MODERN DISCOURSES ON ETHNIC PLURALISM IN AMERICAN THOUGHT

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Abstract

This study explores contemporary discourses of ethnic pluralism within contemporary American thought and situates the analysis in the long-standing struggle between democratic ideals and structural injustices, the alleged American Paradox. The dilemma at its center is that of how American intellectual and cultural discourse operate to both profess inclusion and reproduce exclusionary practices, particularly in the post-Civil Rights era. The research paper critically examines the theorization and articulation of ethnic pluralism in seminal American philosophical, literary, and socio-political writings; it also explores the intersections between national identity, multiculturalism, and institutional marginalization, and critiques the evolution of pluralist discourse against the backdrop of globalization, identity politics, and new social movements. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative, cross-disciplinary approach using critical discourse analysis and close reading of the works of some American thinkers, writers, and theorists. The primary and secondary sources are drawn from literature, cultural studies, and political philosophy to ensure that there is thorough knowledge of both older and contemporary schools of thought. Two literary theories have guided the analysis: Postcolonial Theory, that dismantles power dynamics and narratives of "otherness" embedded within national discourse, and Critical Race Theory, that brings to the fore the lived realities of racialized peoples and disentangle the ideological frameworks beneath inequality. The outcomes from the study are a clearer understanding of the ideological contradictions of American multiculturalism and a re-thinking of pluralism as both ideal and contested practice. The research then contributes to broader debates surrounding identity, belonging, and the changing texture of American democratic thought in a more pluralistic society.
***Key-words**: Ethnic pluralism, American thought, multiculturalism, American Paradox, identity politics, democratic ideals and exclusion*

Résumé

Cette étude explore les discours contemporains sur le pluralisme ethnique dans la pensée américaine actuelle, en inscrivant l'analyse dans la lutte historique entre les idéaux démocratiques et les injustices structurelles, connue sous le nom de Paradoxe américain. *Le dilemme central porte sur la manière dont le discours intellectuel et culturel américain fonctionne à la fois pour proclamer l'inclusion et reproduire des pratiques d'exclusion, en particulier dans l'ère post-droits civiques. Cet article examine de manière critique la théorisation et l'articulation du pluralisme ethnique dans des écrits philosophiques, littéraires*

et sociopolitiques américains majeurs. Il explore également les intersections entre identité nationale, multiculturalisme et marginalisation institutionnelle, tout en analysant l'évolution du discours pluraliste dans le contexte de la mondialisation, des politiques identitaires et des nouveaux mouvements sociaux. Sur le plan méthodologique, cette recherche adopte une approche qualitative et interdisciplinaire, en s'appuyant sur l'analyse critique du discours et une lecture attentive des œuvres de penseurs, écrivains et théoriciens américains. Les sources primaires et secondaires sont tirées de la littérature, des études culturelles et de la philosophie politique afin d'assurer une compréhension approfondie des courants de pensée anciens et contemporains. Deux théories littéraires ont guidé l'analyse: la théorie postcoloniale, qui déconstruit les dynamiques de pouvoir et les récits de l'« altérité » intégrés dans le discours national ; et la théorie critique de la race, qui met en lumière les réalités vécues des populations racialisées et démêle les cadres idéologiques à la base de l'inégalité. Les résultats de cette étude permettent une meilleure compréhension des contradictions idéologiques du multiculturalisme américain et une relecture du pluralisme en tant qu'idéal et pratique contestée. Cette recherche contribue ainsi aux débats plus larges sur l'identité, l'appartenance et l'évolution de la pensée démocratique américaine dans une société de plus en plus pluraliste.

Mots-clés : *Pluralisme ethnique, pensée américaine, multiculturalisme, Paradoxe américain, politiques identitaires, idéaux démocratiques et exclusion.*

Introduction

Ethnic diversity has been at the heart of the American imagination for decades, often celebrated as a quintessential feature of the nation's democratic promise. From the "melting pot" ideal to current visions of multicultural mosaic, the rhetoric of diversity has been written into national narratives of progress and inclusion. But underlying these aspirations' goals is an unremitting contradiction: the coexistence of democratic ideals with deeply rooted patterns of racial and ethnic discrimination. This tension (between the professed unity in diversity and the entrenched history of inequality) forms what scholars have described as the American Paradox.

Against the background of heightened multicultural sensitivity, renewed civil rights activism, and a globalized political and cultural landscape, this study critically assesses how fresh American thinking is grappling with the idea of ethnic pluralism. It explores how intellectual, literary, and political discourses both welcome and resist the promise of pluralism, revealing the ideological fault lines that continue to shape American identity.

Through close reading of the core philosophical, literary, and socio-political texts, the research seeks to ascertain how stories of inclusion are constructed, challenged, and experienced in a society that still grapples with the complexities of its plural identity. Ultimately, this

paper aims to shed light on the evolving discourses that weigh the promise and the peril of ethnic pluralism in modern American thought.

1. Scholarly perspectives: analysis of academic discussions on ethnic pluralism

1.1. Theoretical foundations and the American paradox

Over the last several decades, the concept of ethnic pluralism has been at the forefront of American scholarly discourse, driving persistent debate about how to make sense of and respond to the nation's increasing ethnic diversity. Beneath all of these debates is a fundamental paradox, a desire to forge an inclusive national identity alongside the distinctiveness of different cultural groups. This paradox, one that has often been referred to as the "American paradox," constitutes a dilemma to balance unity and diversity.

