

SOUL
OF
America

250
years
Through
★BOOKS★



Preface

My name is Larnell Gross, and I made this collage to recognize America's 250-year journey as a shared tale. America has never been shaped by one voice or experience. It's built on the lives, labor, creativity, and perseverance of many communities.

This collage uses eleven University of Michigan Press works to highlight how varied populations have shaped the nation's identity over time. Native American spiritual and community ideals show how land, belief, and existence were intertwined. African American music and culture demonstrate how creativity became a tool for survival and resistance. Women's suffrage shows how collective effort changed democracy. How the automobile allowed the connections of people from all different backgrounds. Jewish, Arab, and Asian American histories show how belonging, memory, and culture work together to form American identity. New identity movements and trans Americans show how selfhood is reinvented. These stories illuminate America's past, present, and future.

In early winter 2025, I used the University of Michigan Press archives, my honors thesis research, and my visual design talents to start this project. An academic investigation became a creative journey that combined history, art, and storytelling to reflect the nation's complexity. Each page shows that America's identity has always been shaped by those who demanded to be seen, heard, and respected.

This collage honors the people who founded this country through endurance, expression, and change and invites us to consider how their stories shape us. America is beautiful because of its layers, like a collage. These pieces of culture, belief, hardship, and hope make a nation still becoming what it promised 250 years ago.

Thomas Jefferson, the Father of the Declaration of Independence

When we speak of the Declaration of Independence, we often dwell on the grand, familiar pillars of Life and Liberty. These are noble and essential, yet we frequently overlook the third promise that Thomas Jefferson placed beside them: the Pursuit of Happiness. This phrase is more than a poetic ornament; it speaks to the heart of what it means to live in a democracy today. Even with Jefferson's complicated past, his writings are still the guiding thread of this collage, where culture, community, and diversity are woven together to tell a broader story of American identity and the many people who have struggled to claim that promise today. The pursuit of happiness is not about fleeting pleasures. It is about living fully, nurturing one's best qualities, and finding meaning in daily life. Culture becomes one of the primary ways this pursuit is expressed through music, theater, storytelling, and shared traditions, allowing individuals to see themselves reflected in the world around them.

Community

Community is the beginning of the pursuit of happiness. Traditions are passed down, languages are spoken, and people build meaning together. Native Americans, African Americans, immigrants, women, and LGBTQ+ people developed care and resistance networks that combatted exclusion during times of political and economic hardship in America.

Opportunity

Opportunity helps that community grow. Culture becomes central to national life when education, political participation, artistic platforms, and economic mobility increase. The vote, stage, page, and road all become platforms for fresh voices. Opportunity fosters difference, converting individual brilliance into communal advancement.

Creativity

Community and opportunity are shown through creativity. Spirituals that became soul music, local theaters that presented immigrant experiences, visual work that reclaims identity, and cultural innovations that redefine what it means to be American are all manifestations of such creativity.



Native American





**GREAT LAKES INDIAN
ACCOMMODATION RESISTANCE DURING
THE EARLY RESERVATION YEARS,
1850-1900**

Edmund Jefferson Danziger, Jr.



**Great Lakes Indian Accommodation and Resistance
during the Early Reservation Years, 1850–1900**

by Edmund Jefferson Danziger, Jr.
University of Michigan Press, 2009

Native American Traditions

“Men hunted and fished; they fashioned tools and weapons; they politicked and made war. Equally important and respected was the work performed by girls and women: preparing food and other products from game and fish, farming, collecting wild plants, and various household tasks. Females exerted great influence in all village matters, including politics and diplomacy.” (3)





Although Native American society cannot be reduced to a single, uniform identity, the author argues that many Indigenous communities shared interconnected systems of kinship, labor, and spirituality that emphasized balance rather than rigid hierarchy. Rejecting both an uncritical romanticization and a presentist interpretation of Indigenous life, the analysis highlights how social organization was rooted in communal responsibility and ecological relationships. Kinship extended beyond the nuclear family to include expansive networks formed through blood, marriage, and adoption, reinforcing collective support. Labor was divided by gender, yet women's work was not subordinate; it was central to economic stability and social continuity. Through agriculture, food production, and resource management, women exerted significant influence within villages, including in political and diplomatic affairs. This structure challenges later European assumptions about authority and power, revealing Indigenous governance as participatory, cooperative, and grounded in mutual respect.





“Spirituality was integral to everyday life and guided all aspects of behavior, from village organization to marriage and burial customs. Belief that their homeland was a sacred gift from the Creator required Indians—if they would prosper—to be respectful stewards of the waters and woods.” (157)





Native American societies demonstrate how culture serves as a foundation for survival and expression. Their legacy reminds us that America's identity was shaped long before nationhood.

Women's Suffrage



A WOMAN'S CAMPAIGNING FOR CONGRESS PLACE IS IN IN THE FEMINIST ERA THE HOUSE



BARBARA C. BURRELL

MICHIGAN

A Woman's Place Is in the House Campaigning for Congress in the Feminist Era

by Barbara Burrell

University of Michigan Press, 1994



“In the past, women were socialized not to think of themselves as public citizens and were discouraged, if not prevented, from entering educational and occupational realms that would lead to political careers. It took fifty years of campaigning just to obtain suffrage for women and nearly another fifty years for women to vote in equal percentages as men. The first women’s movement in the United States, from 1848 to 1920, fought to gain women the right to vote . . .



Women's enfranchisement reshaped the nation's political priorities by widening the scope of issues considered worthy of legislative attention. Once women gained access to the ballot, concerns such as child labor, public health, and workplace equity entered mainstream political discourse with new force. This development illustrates the broader argument that expanding citizenship alters not only who participates in democracy but also what democracy chooses to confront. In this sense, the ballot functioned as a transformative instrument, redirecting national focus toward previously marginalized social problems and redefining the contours of public responsibility.





Second-Wave Feminism

Unlike earlier struggles that focused primarily on access, such as suffrage and legal recognition, the feminism of the 1960s re-framed political participation itself. Women were no longer positioned merely as constituents within existing power structures, but as legitimate holders of authority. The demand was not only for representation, but for leadership: the right to shape policy, institutions, and national direction from within. In this way, the movement challenged the assumption that political power was inherently masculine and exposed how democratic systems could remain exclusionary even after formal rights were granted.



Women's organizing demonstrated how shared struggle transforms national values. By claiming political space, women expanded the meaning of citizenship and reinforced the idea that American democracy is not fixed, but constantly renewed by those who demand inclusion.

