation would have been much less diverse and interesting than what we have become.

Fortunately, immigration prevented such homogeneity and continues to prevent it. Neo-Nazis and other white supremists would be happy with such a country, but how do they know what ethnic strains they carry in their genes? None of us, no matter how far back we trace our genealogy, can know this for certain. Invaders and the invaded intermarried; for economic gain or for survival, people changed their religions and took on new names. Often posterity forgot their origins. In their history of exile, the Jews, for example, took on the physical characteristics of the countries in which they settled. In my own history, I found it hard to believe my father's description of his mother as having had blonde hair and blue eyes. Yet when I visited my father's ancestral village, I was struck by the number of relatives and other villagers who had light skin and hair. The closer we traveled to northern Balkan countries, the more prevalent these characteristics became.

The history of immigration makes it clear that the raw determination, the strong beliefs of the immigrant generation, begin to water down in the second generation and become pale by the third. The progeny of those pioneer Mormon journal keepers are shadows compared to their ancestors. The stark words, phrases, sentences are riveting there on the darkened pages; their progeny's comments on television and in newspapers are not. I think of the immigrant Greeks, Yugoslavs, and Italians I knew in Carbon County; they were giants of individualism compared to their children and grandchildren. Neither church nor civil authorities could make them change their stand when they believed they were right, and most of them spoke out even when they knew it was not in their best interests. I recall when I was researching the Carbon County Strike of 1933 that a Catholic bishop came to Carbon County to warn the Yugoslav and Italian Catholics to stop their strike activities and go back to work. Hardly a striker heeded the bishop's warning. The passing of generations waters down individualism, but America's vitality continues, renewed by fresh blood.

America's new immigrants, many from Asia, face the same discrimination and rejection of earlier arrivals. We hear people speak with dismay over Asian immigrant numbers, over their customs, over their taking jobs away from Americans. These complainers have not

paid attention to history; further, they have not really looked about them. Historians who go through microfilms of old newspapers read dire warnings of what immigrants will do to this country. *Mongrelize* was a favorite word. Greek coffeehouses and ethnic lodges were spoken of as sinister places of intrigue. Foreign-language newspapers were certainly, they editorialized, filled with subversive propaganda from the immigrants' native countries. Greek schools showed Greeks could never be Americanized. Italian, Greek, and Serbian priests could hardly speak English and should go back to their own countries. The American-born envisioned immigrant children as clones of their parents.

None of the dire predictions came to pass. Although ethnicity is not entirely lost, nor should it be, the progeny of immigrants are fully American. In my experience, and in that of others of immigrant background, we never felt more American than when visiting the countries of our parents and to our surprise were referred to as Americans, not Italian Americans, Greek Americans, or Lebanese Americans (as we are called in the United States) but Americans. We return homesick to this nation that is also ours. If people will let time pass, immigrants will accommodate, then adapt, then assimilate, retaining elements of their heritage, by the third generation.

We do not have to go into ethnic history for examples of assimilation. One in the recent past involves Americans. During the 1930s Depression, drought dried the topsoil of the Midwest, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, crops died without water, winds carried the dust a thousand miles away. At noon, Arthur Rothstein, the noted photographer of those years, told me, "the skies of New York were darkened." Farmers and storekeepers who depended on crop sales piled children and the most necessary of belongings into old cars and drove to California hoping for work. Sheriffs stood with guns at county boundaries to turn them back. There was no unemployment relief. People died of starvation.

Newspapers harangued over what the lowly Okies, as they were called, would do to California society. They would lower the standard of living; they would be a blight on the economy; they were inferior people. Within two generations the Okies entered the California middle class.

Diversity in labor history gives us several excellent examples of conflict that seemed at the time pernicious, but decades later proved to be salutary. One is the maligned Industrial Workers of the World, the IWW, the Wobblies, the I-Won't-Works, as cynical observers called them. A radical union for the times, the IWW was seen as syndicalist, anarchist; but it also welcomed nonwhites, women, the unskilled, and the foreign-born (all of whom most locals of the staid American Fed-

eration of Labor excluded from membership into its ranks). It fought employers of lumberjacks, migrants, dock workers, and miners for a living wage, decent housing, and an eight-hour day. These were radical demands at a time when foremen hired, decided wages, kept men at work for ten and twelve hours, provided lice-infected housing, if any, and charged the men for every necessity of life, leaving them at times with nothing to show for their labor. By 1932, the IWW was almost finished, yet the precepts it upheld— throughout confrontations with authorities, battles with management thugs, horrible beatings, and long prison terms under inhumane conditions—are today taken for granted.

Diversity in religion brings conflict, but without it there would be no change to fit the times. All religions must change to survive. Generations may pass before alterations are effected. I recall, for example, that the wedding ceremony in my Greek Orthodox church reached its final form in the year 1200. Often necessary changes are painful; I was dismayed the first time I saw the ancient St. John Chrysostom liturgy translated into English. I knew it was necessary, but it was also jarring to hear the words so natural in their original Greek chanted rather clumsily in English. Recent Greek immigrants in the East rail at the translation of the liturgy, even in the face of the high percentage of marriages outside the church and the loss of language among third and fourth generations. Many Roman Catholics yearn for the old Latin rite that is celebrated once a month in St. Ann's church. Splinter groups have arisen when long-held Mormon tenets have been disallowed.

We have serious problems to face, primarily in education, which is the key to success in American society. Again we must place the needs of minority students prominently on the nation's agenda—not only for their sakes but for the sake of the nation.

A thoughtful person wonders how to be of service. In answer I think of the great doctor, Albert Schweitzer, whom not many remember now but who spent his life in Africa building clinics for black Africans. He was deluged with visitors attracted to his remarkable work. One woman asked how people like her could help. He answered that everyone could not come to Africa to work as he had, but that each person could do his or her best for those nearby. When we see acts of discrimination; when we hear racial disparagements of others; when we hear superficial comments that condemn an entire culture; when we are silent while someone harangues against the African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans and argues that Asians should be barred from the country; when neighbors comment derisively about the customs of those who are different, we should defend the maligned. They are part of the diversity and conflict of our nation and, just like

the immigrants of the first twenty-five years of this century, they will enrich America with their new blood, infuse it with the vitality that we have not yet lost. Always we must remember that these minorities are one-third of our nation. Their numbers cannot be ignored; how they fare the United States will fare.

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