Scholars have resolved this paradox through a variety of theoretical stances. Multiculturalism advocates for the celebration and valuing of cultural difference on the grounds that diversity strengthens the national fabric. Assimilationist reasoning, conversely, emphasizes the integration of people into a unitary national identity at the expense of cultural difference. Thomas Archdeacon (1990) finds that neither "cultural pluralism" nor the "melting pot" is an accurate depiction of the dynamics of American nationality, and that these formulations are more in the nature of prescriptions than descriptions of social reality.

The theoretical framework of this research draws from prominent paradigms in critical theory and cultural studies to examine the complex dynamics of identity, representation, and national belonging in the United States. Two foundational ideas (intersectionality and cultural relativism) are especially relevant to examining the intricate experiences of subjects in a plural society.

Intersectionality, a concept crafted by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides an explanation of how intersecting social identities (such as race, gender, class, and sexuality) interact with each other to produce particular modalities of discrimination and privilege. Rather than thinking of identity categories as bounded or additive, this framework emphasizes their interdependence, rendering visible how power operates through these intersections. In cultural and literary criticism,

intersectionality enables a more complex reading of narratives and texts, highlighting the way marginal voices convey the density of lived experience. Intersectionality resists essentialist identity designations and is a component of multicultural and postcolonial theory's broader effort to foreground marginal cultural narratives.

Cultural relativism, founded upon the anthropological work of Franz Boas and developed by scholars like Ruth Benedict, calls for an understanding of cultural practices and values in relation to their own socio-historical contexts. This theoretical position refuses ethnocentric claims and promotes a more empathetic and context-sensitive approach to cultural difference. Cultural relativism in literary studies enables critical examination of how texts reflect, negotiate, or resist dominant cultural norms. It is also a response to assimilationist models, valorizing cultural specificity as resilience, rather than deviance.

Despite the inclusive promise of such models, the dilemma between national unity and cultural pluralism is not dissolved. In *The Disuniting of America* (1991), Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr. laments what he perceives as the fragmentation of national identity through the rise of "ethnic particularism." In recognizing the legitimacy of ethnic consciousness, Schlesinger warns that excessive focus on difference imperils those shared civic values that sustain democratic unity. His viewpoint reflects an old challenge of American cultural discourse: the job of reconciling diversity with a broader national narrative.

This study honors these theoretical impasses in seeking to comprehend how literature, the media, and political rhetoric construct, subvert, and re-make American identity in the multicultural condition. In incorporating intersectionality and cultural relativism into the discussion, and while remaining sensitive to such criticisms as Schlesinger's, the study aims to offer a nuanced and balanced analysis of cultural identity formation in a multicultural society. Methodologically, the work is qualitative and interdisciplinary and employs an integration of discourse analysis, textual reading, and historical contextualization. The work analyzes major works of literature, political texts, media representation, and scholarly debates and traces how competing narratives of ethnic pluralism have unfolded and intersected over time. This approach is

justified in the nature of the subject matter itself: ethnic pluralism is not an ideologically rigid or frozen category but one evolving through multiple modes of cultural production and public debate. Literature informs us about individual and affective dimensions of identity; media reiterates and in a few instances amplifies social tensions; political rhetoric proclaims structural interests of inclusion and exclusion. Discourse-based, multi-source analysis is thus best suited to analyzing the way these discursive spaces collectively construct and problematize contemporary understandings of American pluralism.

In total, the United States' theoretical foundations of ethnic pluralism are a complex dynamic between embracing difference and pursuing national unity. For as valuable as multiculturalism, intersectionality, and cultural relativism are as theoretical frameworks, they also highlight the ongoing tension between recognizing cultural distinctions and wanting one national identity.

1.2. Competing frameworks: multiculturalism, assimilation, and cultural pluralism

The last decades have witnessed ethnic pluralism as a dominant motif within American scholarly discourse, evoking ongoing controversies about how to interpret and respond to America's increasing ethnic diversity. Beneath the controversies lies a fundamental paradox: the desire to forge a unified national identity alongside the distinctiveness of various cultural groups. This conflict, sometimes called the "American paradox," is a balancing act to harmonize unity and diversity in the American social fabric.

Theorists have devised a set of frameworks for resolving this paradox. Multiculturalist theory defends the recognition and accommodation of group-specific rights for the preservation of cultural identities, while assimilationist theory emphasizes integration into a shared national identity. Theoretical positions have evolved over time in light of newer theoretical concepts like intersectionality, cultural relativism, and fluid social identities.

Multiculturalism has been the most prominent framework for describing ethnic pluralism within the United States, particularly as a response to globalization and immigration. Theorists like Will Kymlicka and Charles Taylor have been instrumental in establishing the ideals of

multiculturalism. Kymlicka's *Multicultural Citizenship* (1995) is an argument for a model in which cultural communities enjoy legal equality and group-differentiated rights, contending that diversity strengthens democratic society. Taylor's *The Politics of Recognition* (1992) emphasizes the moral importance of the recognition of cultural identities as a source of dignity and self-respect.

Despite its normative popularity, multiculturalism has never been short of critics. Critics like Frank Furedi have contended that it encourages cultural fragmentation and breakdown in shared national identity, warning that excessive focus on difference threatens to establish disconnected "cultural silos." Furthermore, critics contend that multicultural policies can inadvertently entrench inequalities since they favor some groups over others, thereby reproducing novel injustices in the process of trying to correct past wrongs.