Women in the Workplace

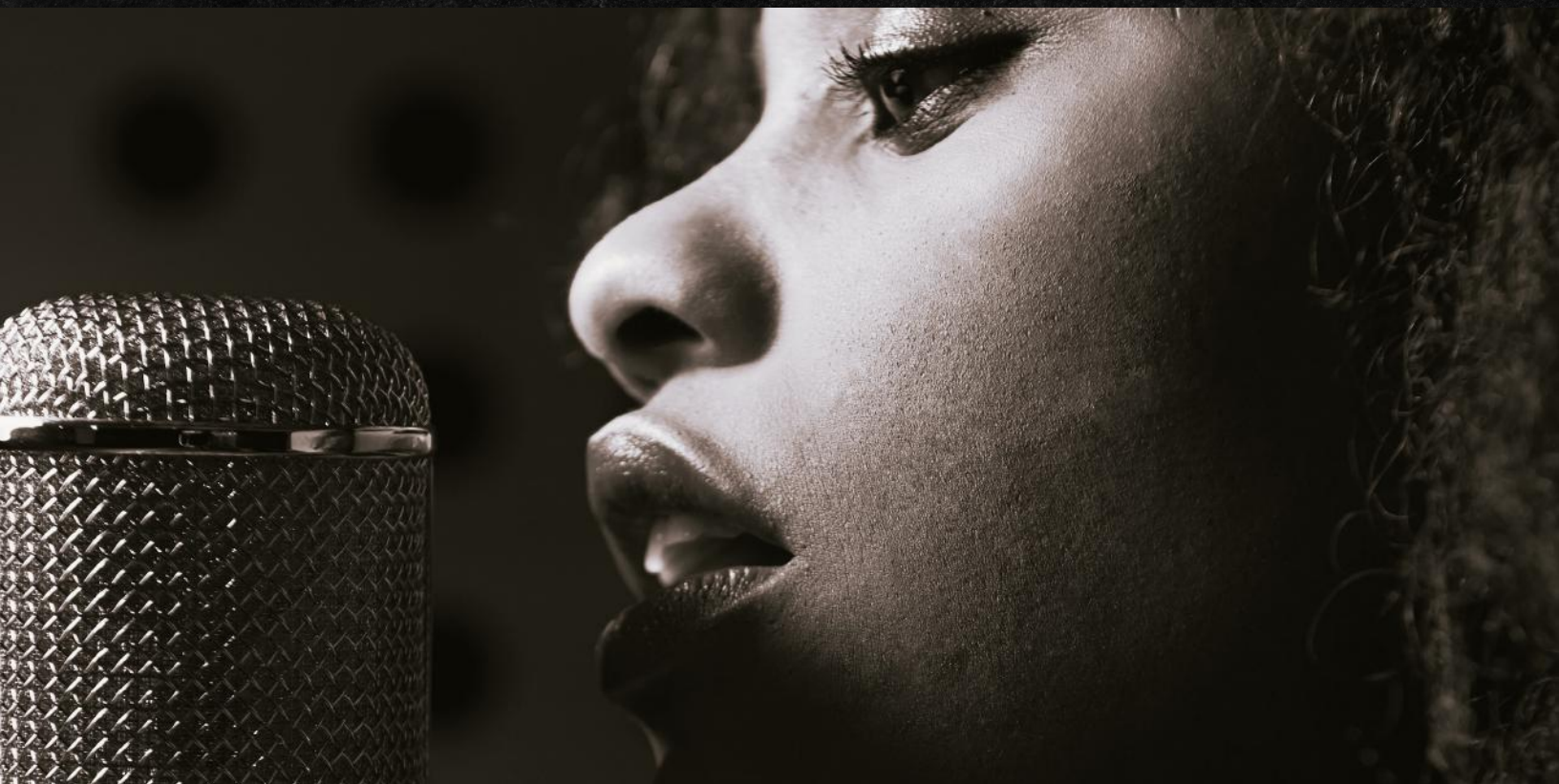


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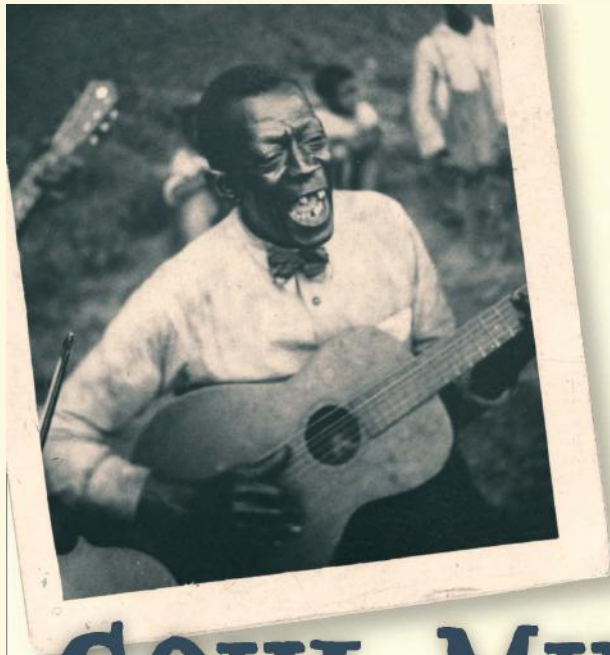


Soul Music



Blues





SOUL MUSIC

Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop
from Plato to Motown

Joel Rudinow



Soul Music
Tracking the Spiritual Roots of Pop from Plato to
Motown
by Joel Rudinow
University of Michigan Press, 2010

SOUL MUSIC

Vinyl



“The word soul found its way into the discourse of American popular culture initially through music and spread out from there.” (9)



Spiritual Roots

African American musical traditions served as a primary gateway for broader cultural language in the United States. The concept of “soul” entered popular discourse not through formal philosophy or politics, but through sound, performance, and communal expression. Music functioned as both a cultural archive and a living language, carrying emotional depth, historical memory, and spiritual meaning. As the term spread beyond music into wider American culture, it retained its roots in Black experience while also being reshaped by mainstream usage.

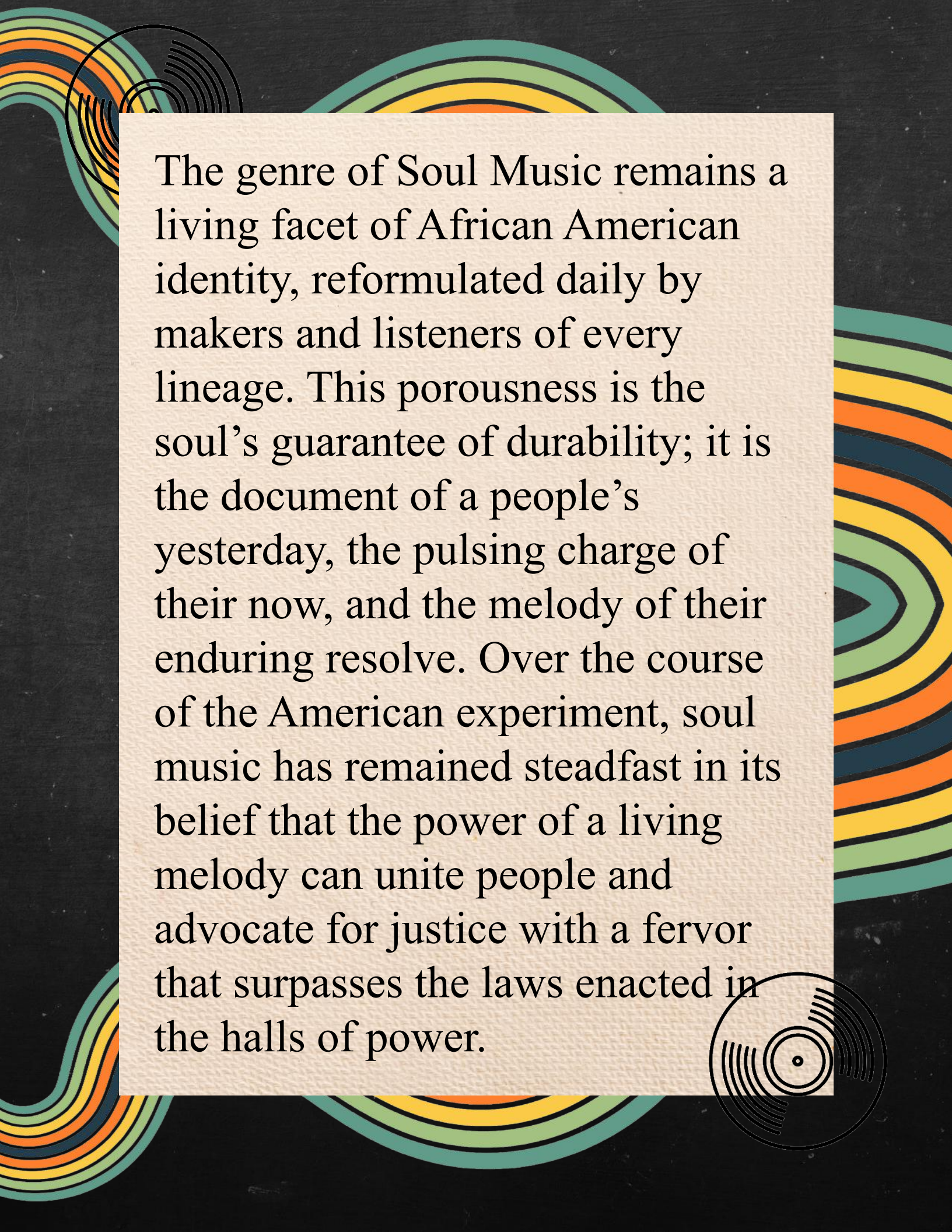


“The term ‘soul’ denotes an essence: the necessary and sufficient condition of authentic blackness. In this application, the word establishes, or honors, a lineage linking African American secular musical innovations with the work of the African American church.” (9)

MUSIC

By presenting “Soul” as more than a stylistic label; it identifies a deeper cultural essence grounded in African American life. The linkage between secular musical innovation and the African American church reveals a shared spiritual and communal foundation in which expression, resilience, and collective survival intersect. In honoring this lineage, the term “soul” resists cultural dilution, preserving a history of creativity shaped by struggle and faith.



The background is a dark, textured surface. It features several sets of concentric circles in vibrant colors: teal, yellow, orange, and green. These circles are arranged in a way that suggests a vinyl record or a stylized sun. In the bottom right corner, there is a detailed illustration of a vinyl record, showing its grooves and center hole.

The genre of Soul Music remains a living facet of African American identity, reformulated daily by makers and listeners of every lineage. This porousness is the soul's guarantee of durability; it is the document of a people's yesterday, the pulsing charge of their now, and the melody of their enduring resolve. Over the course of the American experiment, soul music has remained steadfast in its belief that the power of a living melody can unite people and advocate for justice with a fervor that surpasses the laws enacted in the halls of power.

