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# MODERN AMERICAN CULTURE

# EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY



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1900	William McKinley elected for a second term. One-dollar
	Brownie camera on sale.
1901	McKinley assassinated, Theodore Roosevelt assumes
	the Presidency.
1903	Panama grants canal rights to the United States. Henry
	Ford sells first Model A for 850 dollars. Boston beats
	Pittsburgh in the first Baseball World Series. Wright
	Brothers aircraft makes twelve-second flight. W. E. B.
	DuBois writes The Souls of Black Folk.
1904	Theodore Roosevelt re-elected. Steerage fare from
	Europe to America 10 dollars.
1905	W. E. B. DuBois participates in the Niagara Movement.
	William Benjamin Smith writes The Color Line.
1906	San Francisco School Board segregates Asian schoolchil-
	dren. San Francisco earthquake.
1908	Race riots in Springfield, Illinois. William Howard Taft
	elected. First Ford Model T produced.
1909	Robert Edwin Peary reaches North Pole.
1910	NAACP founded.
1911	Standard Oil broken up.
1912	Woodrow Wilson elected. Sinking of Titanic.
1913	Sixteenth Amendments allows income tax.
1914	First World War begins in Europe. Panama Canal opens.
1915	Birth of a Nation released. Death of Booker
	T. Washington. Sinking of the Lusitania.
1916	Wilson re-elected.
1917	United States enters First World War. Russian Revolu-
	tion begins.
1918	Wilson's fourteen-points peace plan.

1919	May Day Bombing and the Red Scare. Eighteenth Amendment authorizes prohibition of alcohol.
1920	Majority of Americans now live in cities. Nineteenth
1920	Amendment gives votes to women. Warren G. Harding
	elected.
1921	Sacco and Vanzetti convicted of murder.
1922	Sinclair Lewis's Babbitt published.
1923	Calvin Coolidge assumes the Presidency following the
	death of Harding. Supreme Court rules on Adkins v.
	Childrens' Hospital. W. G. Cash writes The Mind of the
	South.
1924	Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue released.
1925	Calvin Coolidge declares that "the business of America
	is business."
1926	Ernest Hemingway publishes The Sun Also Rises.
1927	Lindbergh flies Atlantic.
1929	Young Plan reduces German reparations. Wall Street
	crashes and Great Depression begins.
1930	US population 122 million. Grant Wood paints Ameri-
	can Gothic.
1931	Scottsboro Boys case in Alabama. Empire State Building
	opens.
1932	Franklyn Delano Roosevelt elected. New Deal initiated.
1933	Agricultural Adjustment Act. National Industrial Recov-
	ery Act (N.I.R.A.). Tennessee Valley Authority. United
	States recognizes USSR.
1934	Huey P. Long starts Share Our Wealth Society. Bonnie
	and Clyde killed.
1935	The "Dust Bowl." Huey Long assassinated. N.I.R.A
	ruled unconstitutional.
1936	F. Roosevelt re-elected. Agricultural Adjustment Act
	ruled unconstitutional. Failure of Roosevelt's "Court
	Packing" plan to increase size of Supreme Court.
1937	Hindenburg explodes.
1939	Outbreak of Second World War. New York World's Fair.
	John Steinbeck publishes The Grapes of Wrath.
1940	F. Roosevelt re-elected. Ernest Hemingway publishes For
70.77	Whom the Bell Tolls.
1941	Pearl Harbour. United States joins Second World War.
	Lend-Lease Act. Executive Order 8802 prevents racial
	discrimination in defense industry.