Assimilationist theories, prevalent in early 20th-century sociology, offered a linear model of immigrant incorporation. Theorists such as Robert E. Park presented ideas such as the "race relations cycle," which implied that minority groups would ultimately assimilate into mainstream society. Critics such as Herbert Gans have, however, challenged the excessive optimism of such models, noting that structural inequalities, racism and economic exclusion, for example, continue to hinder full integration, rendering the process of assimilation more complicated.

While assimilationist strategies emphasize the integration of individuals into a common national identity, they have been faulted for failing to consider the challenges posed by systemic inequalities and the diversity of minority experiences. These criticisms demand a more nuanced conceptualization of integration that is attentive to both individual and group identities.

Cultural pluralism, as pushed by theorists like Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, suggests a middle path between multiculturalism and assimilationism. In their book *Beyond the Melting Pot* (1963) , they argue for maintaining ethnic identities but integrating minority groups into the political and economic life of the nation. This framework seeks to strike a balance between unity and diversity by pushing for inclusion without annihilation of cultures.

Glazer and Moynihan's position is that ethnic identities and a shared national identity can coexist, and they contend that social

cohesion does not necessitate the abandonment of cultural distinctiveness. Their position is one of recognizing and valuing cultural diversity within the general framework of national unity.

Contemporary discussions of ethnic pluralism increasingly incorporate the concept of intersectionality, which examines how various social identities, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, intersect to produce experiences of oppression and privilege. In doing so, this approach challenges traditional models by highlighting the multifaceted nature of identity and the need for policies to address more than one axis of inequality.

Additionally, evolving social processes, including globalization and transnationalism, have influenced the discussion of ethnic pluralism. These processes have necessitated a re-examination of such phenomena as cultural assimilation and integration, prompting scholars to adopt more fluid and encompassing modes of conceptualizing and reacting to ethnic diversity.

1.3. Evolving perspectives: identity politics and intersectionality

Contemporary discussions of ethnic pluralism in America have increasingly centered on identity politics and intersectionality, offering nuanced frameworks to help make sense of the complexities of race, gender, class, and other social categories. These perspectives challenge traditional models by emphasizing the interrelatedness of various forms of identity and oppression.

Identity politics has been a significant way through which marginalized groups have asserted their unique experiences and needs. Scholars like Kimberlé Crenshaw have been critical of traditional identity politics because they often overlook intersecting identities of individuals, particularly women of color. Crenshaw argues that such movements end up silencing those whose experiences do not fit into the dominant discourses within such a group.

While identity politics has been empowering in getting various groups on board, Crenshaw emphatically reaffirms that in ensuring inclusive practice in acknowledging the differentiated lives among such constituencies, intersectional vision becomes imperative.

Intersectionality theory, which Kimberlé Crenshaw first used in the late 1980s, provides a critical lens for explaining how various social identities intersect to produce unique experiences of privilege and

oppression. Crenshaw's seminal article, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex," recognized how Black women face discrimination neither based on their race nor sex but on both simultaneously, which typically remains unseen in legal and social narratives.

Patricia Hill Collins built upon this model with her "matrix of domination" theory, where she broke down the ways in which the various forms of oppression, race, class, gender, and sexuality, are interconnected and cannot be theorized separately. This perspective highlights the interdependence of social identities and the need for complex strategies to challenge systemic disparities.

The integration of intersectionality into studies of ethnic pluralism has policy and social movement implications that are far-reaching. By recognizing the interconnectedness of social identities, activists and policymakers can develop more inclusive policies that consider the specific needs of individuals at the boundaries of several marginalized identities.

In addition, this strategy challenges the notion of a uniform national identity to one that is diverse and multicentric. As the United States wrestles with issues of race, immigration, and multiculturalism, the critique of identity politics and intersectionality offers critical knowledge of the lived experience of marginalized individuals and the structuring forces operating upon them.

2. Media and cultural representations

2.1. Media representations: stereotypes to cultural empowerment

Now, the mass media are a major force shaping public perceptions of ethnic pluralism in America. Previously, ethnic minorities were often misrepresented by negative stereotypes used to reinforce racial hierarchies and affirm white superior culture.

Donald Bogle's seminal work, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks* (2001), presents five standard stereotypical screen types open to Black actors and actresses: the obedient "tom," the dumb "coon," the tragic mulatto, the obese "mammy," and the hyper-sexualized "buck." These portrayals were pivotal in reinforcing racial hierarchies and disenfranchising minority groups in American cinema.

Similarly, the practice of "yellowface," in which white actors portrayed Asian characters with over-the-top makeup and imitating, perpetuated such negative stereotypes. Mickey Rooney's Mr. Yunioshi in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) and Luise Rainer's casting in *The Good Earth* (1937), roles originally intended for Asian actors, were examples of such roles. These roles reinforced the "Yellow Peril" stereotype, which depicted Asians as menacing and exotic.

Since the civil rights movement, the representation of ethnic minorities in the media has changed dramatically. The change has been spearheaded by directors like Spike Lee and John Singleton, presenting realistic and sensitive depictions of African American life. Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991) address issues of systemic racism and inner-city issues, speaking out on behalf of Black voices and experiences.

TV shows like *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996) also facilitated this change by bringing African American characters with diverse roles, breaking down monolithic representations, and constructing a broader definition of Black identity.