SOUL



SOUL

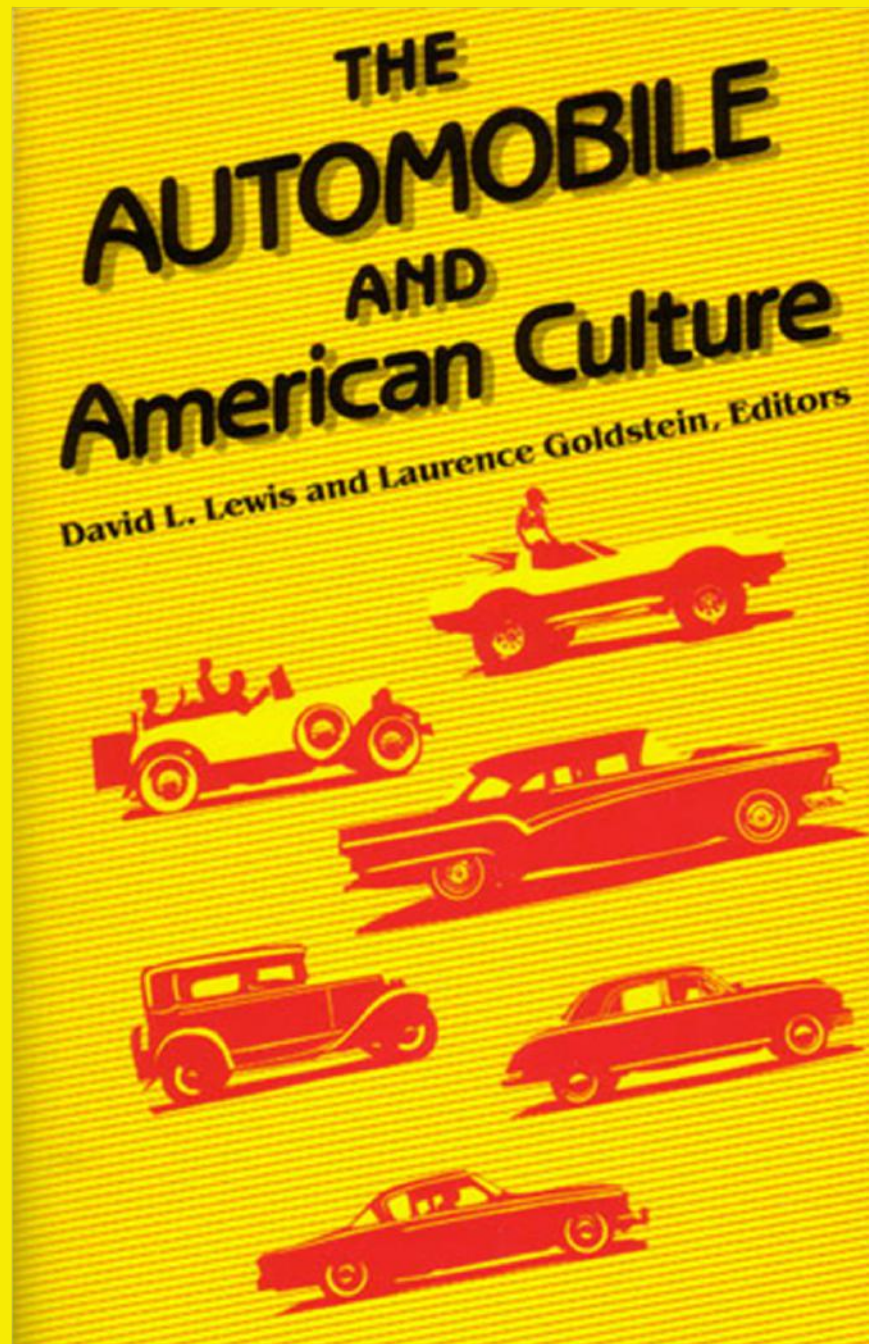


SOUL



Automobiles In America





The Automobile and American Culture
Edited by David L. Lewis & Laurence Goldstein
University of Michigan Press, 1983



“The arrival of the automobile during the first years of this century had a profound influence on rural Americans. Not only did it substantially alter modes of travel, but it also affected the economy, changed the structure of social life, and became part of the cultural fabric of rural civilization. The automobile had become the most revolutionary force yet experienced by rural society.” (37)



Technological change reshaped rural America far beyond simple transportation. The automobile functioned as a social and economic catalyst, collapsing distance, reducing isolation, and transforming everyday life for rural communities. By altering how people worked, socialized, and accessed markets, the automobile integrated rural Americans more fully into national economic and cultural systems. Mobility reorganized rural identity itself, shifting communities from localized, self-contained worlds toward greater interdependence and modernity.



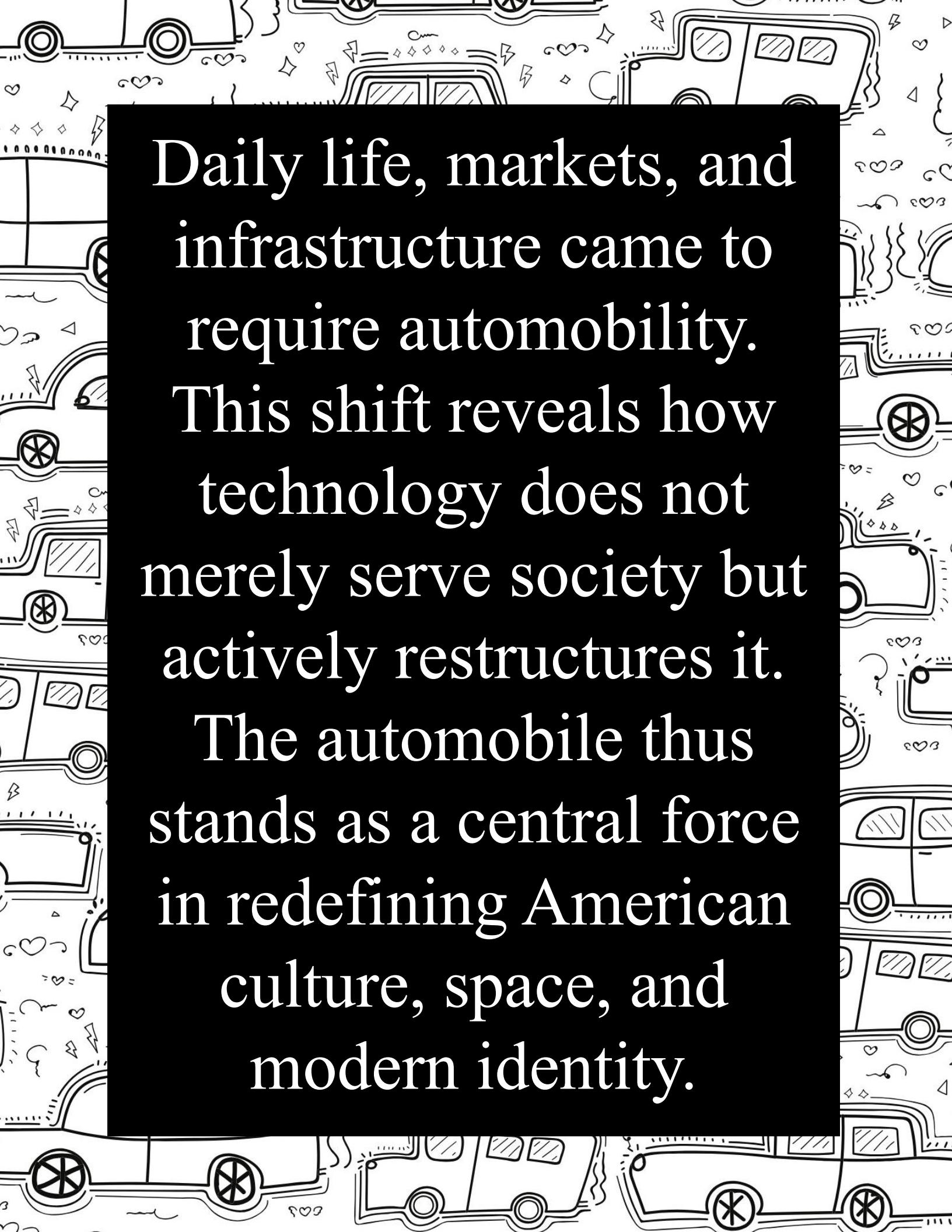


The automobile changed and reshaped rural America far beyond simple transportation. The automobile emerged as a powerful social and economic force reshaping the rhythms of everyday life within American communities. It expanded access to markets, education, healthcare, and employment opportunities for people living in isolated regions. By reducing geographic barriers, it transformed patterns of commerce, social interaction, and personal mobility across the American countryside.



The automobile did not merely serve an existing society, but actively reshaped it. For Lewis and Goldstein, “Metropolitanism” emerges as a spatial and economic system organized around consumption made possible by car travel. While it began as technological freedom, automobility quickly shaped structural dependence, as cities, markets, and daily life were redesigned to require automobiles. In rural communities, it reduced isolation and expanded economic and social participation, while in urban spaces, it reorganized cities around consumption and car travel.





Daily life, markets, and infrastructure came to require automobility. This shift reveals how technology does not merely serve society but actively restructures it. The automobile thus stands as a central force in redefining American culture, space, and modern identity.