1942	Internment of Japanese Americans. Manhattan Project to develop atom bomb begins. Congress of Racial Equality. Battle of Midway founded.
1943	Race riots in more than forty-five cities. Rodgers and Hammerstein's <i>Oklahoma</i> .
1944	D-Day landings. Gunnar Myrdal writes <i>An American Dilemma</i> . F. Roosevelt wins fourth term.
1945	Death of F. Roosevelt. Harry S. Truman becomes President. Atom bombs dropped at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. UN Charter signed.
1946	George Kennan's "Long Telegram," an analysis of the Soviet Union. Churchill delivers "Iron Curtain" speech. G. I. Bill passed. Baby boom begins. Dr. Spock's <i>Baby and Child Care</i> published. Truman establishes President's Committee on Civil Rights.
1947	Establishment of Truman Doctrine, which promises support for countries threatened by communism. Marshall Plan established to rebuild European economies. HUAC hearings, including the "Hollywood 10." Construction begins on mass-produced "Levittowns." Jackie Robinson breaks baseball's color line. Chuck Yeager breaks sound barrier.
1948	The United States recognizes Israel. Berlin airlift. Executive orders desegregate armed forces and federal government.
1949	NATO founded. Russia explodes first Soviet A-bomb. Truman re-elected. Mao Tse Tung wins power in China. Arthur Miller stages <i>Death of a Salesman</i> .
1950	Korean War begins. Senator Joseph McCarthy makes first accusations.
1951	Truman dismisses General MacArthur.
1952	Hydrogen bomb tested. Dwight D. Eisenhower elected.
1953	Korean War ends. Death of Stalin. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg executed for espionage. <i>Playboy</i> magazine launched.
1954	Supreme Court rules on Brown v. Board of Education. Army–McCarthy hearings begin. Senate condemns McCarthy.
1955	Warsaw Pact established. G. L. Mehta – Indian Ambassador – refused service in restaurant. Rise of White Citizens' Councils. Montgomery bus boycott.

1956	Uprising crushed in Hungary. Launch of Interstate system. Suez crisis. Eisenhower re-elected. First appearance of Elvis Presley. <i>Invasion of the Bodysnatchers</i> released in cinemas.
1957	Sputnik launched. Martin Luther King elected leader of Southern Christian Leadership Conference. Little Rock crisis as Governor Orval Faubus attempts to prevent the desegregation of Central High School. Civil Rights Act.
1958	NASA created. US troops deployed to Lebanon.
1959	Castro comes to power in Cuba.
1960	Greensboro sit-ins. John F. Kennedy elected. Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee created. Birth- control pill becomes available. Freedom rides.
1961	Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba.
1962	Cuban missile crisis. Port Huron statement of Students for a Democratic Society. John Glenn orbits Earth in Friendship Seven.
1963	Kennedy assassinated. Lyndon Johnson becomes President. March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom.
1964	China explodes first A-bomb. Civil Rights Act. Gulf of Tonkin resolution following a supposed attack on the American destroyer <i>Maddox</i> by Vietnamese forces. Johnson elected. First American appearance of the Beatles.
1965	Johnson sets out plan for "Great Society." Watts Riot Voting Rights Act. Operation Rolling Thunder and troop escalation in Vietnam. Malcolm X assassinated.
1966	Black Power and Black Panthers appear. National Organization for Women established. Fulbright hearings on Vietnam.
1967	Summer of Love in Haight-Ashbury, San Francisco. Race riots in Newark, Detroit, and over 125 other cities.
1968	Tet Offensive. Martin Luther King assassinated. Robert Kennedy assassinated. Antiwar protests. Richard Nixon elected.
1969	Woodstock festival. Apollo 11 lands on Moon. Indian occupation of Alcatraz. Nixon administration begins affirmative action plan. My Lai massacre.
1970	Invasion of Cambodia. Kent State and Jackson State shootings.
1971	Pentagon Papers.

1972	Nixon visits China and Soviet Union. Watergate break-
	in.
1973	Paris agreement ends US involvement in Vietnam. Su-
	preme Court rules on Roe v. Wade, permitting abortion.
	Vice-President Spiro Agnew resigns, Gerald M. Ford
	becomes Vice-President.
1974	Nixon resigns, Ford becomes President.
1975	Unemployment hits 8.5 percent. Indian Self-Determin-
	ation and Education Assistance Act. Last Americans
	leave Saigon.
1976	Jimmy Carter elected.
1977	Elvis Presley dies.
1978	Supreme Court rules on Regents of the University of
	California v. Bakke: fixed racial quotas declared uncon-
	stitutional. Proposition 13 places cap on property taxes
	in California.
1979	Three Mile Island disaster at nuclear power plant. Camp
	David accords between Israel and Egypt. American hos-
	tages taken in Iran. Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
1980	Ronald Reagan elected. Iranian hostages released.
1981	AIDS first noted in US. Interest rates rise to 21.5 percent.
	"Reaganomics" approved by Congress.
1982	Unemployment reaches 10 percent – highest since Great
	Depression. Ratification of ERA fails.
1983	Strategic Defense Initiative proposes a missile defense
	system. US Marines killed in Lebanon. United States
	invades Grenada.
1984	American aid to Contras in Nicaragua. Economic
	recovery. Reagan re-elected. Mikhail Gorbachev begins
Open Co.	reform.
1986	Iran-Contra scandal (in which the proceeds of arms sold
	to Iran were used to finance the right-wing Contra guer-
_	illas in Nicaragua). Space shuttle Challenger explodes.
1987	Palestinian Intifada begins.
1988	George Bush Sr. elected.
1989	Berlin Wall falls. United States invades Panama.
1990	Collapse of communist regimes. Iraq invades Kuwait.
1991	Gulf War begins. USSR dissolves. Pan-American World
	Airways ceases flying.