More recently, films like *Black Panther* (2018) and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) have revolutionized ethnic representation by placing Black and Asian narratives at the center in empowering stories. *Black Panther*, in addition to having a predominantly Black cast, also features themes of heritage, leadership, and global responsibility, appealing to worldwide audiences. *Crazy Rich Asians* was the first film to boast an all-Asian cast in a major Hollywood production, bypassing the stereotype of the "model minority" and showing Asian communities' diversity.

These films capture what Amanda Hobson describes as a transition "from mere representation to real empowerment," where media mirror and not merely represent society but actually influence and mold it.

Despite these advancements, there remain problems in the achievement of accurate and varied representation. The underrepresentation of certain ethnic groups and continued existence of stereotypes indicate that the journey towards balanced media representation is far from over. Continued advocacy and critical exploration are necessary in order to ensure that media representation progresses to capture the complexity and richness of ethnic pluralism in America.

2.2. Literary responses to ethnic identity and the American narrative

Literature has long been a significant location for the resistance to mainstream cultural discourse and for the creation and affirmation of ethnic identities. Literature in the United States has consistently grappled with questions of belonging, identity, and the trauma of historical marginalization. Through their writing, writers have not only toppled prevailing discourses but have also opened up possibilities for cultural resilience and reimagination. African American, Latino, Chicano, and other marginalized writers have used their writing to explore ethnic identity, dissect systemic oppression, and challenge the forces of assimilation.

African American writers, in particular, have been at the forefront of documenting the complexities of racial identity and the persistent struggle for racial justice. Writers like Toni Morrison and James Baldwin have charted the trauma of slavery and its long legacy. Their work has an intense involvement with the personal and public memory of racial violence, seeking both to commemorate and to transcend the atrocities of the past.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) has been seen as a cornerstone text of African American literature. The novel intertwines historical critique and accounts of cultural survival in how the memory of slavery haunts the lives of its survivors and their descendants. Morrison's protagonist, Sethe, is paradigmatic of this survival and reclamation struggle, attempting to make sense of the slavery experience and her attempts at rebuilding life. Morrison's interrogation of memory, erasure, and identity in Beloved is central in challenging those forces of historical amnesia that seek to minimize the significance of slavery and its lingering effects. For, in Morrison's Beloved, "It was not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 1987, p. 324), emphasizing the importance of confronting painful histories rather than consigning them to forgetting. In this literary quest, Morrison affirms that Black identity is not an essentialized category, but rather one that is shaped deeply by history, memory, and survival.

James Baldwin's work, such as *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953) and *The Fire Next Time* (1963), also contributes to this conversation in its examination of the complexities of Black identity in America, especially

in relation to institutional racism, religion, and the personal and communal burden of oppression. Baldwin's exploration of the internalized contradictions of African Americans, as well as his insistence on racial justice, remains a powerful testament to the ongoing negotiation of identity in a racially divided society. Baldwin's assertion that "the history of the Negro in America is the history of America" (Baldwin, 1963, p. 74) continues to echo, illustrating the intrinsic relationship between Black identity and the general American experience.

Similar to African American writers, Latino and Chicano writers have used their writing to navigate the complexities of cultural identity, immigration, and existing with multiple cultural realities. These writers negotiate assimilation, biculturalism, and the desire to maintain their cultural heritage in the face of a society that often pressures them to conform to one, "American" identity.

Sandra Cisneros, in her now much celebrated novel *The House on Mango Street* (1984), provides a poignant account of what it means to grow up as a Latina adolescent girl in Chicago. Through the eyes of Esperanza Cordero, Cisneros addresses themes of identity, belonging, and hopes for a better life, never failing to do justice to the Mexican heritage of the protagonist. Esperanza's views of her neighborhood, family, and desires to leave illustrate the tension between the need to assimilate into mainstream American culture and the desire to preserve cultural heritage. Cisneros says, "I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. But I am not going to leave Mango Street. I belong here" (Cisneros, 1984, p. 110), and underscores the importance of cultural belonging as a source of strength and survival. Rather than seeing her heritage as something to be discarded, Esperanza begins to see it as fundamental to who she is and as a groundwork that is necessary for her identity.

Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) also addresses concerns of immigration, assimilation, and cultural displacement. The novel focuses on the history of a Dominican American family, using magical realism and the supernatural to tell the story of the intergenerational suffering of both the family's past in the Dominican Republic and its struggles in the United States. Díaz's text grapples with the tension between the "American Dream" and the reality of cultural displacement, as the characters try to be both Dominican and American. As Díaz would have it, "It's not that I don't know the score. It's that the score is a lie" (Díaz, 2007, p. 17), contesting the myth of

assimilation and the erasure of the rich complexities of immigrant identity.

These authors, among many others, are engaged in a literary project that rescripts the American narrative by offering counter-narratives to the traditional, assimilationist models that have for so long dominated discussions of what it means to be "American." They create multicultural fictions that do not require the erasure of ethnic identity in the interest of a homogeneous national culture. Instead, these writers imagine a more pluralistic America, one that is aware of and celebrates its diversity and creates room for ethnic identities to exist.

Cisneros, Díaz, Baldwin, and Morrison present complex, multidimensional portrayals of ethnic identities in their work that resist the reductionist demands of assimilation. Through their dense representations of Black, Latina/o, and other minoritized experiences, they challenge the monolithic representations of American identity and reconfigure the terms of national belonging. Their writings affirm that American identity is not a fixed, monolithic category, but one that is constantly changing in relation to the multiplicity of experiences that make up the nation.