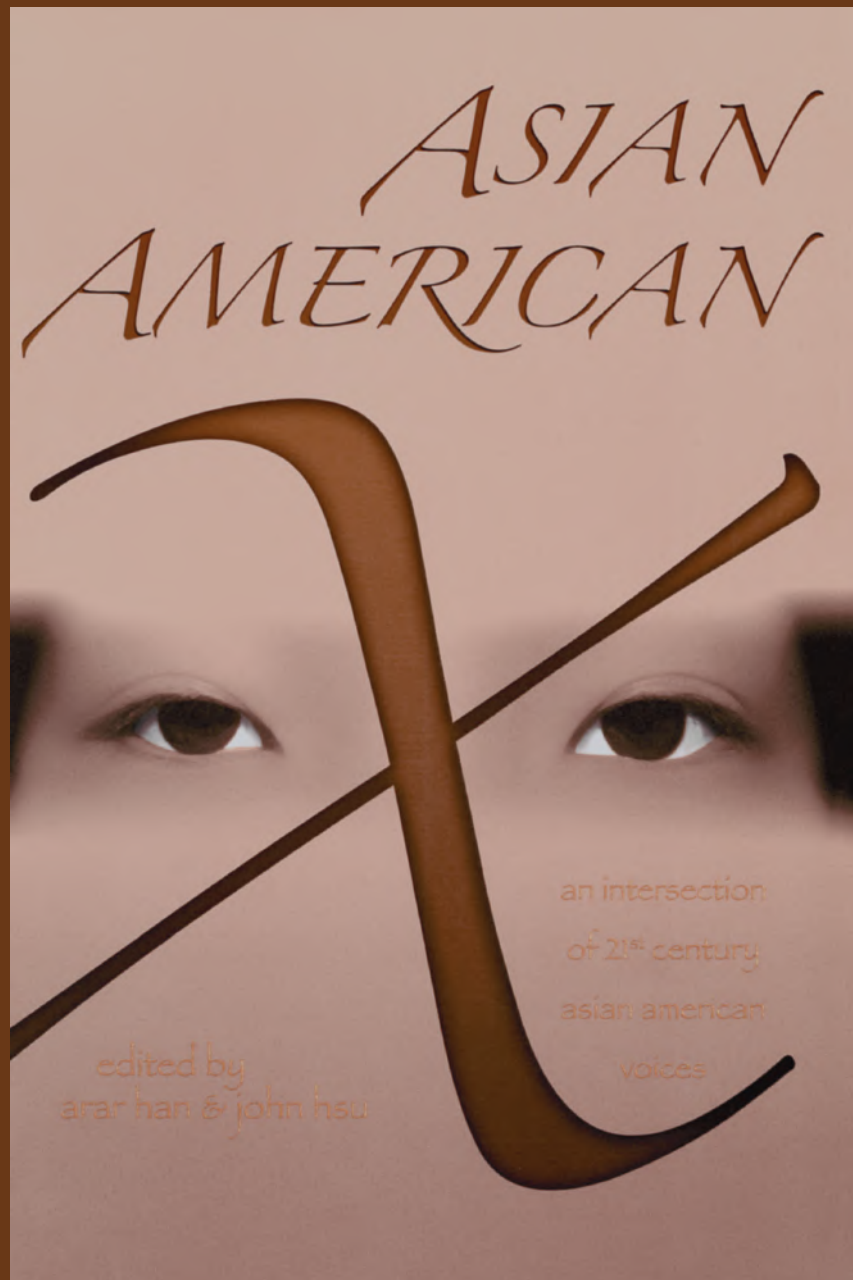


Trip with friends

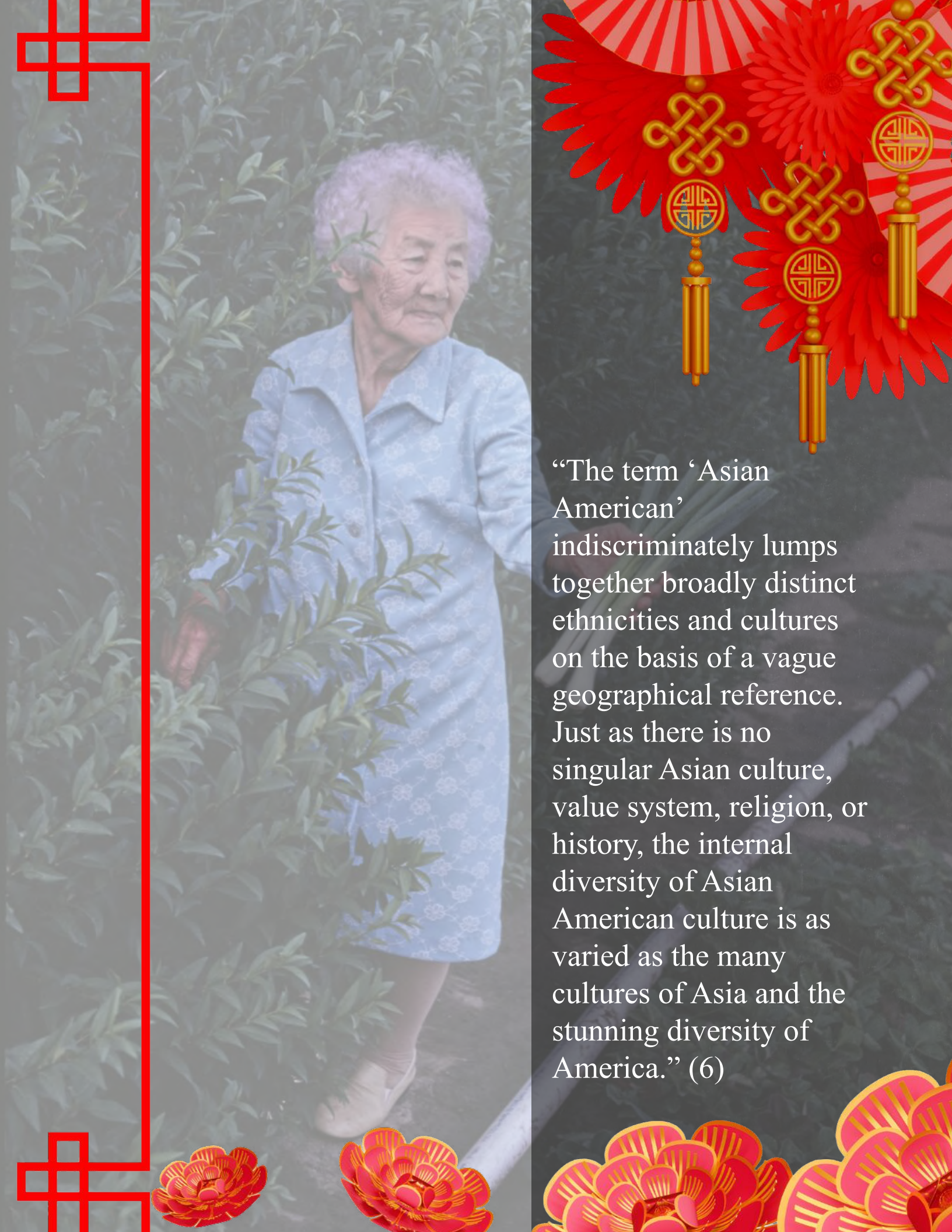




ASIAN AMERICAN



Asian American X
An Intersection of Twenty-First Century Asian
American Voices
Edited by Arar Han & John Hsu
University of Michigan Press, 2004

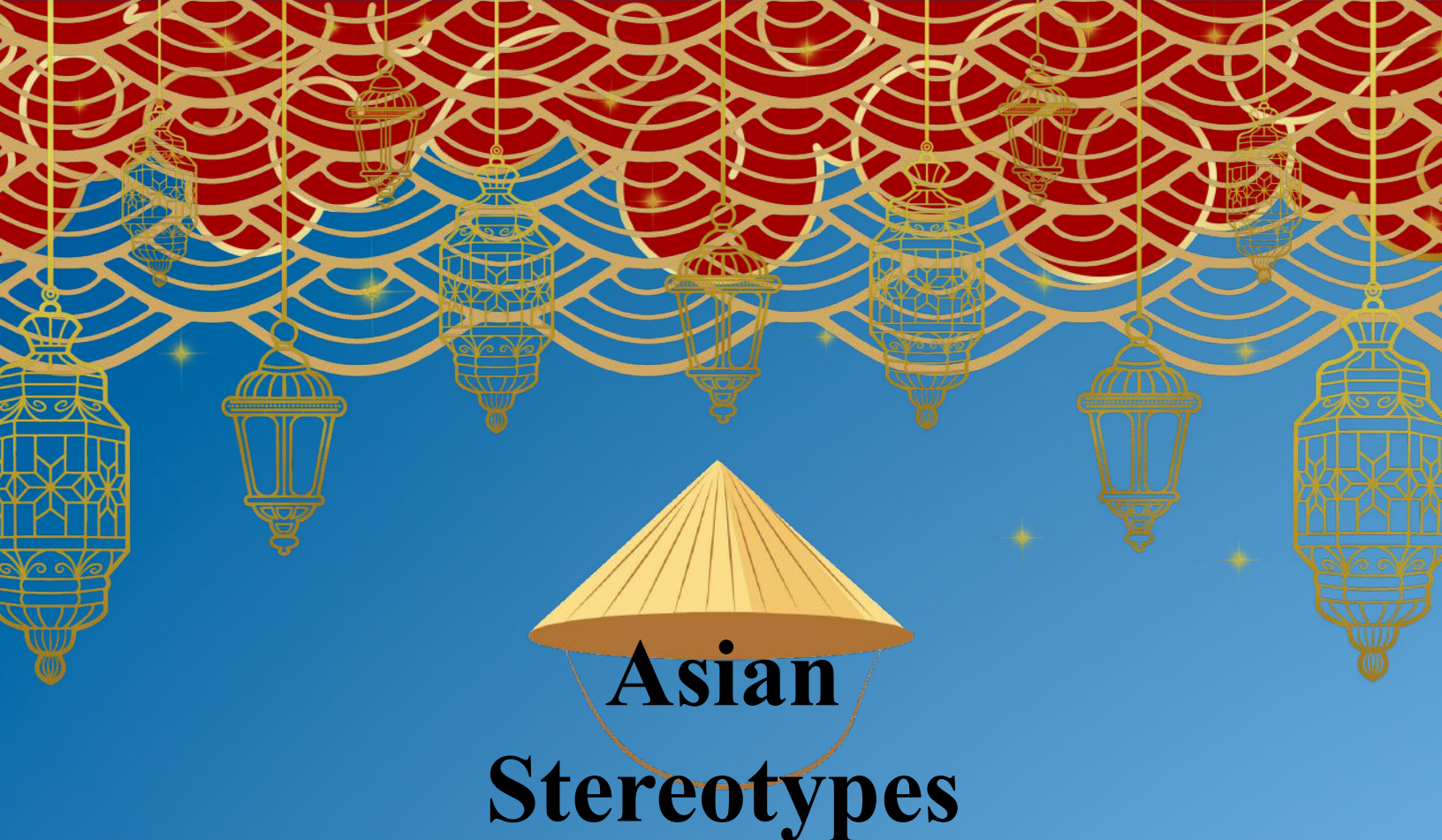


“The term ‘Asian American’ indiscriminately lumps together broadly distinct ethnicities and cultures on the basis of a vague geographical reference. Just as there is no singular Asian culture, value system, religion, or history, the internal diversity of Asian American culture is as varied as the many cultures of Asia and the stunning diversity of America.” (6)



Asian Americans expose how a single label can obscure vast cultural, historical, and ethnic differences. By emphasizing the absence of a singular Asian culture or shared value system, the passage resists reductive identity frameworks imposed by geography rather than lived experience. It highlights how the category “Asian American” functions more as a political or social construct than a cultural reality. In doing so, it calls for a more nuanced understanding of identity that recognizes diversity without erasing collective experience.





