

Introduction

Norman R. Yetman

In a grandiloquent essay published in February 1941—ten months before the Japanese attack on the island outpost of Pearl Harbor—Henry Luce, head of the Time-Life publishing empire, provided one of the most provocative, enduring, and widely quoted characterizations of American society in the twentieth century: “The twentieth century is the American Century.” Luce celebrated the rise of the United States to a position of economic, political, cultural, and military dominance in world affairs, but he also idealistically invoked America as the “sanctuary of the ideals of civilization” and called upon Americans to “spread throughout the world . . . the ideals of Freedom and Justice . . . [with] joy and gladness and vigor and enthusiasm” (Luce 1941, 65).

However, as we look back upon the “American century,” the prescient words of W. E. B. Du Bois, uttered at the beginning of the century, provide a contrasting, less optimistic, but equally appropriate epitaph: “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America, and the islands of the sea” (Du Bois 1903/1986, 372).

When Luce anointed the twentieth century as “The American Century” in 1941, he certainly was not referring to the issues of racial and ethnic diversity that Du Bois had identified—indeed, he appears to have been oblivious to them. Thus is it more than a little ironic that the two largest and most ethnically diverse

waves of immigration in American history—or in the history of *any* nation, for that matter—took place at the beginning and at the end of the twentieth century, thus suggesting how crucial issues of multiculturalism are to the very definition and meaning of what it means to be American.

The most recent immigrant wave—drawn primarily from Latin America, Asia, and the Caribbean—has led to the development of a much more genuinely multiracial, multicultural, cosmopolitan society than ever before in the nation's history. The impact of the most recent wave of immigration in creating what Ben Wattenberg (1991) has characterized as the “first universal nation” has been visibly apparent in the American studies movement, which in both its membership and in its substantive and theoretical foci have reflected and been deeply engaged—indeed, one might argue, defined—by issues of multiculturalism that this racial and ethnic transformation has elicited.

However, the primary focus of the intense examination of race and ethnicity that has characterized American studies during the past three decades has been almost exclusively on the *continental* United States—especially on those states, such as California, Florida, Texas, and New York—that have experienced the most dramatic population shifts. Seldom do discussions of the meaning of *American* multiculturalism extend beyond the 48 contiguous states on the mainland, except when the populations of Hawai'i, Alaska, Puerto Rico, and Pacific Island territories are included in aggregate population figures. American studies scholars have seldom fully heeded Du Bois' prescient call to examine the “problem of the color line” not only in Asia, Africa, and America, but also in “the islands of the sea.”

This special issue of *American Studies* belatedly focuses on Hawai'i—the single U.S. state that would fulfill Du Bois' mandate. Having experienced a unique history, one that today continues to undergird and inform economic divisions and political debate, Hawai'i is today characterized by ethnic diversity and intermarriage so extensive that it has frequently been portrayed as a multicultural laboratory, a “rainbow,” “the Melting Pot of the Pacific.” 2000 U.S. census data show Hawai'i with the lowest (23 percent) percentage of the population that is white; the highest percentage (42 percent) that is Asian; and the highest percentage (21 percent) reporting ancestry of two or more races (US. Bureau of the Census 2005). Most important, nearly one-tenth (9.4 percent) of Hawaiian residents claimed an indigenous Hawaiian identity, and their continued presence and their legal claims to the islands' resources have shaped discourse not only over issues of ethnic identity in the islands but also about the very nature of Hawaiian “Americanness.” The articles in this special issue provide a context for comprehending more adequately the distinctive nature of Hawaiian society and culture.

The inspiration for this special issue grew out of a stimulating mini-conference in 2000 on Hawai'i at Hawai'i Pacific University that was organized by Marilyn Halter and sponsored by Boston University, at which earlier drafts of some of the papers published here were discussed.

References

- W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Greenwich, Conn: Fawcett, 1903/1986).
- Henry R. Luce, "The American Century," *Life*. February 17, 1941.
- U.S. Census Bureau, "Hawaii Quick Facts," <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/15000.html>.
- Ben J. Wattenberg, *The First Universal Nation* (New York: Free Press, 1991).