1992	Riots in Los Angeles after verdict in Rodney King trial. Troops sent to Somalia. William Jefferson Clinton
	elected.
1993	Congress approves North American Free Trade Agreement. US Marines killed in Somalia, United States withdraws.
1004	
1994	Republicans claim majorities in House and Senate. Genocide begins in Rwanda. United States intervenes in
	Haiti.
1005	Oklahoma City bombing.
1995	Welfare Reform bill. Clinton re-elected.
1996	House votes to impeach Clinton.
1998	
1999	Senate acquits Clinton. NATO airstrikes in Kosovo.
	Anti-globalization protests at World Trade Organization
	meeting in Seattle.
2000	Longest economic expansion in nation's history. Su-
	preme Court rules in favour of George W. Bush in dis-
	puted election.
2001	September 11 attacks on the twin towers of the World
	Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon. Patriot
	Act. Enron scandal. United States intervenes in Afghani-
	stan, Taliban regime falls.
2003	United States invades Iraq.
2004	George W. Bush re-elected.
2005	Retirement of Sandra Day O'Connor, first female Su-
	preme Court Justice. Death of Chief Justice Rehnquist.
	New Orleans flooded as a result of Hurricane Katrina.
	Continuing occupation of Iraq.

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### $\mathbf{I}$

#### CHRISTOPHER BIGSBY

# Introduction: What, then, is the American?

Every year, on March 22, Riverside, Iowa, celebrates an event that has not yet happened and never will. It is the place and date designated for the birth of Captain James Tiberius Kirk, Captain of the Star Ship Enterprise. America has so successfully colonized the future that it has mastered the art of prospective nostalgia. Its natural tense is the future perfect. It looks forward to a time when something will have happened. It is a place, too, where fact and fiction, myth and reality dance a curious gavotte. It is a society born out of its own imaginings.

There are those who believe they can remember alternative past lives. The science fiction writer Philip K. Dick claimed to remember a different present life. In his case it may have had something to do with amphetamines, but in fact we do inhabit different and parallel presents. The 1920s constituted the jazz age, except for those who tapped their feet to different rhythms. The 1960s were about drugs and rock and roll, except for the majority for whom they were not. Thoreau once wrote of his wriggling his toes in the mud of Walden Pond in search of the rock beneath. The search for a secure foundation is understandable but cannot always be satisfied. Nineteenth-century American writers dealt in symbols for a reason. Unlike the metaphor, the symbol suggested a field of meaning, an ambiguity which in the end perhaps could more truthfully capture a world in flux, desperate for clear definitions yet aware that in stasis lay a denial of, rather than a route to, meaning in a society wedded to the idea of possibility, always coming into being and never fixed.

Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* begins in a curious way. A late consumptive usher to a grammar school offers an etymology and a sub-sub librarian supplies a series of abstracts which together identify what is described as a "veritable gospel cetology," a seemingly comprehensive account of whales, their types, weight, size, reproductive habits. Detail after detail is offered as if thereby to reveal an undeniable truth. It is a mock taxonomy or, as Melville suggests, "a glancing bird's eye view." For what follows is a novel

Ι

with the ultimate in floating signifiers, the great white whale that is Moby Dick, a screen onto which the characters project their own meanings in a novel in which identity is problematic. Even the narrator coyly refuses to define who he might be, offering instead a name which identifies him with an ancestor of twelve tribes but a name which also means "outcast." "Call me Ishmael," he suggests, as if mocking the desire for a true self and this in a novel about the wish to pin down, harpoon a singular meaning. Here is Melville's allegory for the similar desire to stabilize America, identify what it might be and thereby define its citizens.