Asian Stereotypes

“Moreover, the distinction ‘Asian Americans’ often serves as a conveniently powerful mechanism to propagate stereotypes about these different people and cultures. As many of our friends have pointed out, our continued use of the category ‘Asian American’ appears to be paradoxical and an implicit endorsement of a category we recognize as potentially harmful.” (6)



Asian American?

By naming the category as “potentially harmful,” this invites readers to question how identity labels are used, by whom, and to what effect. It ultimately calls for a more critical and self-reflective approach to collective naming practices in multicultural societies.



WE ARE AMERICANS

Asian American emphasis on cultural work reframes writing, food, music, and film as acts of memory and resistance rather than mere artistic expression. By insisting on visibility through culture, Asian American communities actively counter historical erasure. This perspective underscores that art and culture function not as luxuries but as essential tools for survival and self-definition.

Resistance

The category “Asian American” reveals both the power and the limits of collective identity. While it has functioned as a necessary political and social tool, it also risks obscuring the profound diversity of histories, cultures, and experiences it contains. The tension between visibility and erasure underscores how identity labels can simultaneously empower and stereotype. Recognizing this paradox encourages a more critical engagement with the language used to describe communities. Ultimately, the Asian American experience cannot be reduced to a single narrative, but must be understood as a constellation of distinct yet intersecting stories.



אחזר הש"י חס ותלך ותשב לה מנגד הרחוק
כמטויו קשת כל אמרה אל אראה במורת



The People of Resilience



עמדי ועם הארץ אשר

יתי

רחם
על
ימלך
את הדם
לא
בקר ויו

הם
הם
אשר נז
לא ידע
הנז
חאם

JEWISH IN AMERICA

EDITED BY SARA BLAIR & JONATHAN FREEDMAN

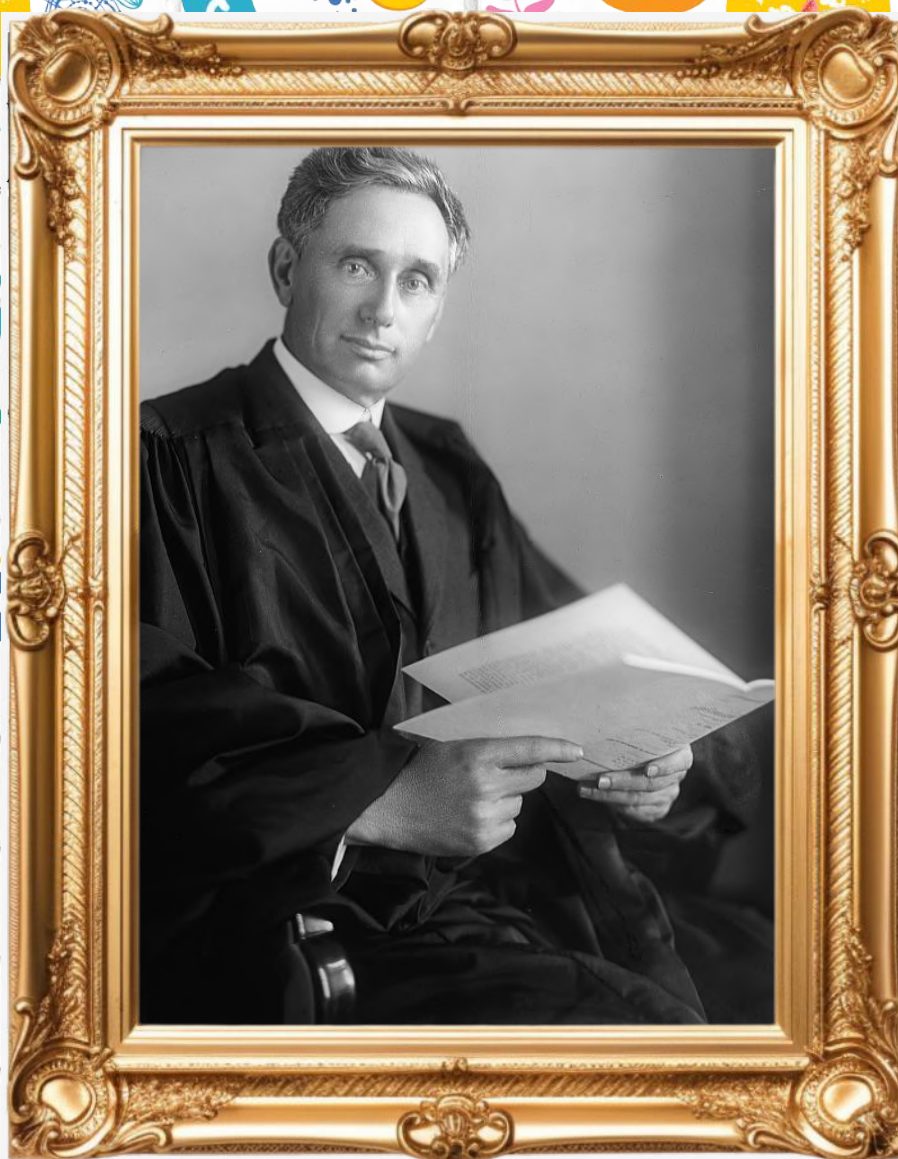


Jewish in America
Edited by Sara Blair & Jonathan Freedman
University of Michigan Press, 2004

What is Jewish identity in America?

“American Jews fiercely debated every ‘must’ and ‘should’ of their loyalties. Their collective identity seemed hopelessly hyphenated (though written without a hyphen). Were they Jewish Americans, analogous say to Italian Americans? Or were they American Jews, similar to American Catholics and Protestants? Did ethnicity matter more than religion? And what was ethnicity without religion, without language, without memory? What was the meaning of American? Did it suggest only citizenship or membership in a nation?” (4)

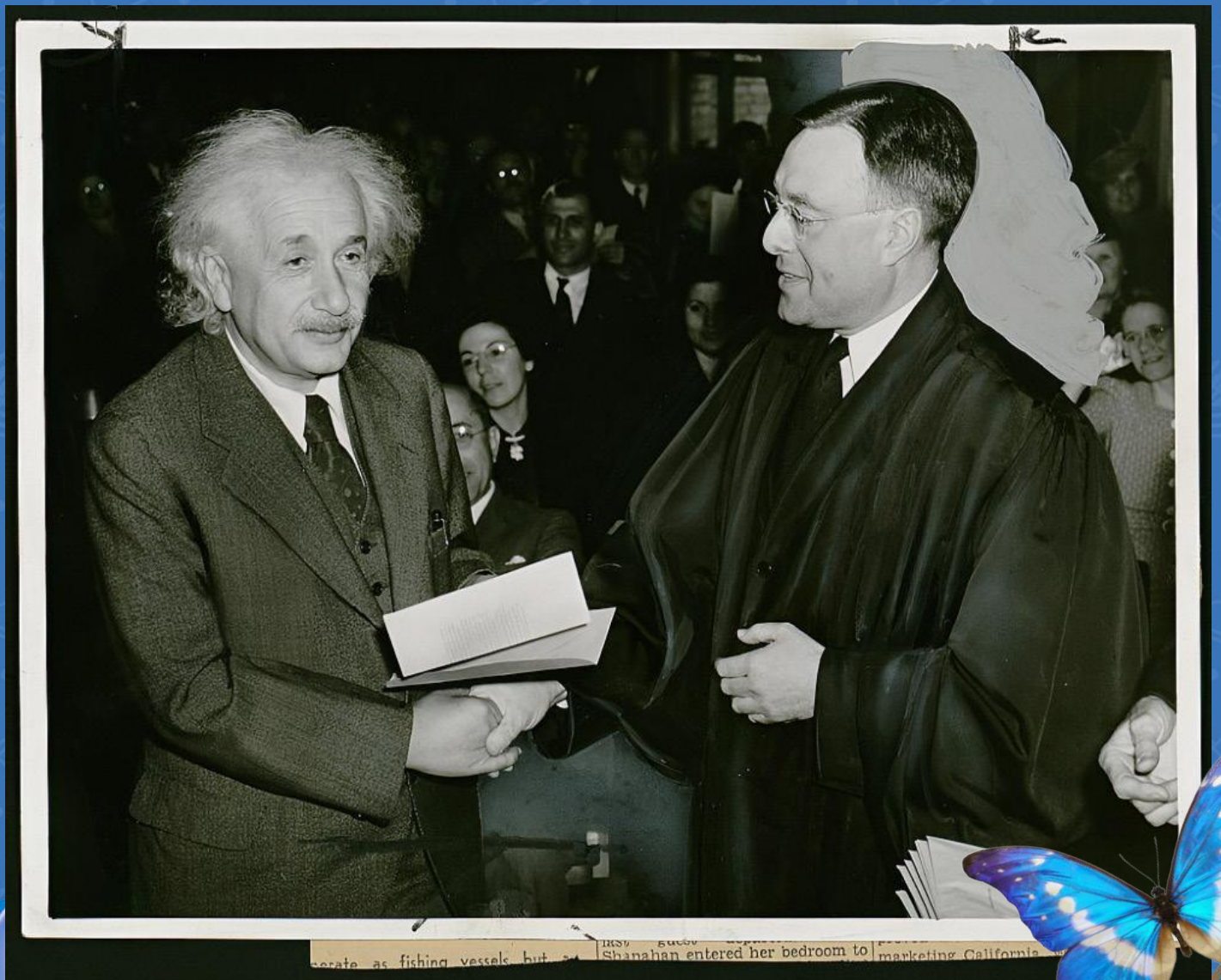




Deep uncertainty and negotiation surround American Jewish identity in the modern United States. The debate over naming Jewish American versus American Jew reveals how identity is shaped by competing pulls of religion, ethnicity, memory, and national belonging. Rather than a stable category, Jewish identity emerges here as fluid and contested, defined through continual questioning rather than fixed answers. This exposes how “American” itself is an ambiguous concept, encompassing citizenship, cultural belonging, and moral allegiance. In doing so, it illustrates how minority identities often exist in productive tension, navigating inclusion without surrendering their historical and cultural distinctiveness.