As these writers illustrate, the quest to make ethnic identities within the framework of the broader American society is closely intertwined with struggles for social justice, cultural survival, and self-affirmation. In their writings, these authors have not just contested and criticized the mainstream American narrative, but they have also provided a voice for marginal groups to transform the narrative of what it means to be American. In offering alternatives to the assimilationist model, they create spaces for a more inclusive and nuanced conception of identity, one that would acknowledge the different histories and cultural contributions of all the groups that constitute the American population.

2.3. Visual arts as cultural reclamation and resistance

Visual art has been a powerful means of representing, resisting, and reclaiming ethnic identity for a long time. In the US, where cultural stories have always been Eurocentric in their construction, art has served as a means by which oppressed peoples could make their presence known, combat stereotypes, and challenge hegemonic cultural narratives. From Harlem Renaissance to present-day street and gallery art, visual

artists have been actively engaging to take space in the popular imagination and proclaim that their stories, identities, and histories matter.

The Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s was a watershed moment in African American cultural history, with the emergence of a new Black consciousness through art, music, literature, and performance. Artists like Aaron Douglas and Archibald Motley used their art to assert Black identity against the negative stereotyping of Black individuals by mainstream culture. Through commanding visual iconography, they celebrated the richness of African heritage, Afro-American culture, and Black people's resolve amidst systemic racism.

Aaron Douglas, commonly known as the "father of African American art," created paintings that harmonized African motifs with modernist styles in an attempt to establish a distinct visual vocabulary for African American culture distinct from both European traditions of art and racist portrayals. His presently famous murals, such as those in the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library, tried to show the history and potential of African Americans, depicting themes of empowerment, pride, and cultural strength. As Douglas himself wrote, "I believed that it was necessary for me to form some artistic relationship to the long heritage of the African race" (Douglas, 1929, p. 84). Therefore, the Harlem Renaissance was an early period when art was a powerful act of cultural recovery and resistance.

Artists like Kehinde Wiley and Titus Kaphar today continue to challenge the hegemony of Eurocentric visual culture and assert African American identity. Wiley is renowned for changing the classic Western portraiture by placing Black subjects in the monumental, historical positions that were hitherto reserved for white aristocrats and powerful figures in European paintings. In his best-selling series "Portraits of Power," Wiley reinvents the portrait of kings, queens, and generals by presenting Black men and women in these positions of power. His work resists the historical erasure of Black bodies from such places and resists the long cultural heritage of Black identity marginalization in the art world.

Wiley's *Equestrian Portrait of King Philip II* (2012), for example, reimagines the traditional equestrian portrait by placing a Black man in the dignity and power position that traditionally has been held by white kings. As Wiley himself has stated, his artwork is intended to "reclaim

the space of the Western art canon that has excluded the Black body" (Wiley, 2014). His paintings are thus not merely pictures but acts of resistance, reclaiming images of power that have long been stolen from Black people.

Titus Kaphar, another influential current artist, also challenges the ways in which historical representation has shaped societal view of race and identity. In works like *Shifting the Gaze* (2014), Kaphar recontextualizes and reimagines traditional white historical portraits, combining elements of African American history and daily life into the paintings. By physically cutting, rearranging, and distorting these portraits, Kaphar makes visible the exclusivist tendencies of canonical art historical narratives and invites the viewer to confront the violent histories that those portraits typically cover up. Kaphar's paintings are directly counter to the traditional art historical canon and a reminder of how visual culture has been manipulated historically to legitimize the superiority of one race over others.

Both the practice of Wiley and Kaphar, and that of many other contemporary artists, constitutes a broader movement in which visual art is a tool for empowerment and resistance. Such practice enables artists to create counter-histories that complicate the established, often singular narratives of American history. Through the reconfiguration of historical memory and the recuperation of lost or displaced identities, they render the experiences and contributions of marginal communities visible and recovered from dominant cultural discourses.

As art historian Sarah Lewis posits, "The presence of Black bodies in art challenges the visual status quo and asserts that our humanity, not only our history, is worth being seen and recognized" (Lewis, 2014, p. 29). By positioning Black bodies in the arenas of power and beauty that have long been claimed by white bodies, artists like Wiley and Kaphar are not merely rewriting the past; they are introducing new ways of thinking about the future and the present, and demanding that American culture envision a bigger and more expansive vision.

Moreover, these art practices are not only intended to critique and resist but also to present an aesthetic vision of empowerment. Through the medium of art, marginalized communities can define their identity with dignity, beauty, and power, recovering their rightful place in American culture. By their intervention of the Western art canon in a manner that both invokes and problematizes its exclusionary practices,

artists like Wiley and Kaphar create spaces of empowerment denied by the dominant visual culture to their respective communities.

The intersection of art and ethnic identity is fertile ground for the remapping of what constitutes American culture. As with literature and the media, visual art does not merely represent cultural attitudes but builds them. Art, especially by the marginalized, becomes a way of envisioning other possibilities for inclusion and integration in culture. The paintings of Kehinde Wiley and Titus Kaphar, for instance, not only critique earlier injustices but offer an opportunity to envision a greater American identity that is inclusive and more diverse, one where every racial and ethnic group is treated as an equal participant in the cultural fabric of the nation.