James Fenimore Cooper, another chonicler of an emerging country, created a protagonist who at one moment was the prosaic Natty Bumppo, then Long Rife, Leatherstocking, Hawkeye. Only the British soldiers in those novels, which track back near to the beginning of the American experience, were manifestly who they seemed. The American was legion. At the same time Nathaniel Hawthorne was creating his own fable of an ambiguous identity in *The Scarlet Letter*, in which the letter A, inscribed on the breast of Hester Prynne, offered as a definition by those intent to insist upon a singular meaning, is transformed by experience, this being the gift offered by a culture in which transformation is the essence. Call me Chillingworth, says her cold-hearted husband, implying that a name is no more than a convenience, as she suggests to her fearful lover that he could change his name and so liberate himself from his own past, liberation from the past being a national imperative.

At one moment America was to be self-evident fact; at another its virtue lay in its resolute refusal of definition. For Henry Steal Commager, writing in 1950, "Over a period of two and a half centuries, marked by such adventures as few other people had known, Americans had created an American character and formulated an American philosophy." However, "that character all but eludes description and that philosophy definition" even if "both were unmistakable."<sup>2</sup>

This was the existential space where existence preceded essence and yet essence was in a curious way assumed. No one knew what America would become and yet everyone assumed they knew it for what it was. America was a blank sheet on which her identity was yet to be inscribed. It was also a new Eden, undefined, yet one whose parameters were known because delineated in myth. It was simultaneously what it was and what it would become. It was the future and the past in the same moment.

To travel west was to travel back in time toward a primitive encounter with nature and to travel forward into a new land of possibility. The writers knew early that the essence of the country lay in a resistance to definition, hence their preference for symbols rather than metaphor. It was a kaleidoscope of

shifting possibilities. At the same time the root meaning of the word "symbol" is "thrown together", so that there is the potential for this centripetal urge to terraform a country, improvise it into being, and improvisation has always been an American virtue and necessity. The ache to be clear about national identity and destiny was clear in encomiums to what did not in truth yet exist but along with this went a perception that this was a culture endlessly wedded to becoming, that being its special gift to the world, charged with a kinetic energy you could feel from across the oceans of the world but which could never discharge completely or it would lose its force.

In 2004, Bruce Springsteen, in explaining his reluctant decision to involve himself in that year's presidential election, remarked that in the aftermath of 9/11 "I felt the country's unity." He could not, though, "remember anything quite like it." Nor did the feeling last. The election, he suggested, was essentially about "who we are, what we stand for," though what that "who" and "what" might be was clearly no more evident to him than to those who had sung America a century and a half before, a Walt Whitman, say, who celebrated heterogeneity in what was offered as a national epic in which the narrative voice was an I that contained multitudes. "Why is it," Springsteen asked,

that the wealthiest nation in the world finds it so hard to keep its promise and faith with its weakest citizens? Why do we continue to find it so difficult to see beyond the veil of race? How do we conduct ourselves during difficult times without killing the things we hold dear? Why does the fulfilment of our promise as a people always seem to be just within grasp yet for ever out of reach?

He may have been "Born in the USA" but the question remained, what is this thing, the USA?<sup>3</sup> That question has echoed down the corridors of American consciousness.

At 8.46 a.m. on September 11, 2001, a Boeing 767 American Airlines plane flying from Boston to Los Angeles, carrying eighty-one passengers and eleven crew, crashed into the North Tower of the World Trade Center in Manhattan. Seventeen minutes later, another 767, a United Airlines flight carrying fifty-six passengers and nine crew, also en route from Boston to Los Angeles, crashed into the South Tower. At 10.05 the South Tower collapsed, followed, twenty-three minutes later, by the North. In just one hour and forty-two minutes, 2,752 people died.

Those who had begun their day with a hurried kiss of farewell, thinking of no more than what they must do and their destinations, found this to be their last day on earth, never knowing why this should be so or that this