Jewish American Story

The Jewish American story is one of how assimilation often demanded distance from linguistic and cultural heritage. Jewishness is presented not as a singular definition, but as a layered identity that can signify family lineage, collective trauma, religious tradition, or biblical ancestry.





DEFINING JEWISHNESS

“Did it imply participation in a culture grounded in English and connected to a history of settlement? Could they, as the children or grandchildren of Yiddish-speaking immigrants from Eastern Europe, lay claim to this American language and history? What, in fact, did Jew mean? Perhaps this was merely an expression of family sentiment, a way of identifying parents and grandparents. Or did it have a public dimension, referring to a long history of suffering and persecution? Maybe the term Jew suggested ties to biblical ancestors.” (4)

A decorative header featuring a row of yellow stars with blue outlines hanging from the top, and a stylized teal branch with yellow leaves and fruit on the right side.

JEWISH IDENTITY

The ongoing process by which American Jewish communities negotiate identity, values, and collective direction suggests that identity formed is not inevitable or fixed, but shaped either through deliberate choice or passive drift. The appeal of inclusivity is presented as both ethical and strategic, reflecting contemporary norms that resist exclusion and overt judgment. A subtle tension, as even inclusive frameworks can reproduce forms of moral boundary-setting. Jewish Americans began to participate in movies, sports, and music to underscore how cultural expectations, political pressures, and unresolved questions of belonging continually shape community identity.





American Jewish identity emerges as a continual process of questioning rather than a fixed definition. Debates over religion, ethnicity, memory, and national belonging reveal how Jewishness in America resists simple categorization. The tension between inclusion and boundary-making reflects broader challenges faced by minority communities as they navigate assimilation and cultural preservation. These discussions show that identity is shaped as much by historical experience and collective memory as by present political and social pressures. Ultimately, American Jewish communities define themselves not through consensus alone, but through ongoing negotiation over meaning, belonging, and responsibility.



**ARAB
AMERICAN**



The Development of Arab-American Identity
Edited by Ernest McCarus
University of Michigan Press, 1994

Arab American



“U.S. citizens of Arab origin are today a small but prominent ethnic minority with identifiable personages in all walks of life. While they have historically been primarily from Lebanon, Syria, and Palestine, all Arab countries are today represented in the citizenry of the United States and its neighbors. Along with their increased contributions to American society, Arab-Americans have in recent decades received increasing attention and study.” (1)



While early Arab immigration originated in specific regions of the Middle East, the community has since expanded to reflect the broader diversity of the Arab world. The reference to identifiable figures across many fields highlights how Arab Americans have shaped American life beyond the margins. Increased scholarly attention reflects a recognition of both their contributions and the complexities of their historical experience, especially in the field of arts, music, and theater. These points frame Arab American identity as dynamic, evolving, and increasingly acknowledged within national discourse.



“In Detroit, amateur groups since 1980 have presented several plays dealing with the complexity of living in the new culture. Most of these plays have been farces and have tried to imitate Egyptian farces as written and produced; a few have tried to deal with political concerns. These plays present social commentary on change in traditional values as they interact with the values of U.S. culture. Titles of some of the plays reflect interesting subjects of the realities of the New World and their concerns.” (109)





The myth that European immigrants experienced a smoother, more effortless path to success in the United States than later immigrant groups does not hold. By rejecting this oversimplified narrative, the author emphasizes that immigration has always been shaped by hardship, exclusion, and complex social barriers, regardless of origin. The critique highlights how comparative myths distort historical understanding by flattening diverse immigrant experiences into a false hierarchy of difficulty. A deeper engagement with the shared legacy of “coming to America” requires grounding in historical specificity rather than assumption. In doing so, it reframes immigration history as a continuum of struggle, adaptation, and learning rather than a story of easy assimilation.



MUSLIMS *in a* POST-9/11 AMERICA

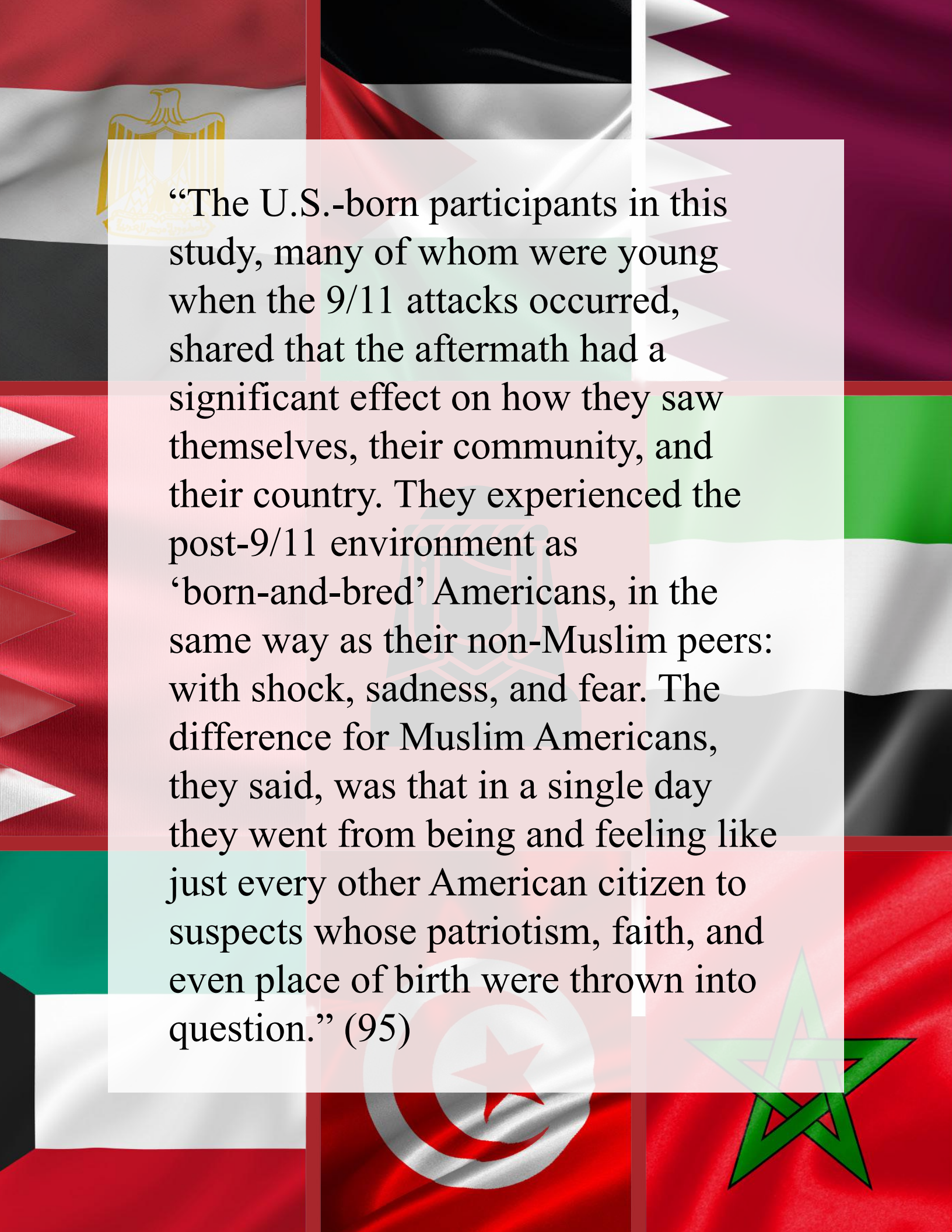
A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and Their
Implications for U.S. National Security Policy

RACHEL M. GILLUM

Muslims in a Post-9/11 America
A Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and
Their Implications for U.S. National
Security Policy
by Rachel M. Gillum
University of Michigan Press, 2018



“While it is widely known that many different ideologies and political motivations can inspire violent acts, scholars note that the association between violent extremism and Islam has deepened in the minds of many Americans since 9/11. Some academic studies have even purported that ‘jihadist’ violent extremism is a ‘new’ and more dangerous phenomenon than past forms of terrorism and have turned their focus on Islamic ideologies to explain violence.” (27)