Therefore, visual art becomes a dynamic and fluid space for the negotiation of American identity. It forces the viewer to confront the past even as it reconceptualizes the future. With their paintings, these artists have redefined what it means to represent a people and reordered the visual terrain of America in ways that demand reflection, dialogue, and transformation.

Collectively, media studies, literature, and visual studies provide a multiperspectival answer to the American paradox of diversity and unity. Although all three forms of cultural production engage with the complexities of ethnic pluralism, each one also constructively counters and refigures the very outlines of American identity. The art practice of artists like Kehinde Wiley and Titus Kaphar is typical of how art can be reclamation and resistance, offering counter-histories that affirm the richness of African American and other marginalized identities but undermine the very foundations of the Eurocentric art canon. By such processes, art becomes an effective force both of individual empowerment and communal reconstruction, serving to build continuously on the definition of being American in an increasingly complex society.

3. Public opinion

3.1. National attitudes toward ethnic diversity and immigration

Public opinion regarding ethnic diversity and immigration has a profound impact on social, cultural, and political policy in the United States. As the nation becomes increasingly diverse, it is essential to

discern how the general public perceives such matters as immigration, multiculturalism, and ethnic identity to facilitate the creation of inclusive policies. Surveys and opinion polls, particularly those conducted by organizations like the Pew Research Center and Gallup, are valuable sources of data on such attitudes. As a Pew Research Center survey (2020) reports, while an overwhelming majority of Americans express that they support diversity and recognize that immigration strengthens the nation, there is nonetheless an identifiable division of public opinion regarding its economic and cultural influence. Specifically, even as most Americans believe immigration makes the country stronger, a large majority also report being worried about the potential economic burden of immigration, the cultural integration of immigrants, and what becomes of traditional American values (Pew Research Center, 2020, p. 12).

This ambivalence in public opinion points to what is often referred to as the "American paradox." The United States is a nation of immigrants, yet this founding reality coexists with an historical and ongoing opposition to the complete incorporation of ethnic minorities into the political community. Even as America prides itself as a "nation of immigrants," it is also beset by traditions of exclusion, institutionalized discrimination, and a reluctance to fully embrace newcomers if their cultural practices are perceived to conflict with those of the mainstream culture (Alba & Nee, 2003). As Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003) argue, the tension between national unity and ethnic diversity lies at the center of American society's shifting relationship with immigration. Immigrants, in Alba and Nee's reckoning, contribute to the nation's enrichment through their cultural diversity but, simultaneously, are driven towards integrating into a mainstream cultural identity that has the tendency to sideline the particularistic cultural expressions of the immigrants (p. 87).

In the meantime, racial and ethnic stereotypes continue to fuel ethnic diversity tensions. African Americans, for one, are represented in media and popular discourses through negative stereotypes of crime and welfare dependency. As scholars like Michelle Alexander (2010) have pointed out, the criminal justice system has played a fundamental role in building these attitudes, targeting disproportionately African Americans and instilling a long-term stigma that affects how they are viewed by the broader society. On the other hand, Latinos are depicted as a burden to

social services, with fears of "illegal immigration" driving xenophobic discourse that paints entire communities as economically draining (Cisneros, 2015, p. 56). Even the "model minority" label that has become affixed to Asian Americans, while seemingly flattering, also works to exclude these communities. By representing Asian Americans as uniformly hardworking and successful, this stereotype erases the diversity of their experiences, ignoring the struggles of working-class Asian immigrants and the discrimination that they face (Lee, 2015, p. 102).

The persistence of these sorts of stereotypes entrenches boundaries and renders it increasingly challenging to build an inclusively national identity. While some Americans view immigrants as a threat to cultural uniformity, others welcome the enrichment that they bring. These conflicting views point to the broader contradictions of American identity itself, on one hand embracing pluralism and cultural diversity as foundations of the nation's identity, and on the other, fearing the potential undermining of what is "true" American culture. This contradiction is not just expressed in public debate but also in policy debates concerning immigration reform, citizenship rights, and multiculturalism (Foner, 2000).

Furthermore, the current political climate has also polarized such perceptions, with continued debates regarding "assimilation" versus "integration." The advocates of assimilation claim that immigrants are required to adopt the existing cultural norms in order to achieve complete participation within American society, while critics of this approach emphasize cultural preservation and the right of immigrant communities to maintain their distinctive cultural identities. This continuing conflict highlights the difficulty of reconciling the nation's historic commitment to diversity with demands for conformity to a unifying national identity (Citrin, 2007).

To conclude, public opinion regarding ethnic diversity and immigration in the United States articulates a lingering tension that is at the foundation of the American paradox. While a majority of Americans acknowledge the strengths of diversity and believe that immigration strengthens the nation, the concerns regarding the economic and cultural impacts persist. The persistence of stereotypes, along with the pressure for immigrants to assimilate, further contributes to the difficulty of

creating an inclusive national identity that embraces both diversity and unity.

3.2. Multiculturalism, assimilation, and national identity

The question of where multiculturalism has a place in America's national identity continues to remain sharply contentious, with Americans being divided in their views regarding the role of diversity in shaping the country's identity. According to a 2020 Gallup survey, the general public's opinion is about evenly split between the acceptance of immigrant cultural integration into the dominant American identity and the preference for ethnic distinctiveness (Gallup, 2020). This dichotomy represents the ideological conflict that runs beneath American society, a conflict between embracing diversity and, simultaneously, asserting a uniting national identity. This tension, also referred to as the American paradox, underscores the tension of forging an integrated sense of national identity in a country that is proud of its pluralism but one that is forced to counter the calls to maintain shared values and norms.