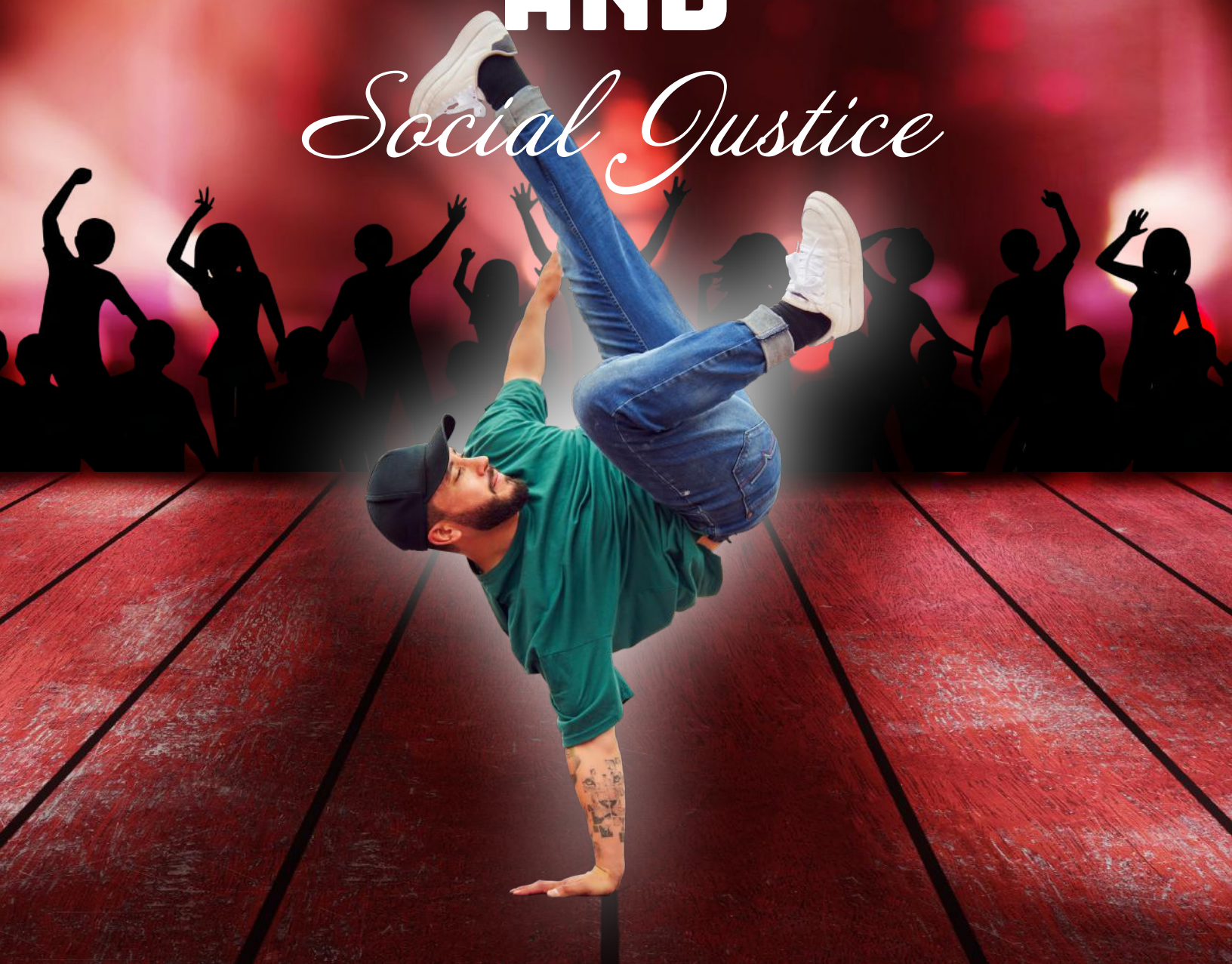
“The U.S.-born participants in this study, many of whom were young when the 9/11 attacks occurred, shared that the aftermath had a significant effect on how they saw themselves, their community, and their country. They experienced the post-9/11 environment as ‘born-and-bred’ Americans, in the same way as their non-Muslim peers: with shock, sadness, and fear. The difference for Muslim Americans, they said, was that in a single day they went from being and feeling like just every other American citizen to suspects whose patriotism, faith, and even place of birth were thrown into question.” (95)



The aftermath of 9/11 fundamentally reshaped the social positioning of Muslim Americans. While scholars and media increasingly framed violent extremism through an Islamic lens, this academic and political focus contributed to the perception that Muslim identity itself was inherently suspect. For U.S.-born Muslims, the trauma of 9/11 was initially shared as a national experience marked by grief, fear, and solidarity. Yet that shared mourning quickly fractured, as Muslim Americans found their patriotism, faith, and belonging publicly questioned. The merging of scholarly discourse and lived experience exposes how national crises can transform citizens into outsiders, revealing the lasting consequences of conflating religion with violence.



Music
AND
Social Justice





Hip-Hop and the Fight
for Social Justice

Lakeyta M. Bonnette-Bailey
and Adolphus G. Belk, Jr., Editors

For the Culture
Hip-Hop and the Fight for Social Justice
Edited by Lakeyta M. Bonnette-Bailey & Adolphus G. Belk, Jr.
University of Michigan Press, 2022



“Now in its sixth decade, rap music and culture have been shaped by at least five generations, and the genre has reached a level of notoriety that seemed improbable given its initial reception, when detractors dismissed the art form and its artists as uncouth.” (1)



Over the last five decades, hip-hop has transformed from a marginalized cultural expression to a powerful political and social force. The backlash from political figures across the ideological spectrum illustrates that hip-hop was perceived as threatening dominant cultural norms rather than merely as controversial entertainment. These critiques reveal an anxiety over who is allowed to speak, narrate social realities, and challenge power through art. Ultimately, the passage positions hip-hop as a resilient cultural movement that endured scrutiny and censorship to redefine American culture on its own terms.



WOMEN IN HIP~HOP

“Stereotyping has a significant negative impact on how Black women are viewed and talked about, and perhaps the worst stereotypes have even decreased Black women’s visible participation in Hip-Hop culture. Although often relegated to roles as props or anomalies on the main stage of Hip-Hop culture, women have been consistent contributors to and participants in every element of Hip-Hop.” (209)



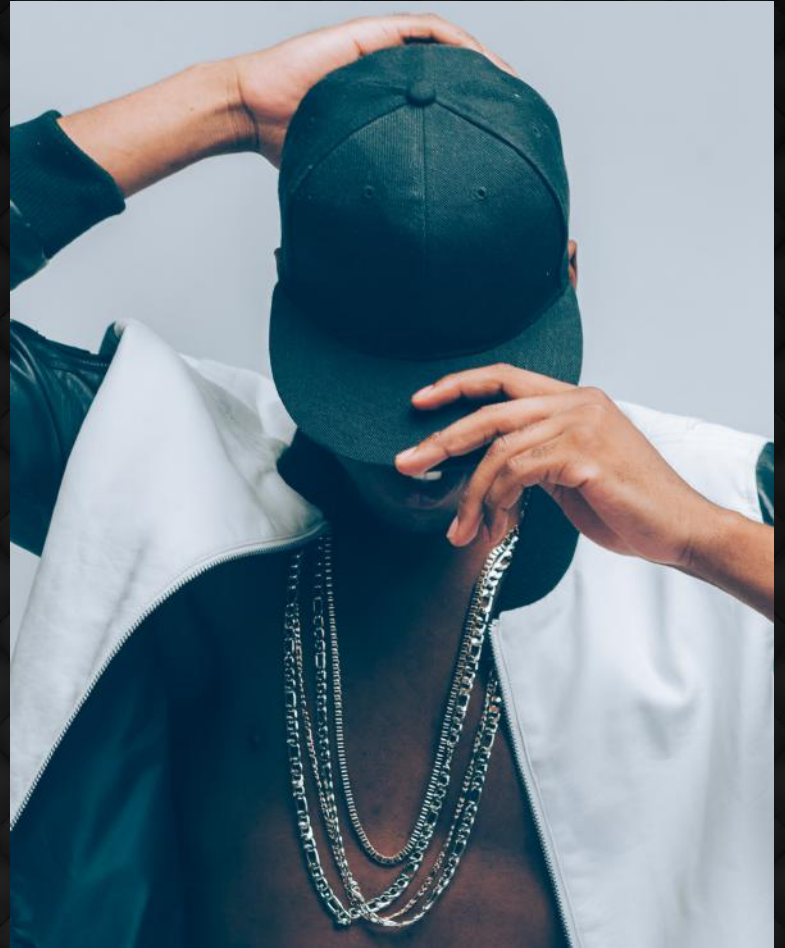


WOMEN IN HIP-HOP CULTURE

Stereotyping has shaped both the visibility and misrepresentation of Black women within hip-hop culture. While stereotypes have marginalized Black women by limiting their public recognition and participation, the quote challenges the false assumption that they are peripheral to the genre. In reality, women have been foundational contributors across all elements of hip-hop, from music and performance to production and cultural innovation. The tension between marginalization and contribution reveals how gendered stereotypes distort cultural memory. By naming this disparity, the passage calls for a more accurate and inclusive understanding of hip-hop's history and creators.

**PARTY PARTY PARTY
DANCE DANCE DANCE
MOVE MOVE MOVE
JUMP JUMP JUMP
SHOUT SHOUT SHOUT
STYLE STYLE STYLE**

As the sounds, styles, and messages of hip-hop are absorbed into mass culture, the political urgency that gave rise to the movement is often diluted or stripped away. This tension highlights the precarious balance between cultural visibility and exploitation, especially for communities whose voices have historically been marginalized. Yet, despite these risks, hip-hop continues to function as an indispensable space for critique, memory, and empowerment. It stands not only as an artistic genre, but as an enduring assertion that these voices belong at the center of American cultural and democratic life.