Multiculturalists are convinced that the United States' identity is, and should be, diverse. Multiculturalism is the belief that the strength of America lies in its ability to embrace various ethnic, racial, and cultural groups while allowing them to retain their own individual identities. Adherents, including Charles Taylor and Will Kymlicka, posit that group rights in relation to their specificity must be established and accommodated to maintain diversity of cultures and, in their view, the state has an obligation to ensure minority groups do not give up their identity in pursuit of national unity (Kymlicka, 1995, p. 77). Such thinkers view multiculturalism, therefore, not as a threat to social cohesion but as the means to help the country develop a more democratic nature, with room for difference to flourish in and where all may flourish.

Others believe that integrating immigrants into one common national culture is crucial to making society harmonious and continuous. This line of thinking takes its roots from the early 20th-century assimilationist theories, particularly those of researchers such as Robert Park, who emphasized the idea of the "race relations cycle" where immigrant groups eventually take their place in the mainstream American way of life (Park, 1950). Assimilationists argue that it can only be maintained that a cohesive national identity can be preserved when immigrants find themselves integrated into the teachings and customs of

the majority society. Under this paradigm, ethnic distinctiveness comes to be understood most often as an obstacle to full access to the American project.

This ideological conflict reflects more profound fears about American exceptionalism, the belief that America is exceptionally well-placed to construct a model society based on liberty, democracy, and unity. According to David Held and Henrietta Lobo (2003), American exceptionalism has a tendency to run counter to the functional needs of a society to become more diverse. Freedom and oneness are values, they argue, which at times get into collision with the reality of pluralism, in which tolerance and accommodation of difference sometimes dilute the vision for an integrated national identity (Held & Lobo, 2003, p. 24). This tension has organized multicultural and assimilation values disagreements throughout much of American society's history.

Education has a strong impact on attitudes regarding diversity and assimilation. What apparently higher education helps to develop in people, evidence indicates, are tolerance, support for multicultural policies, and a willingness to be ethnically or racially diverse. George Marcus (2002) suggests that education results in empathy and historical consciousness, which are essential to understanding the complexities of multiculturalism. Educated individuals, Marcus argues, will be in a better position to value the strengths of a multi-ethnic society and advocate for policies of inclusion that address the diversity of the country (Marcus, 2002, p. 58). On this point, education can be conceived as a mediating variable in bridging the divide between those who demand assimilation and those who demand multicultural recognition.

The term "multiculturalism vs. assimilation" also carries implications about broader fears about the future of American identity. As the nation becomes more ethnically diverse, questions about what it means to be "American" only become more complex. Is American identity a common civic engagement and set of values, or a shared cultural heritage one must embrace? For others, the answer is assimilation, where American identity is synonymous with a single and fixed set of values that everyone must adhere to. For others, the answer lies in multiculturalism, where American identity is an evolving and developing one, shaped by the contributions of different groups.

Lastly, this tension is reflective of the American paradox, how can a nation built on the ideals of liberty and equality reconcile these

ideals with the needs of ethnic diversity? As the United States grapples with these questions in the years to come, the role of education, public policy, and national discourse will play a critical role in determining the future of its national identity.

3.3. Symbols, patriotism, and the limits of inclusion

The question of national symbols, such as the American flag, the Pledge of Allegiance, and other patriotic rituals, is a revealing lens through which the paradoxes inherent in American attitudes toward ethnic diversity and national unity can be examined. While these symbols are widely interpreted to signify unity, freedom, and patriotism, they also underscore the limits of inclusion for many racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. As these symbols remain at the center of American identity, they have the consequence of inducing contradictory feelings: an overwhelming pride in the country's diversity, along with frustrations about the persistent structural disparities plaguing marginalized communities.

In a 2019 Public Religion Research Institute survey, while 70% of Americans reported being proud of the nation's diversity, a significant 42% held the view that the political institutions had failed to offer actual inclusion (Public Religion Research Institute, 2019). This poll identifies a core paradox: Americans are proud of the multicultural character of their society, yet there is widespread dissatisfaction with the nation's political and social institutions, which are not perceived as meeting expectations in addressing systemic racism, economic inequality, and social exclusion. This strain reflects an historical contradiction between ideals of unity and practices of exclusion.

National symbols, including the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance, are powerful tools of national unity. They are intended to unite Americans under a common set of ideals, including liberty, justice, and democracy. Their meaning, however, is not identical to all people, especially as understood from the vantage point of ethnic and racial minorities. For African Americans, Native Americans, and other traditionally oppressed groups, however, these symbols mean something else, something based on histories of slavery, colonization, and segregation. As historian David Blight (2001) argues, the flag and national rituals have been used historically to legitimate the suppression and exclusion of minority groups, even as they have spread the myth of

American exceptionalism. The Pledge of Allegiance, for example, started out as a means of national unity and patriotism, yet for many people of color, it also can be a pledge of freedom and justice yet to be fulfilled.

This disconnect between national practice and national pride reflects a broader public contradiction in the American experience. On the one hand, the American ethos is that of unity and the conviction that all citizens are joined together in their commitment to democratic principles. On the other hand, there is a continual resistance to structural change that would eliminate the inequities suffered by nonwhite populations. Political theorist Michael Dawson (2001) suggests that this paradox is in a national identity that emphasizes the symbolic ideals of equality and unity but resists systemic change necessary to make the ideals actual for every citizen. Public opinion, in this regard, is not only a reflection of the tension between diversity and unity but also a force that recreates the status quo by narrowing the scope of what inclusion is actually all about. For instance, efforts at expanding affirmative action or reforming criminal justice systems are often met with resistance, even when a majority of Americans report being proud of the nation's diversity.

Also, the public's acceptance of diversity is limited by what they think it is to be "American." As sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset (1990) suggests, American patriotism is strongly based on a set of core values, of which individualism, hard work, and involvement in democracy are among. However, these values are sometimes used to justify exclusionary practices because those who do not belong to mainstream cultural norms are seen as "outsiders" who must prove themselves loyal to the national project. National symbols like the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance are often taken here as symbols of assimilation, indications that groups and individuals must conform to a certain set of cultural norms in order to be fully accepted as part of the American mainstream.

This circumscribes the potential for real inclusion because it equates American identity with a narrow, Eurocentric cultural model, often excluding the experiences of Indigenous, Black, Latino, Asian, and other minority communities. Some of the examples of this tension are the ongoing controversies about where Confederate statues should be placed or the argument surrounding kneeling for the national anthem. While some see these symbols as expressions of historical heritage or free

speech, others see them as symbols of oppression that entrench cleavages in American society.

The tension between symbolic inclusion and systemic exclusion remains a hallmark of American society. While national symbols offer a veneer of unity, they often do little to address the deeply ingrained disparities that continue to affect marginalized communities. In this regard, public opinion about symbols like the flag or the Pledge of Allegiance reflects the broader failures of the American experiment, one that still struggles to reconcile its founding principles with the realities of ethnic diversity and inequality.

Ultimately, such symbols are a cause for pride and also a reminder of business unfinished. They refer to the need for a more inclusive national narrative, one that not only celebrates diversity but actively works to undo the structural inequalities that prevent full participation in the American venture. The continued divisiveness of these symbols is an indication that while the country is one in terms of ideals, it is far from achieving its avowed inclusive and egalitarian society.

Conclusion

The research on ethnic pluralism in the United States presents a deep paradox in the very core of its national identity. The U.S. celebrates being a "melting pot," a nation that proclaims diversity to be a strength, yet from its past and present social dynamics comes to light the tension between cohesion and the struggle to be heard, equal, and included by minority groups. This paradox, following Richard Alba and Victor Nee (2003), summarizes the ever-present tension between assimilation and ethnic particularity affirmation.

Previous theory emphasized assimilation into a single homogeneous American identity, but newer theories like those of Will Kymlicka (1995) and Charles Taylor (1992) focus on the respect for diversity of culture. Multiculturalism, in celebrating differences between cultures, has been criticized, e.g., Frank Furedi's (2007) objection that it leads to fragmentation. The question remains at the heart: how does a nation maintain unity while embracing its diverse heritage?

Cultural works (literature, media, and the visual arts) are powerful tools of resistance against hegemonic narratives. Writers such as Toni Morrison and James Baldwin and artists such as Kehinde Wiley

have reimagined American culture by resisting the silencing of subaltern voices and luxuriating in cultural survival. They resist erasure, offering counter-histories that reconstitute national belonging.

Public opinion exhibits a chronic and subtle tension between multicultural values and national unity imperatives. Work by Gallup and the Pew Research Center (2020) illustrates this paradox: while most Americans report that they favor cultural diversity, they also expect immigrants and minority groups to assimilate into a mainstream national identity. This paradox echoes American exceptionalism's ideological limitations in asserting inclusiveness while often opposing the cultural and structural change that genuine pluralism demands. As theorists like David Held (2006) and Henrietta Lobo (2013) argue, the idealized American metanarrative of unity is habitually in tension with the lived realities of ethnic pluralism.

National symbols (such as the flag and the Pledge of Allegiance) also complicate the landscape. Intended to be instruments of unity, they instead more regularly function as gatekeepers of cultural legitimacy, omitting communities whose identities and experiences are outside of mainstream discourses. As Michael Dawson (2001) suggests, the symbols do not regularly include the perspectives and experiences of historically marginalized communities within the full promise of American democracy. Public pride in diversity, therefore, is also met with aggravation over persistent systemic inequalities, as seen in findings from the Public Religion Research Institute (2019).

This research highlights that contemporary discussions of ethnic pluralism are not merely scholarly esotericisms, they are instruments for diagnosing and treating the sociopolitical rifts of the nation. The value of this research lies in its explanation of how identity, power, and belonging are negotiated within public discourse and cultural texts, and how these negotiations create both policy and everyday life. In its deployment of intersectionality and cultural relativism, the project provides a model for political and cultural practices that are more inclusive of the diversity of American society.

Lastly, the United States must reconcile its own contradictions: to achieve unity and diversity, it must topple institutionalized racism,

reduce economic inequality, and affirm the cultural legitimacy of each community. Not only is this a moral imperative but a strategic one as well for the establishment of an equal and durable democracy. As Cornel West (1993) has reminded us, the search for identity must be inseparable from the search for justice. Giving and struggling with these facts enables the U.S. to imagine national identity not as an ideal essentialized, but instead as a continual and inclusive project, one in which difference is not threat, but a central source of common strength.

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