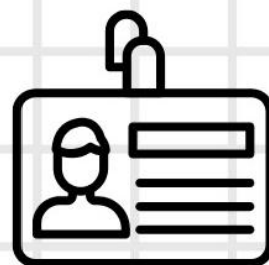






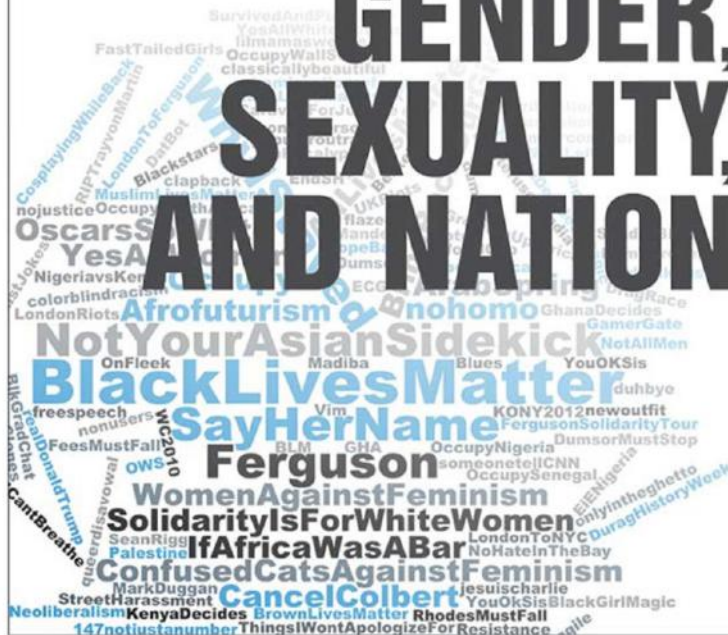
IDENTITY

Identity
Identity
Identity



Abigail De Kosnik and Keith P. Feldman, Editors

#IDENTITY HASHTAGGING RACE, GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND NATION



#Identity

Hashtagging Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Nation

Edited by Abigail De Kosnik & Keith P. Feldman

University of Michigan Press, 2019

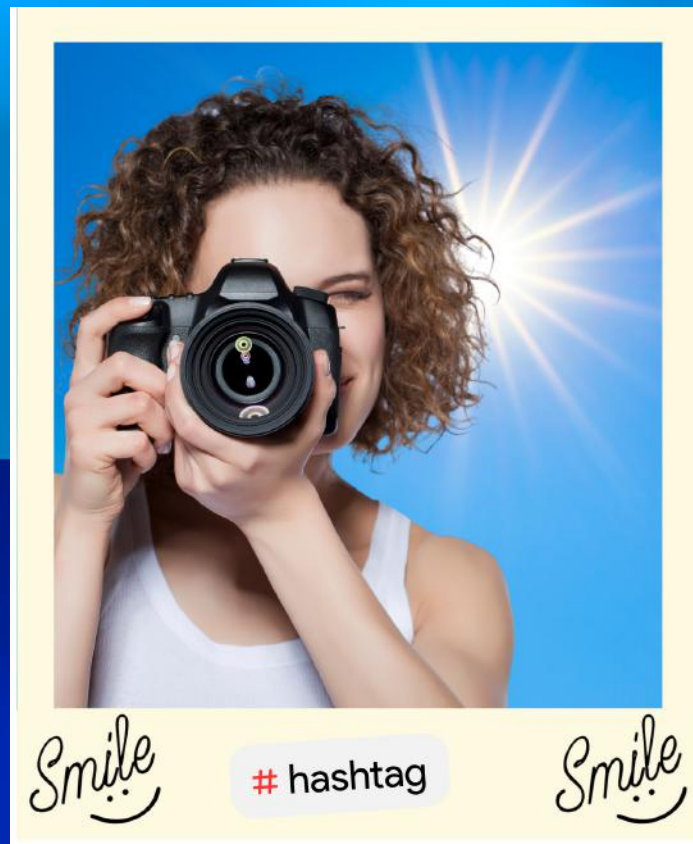
IDENTITY



#

Through trending hashtags, small, persistent community actions, and heated, public conversations, people keep redrawing the lines of who belongs, of how the self is presented, and of who gets to be acknowledged. This move from culture to identity reminds us that everything we consume, every tradition we uplift, and every new creation we offer eventually circles back to the more fundamental question of who we are, both in solitude and as a collective.

SOCIAL MEDIA



Identity in contemporary American life now operates simultaneously as refuge and contest. The authors contend that today one's sense of self is no longer merely privately articulated but publicly enacted, molded by algorithms, activists, and shifting cultural logics. Digital platforms empower long-marginalized voices to reclaim representation and recursively annotate the scripts that have long been imposed on them. This redistribution of narrative authority suggests that identity has migrated from the realm of fixed, inner fact to that of open, ongoing accord, forever remade in the conjunction of speaking and listening.

IDENTITY



The #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter, and #StopAsianHate movements reveal how identifying an individual used to be a deeply personal matter, but is now becoming a collective necessity to be acknowledged as such. The hashtags demonstrate that membership in a collectivity is equivalent to endorsing the collectivity itself. The book notes that hashtags act as “cultural signposts” to digital spaces where individuals can converse and think about identity issues. This form of framing, with its significant political ramifications, illustrates how distinct experiences become recognized as relevant to one another through global networks and can subsequently be mobilized for coordinated action in using the personal to affect the public.



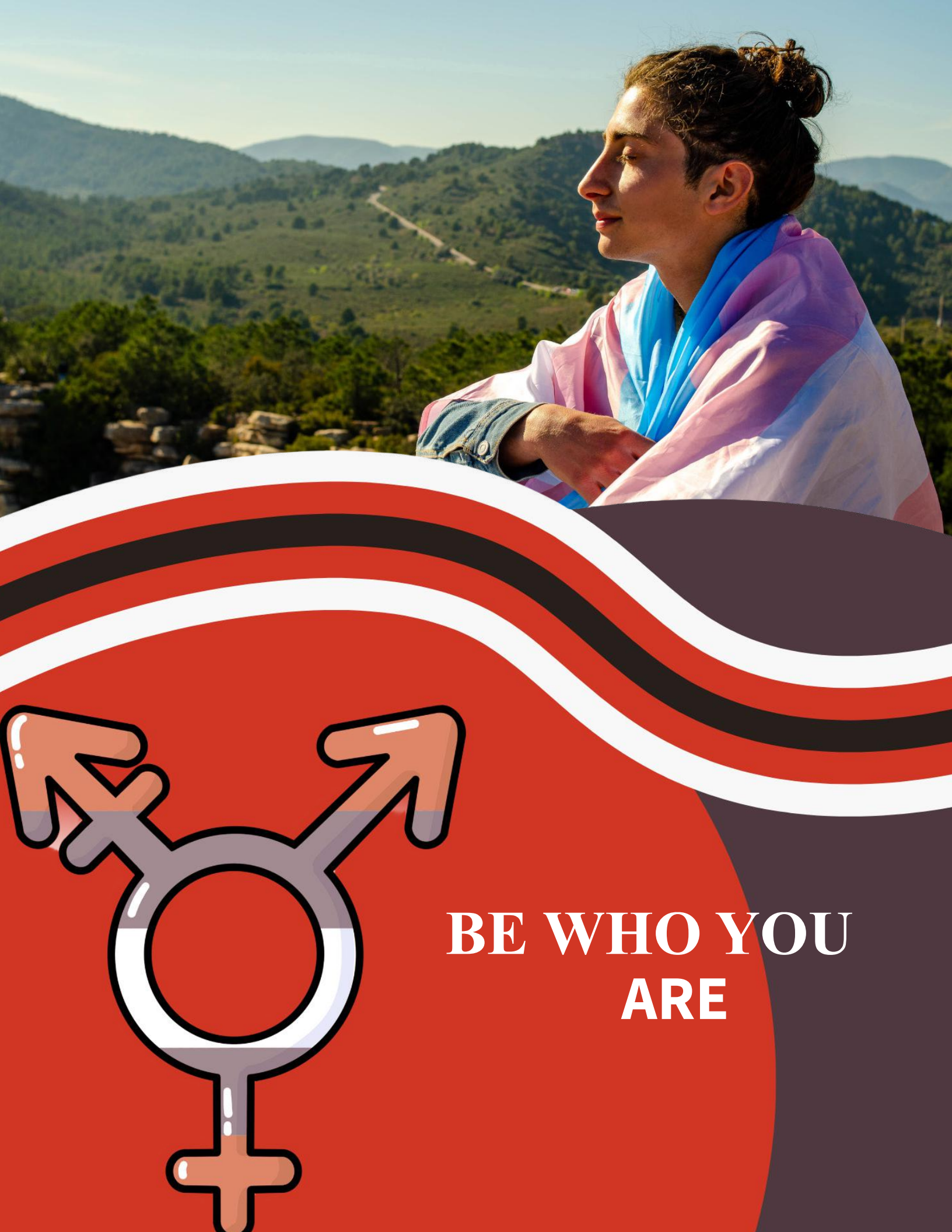
“By ‘identity’ we signal not simply the static or cultural notions related to tradition and shared meaning among Twitter users living on the continent. Instead, we deploy a notion of identity as a set of discursive practices, where media is implicated. The culture of iPhones, MySpaces, and YouTubes simultaneously enforces the notion that the individual is the chief articulator of their identity claims in the digital age. But there is always a ‘struggle for representation’ at the core of this co-construct of the self.” (263)



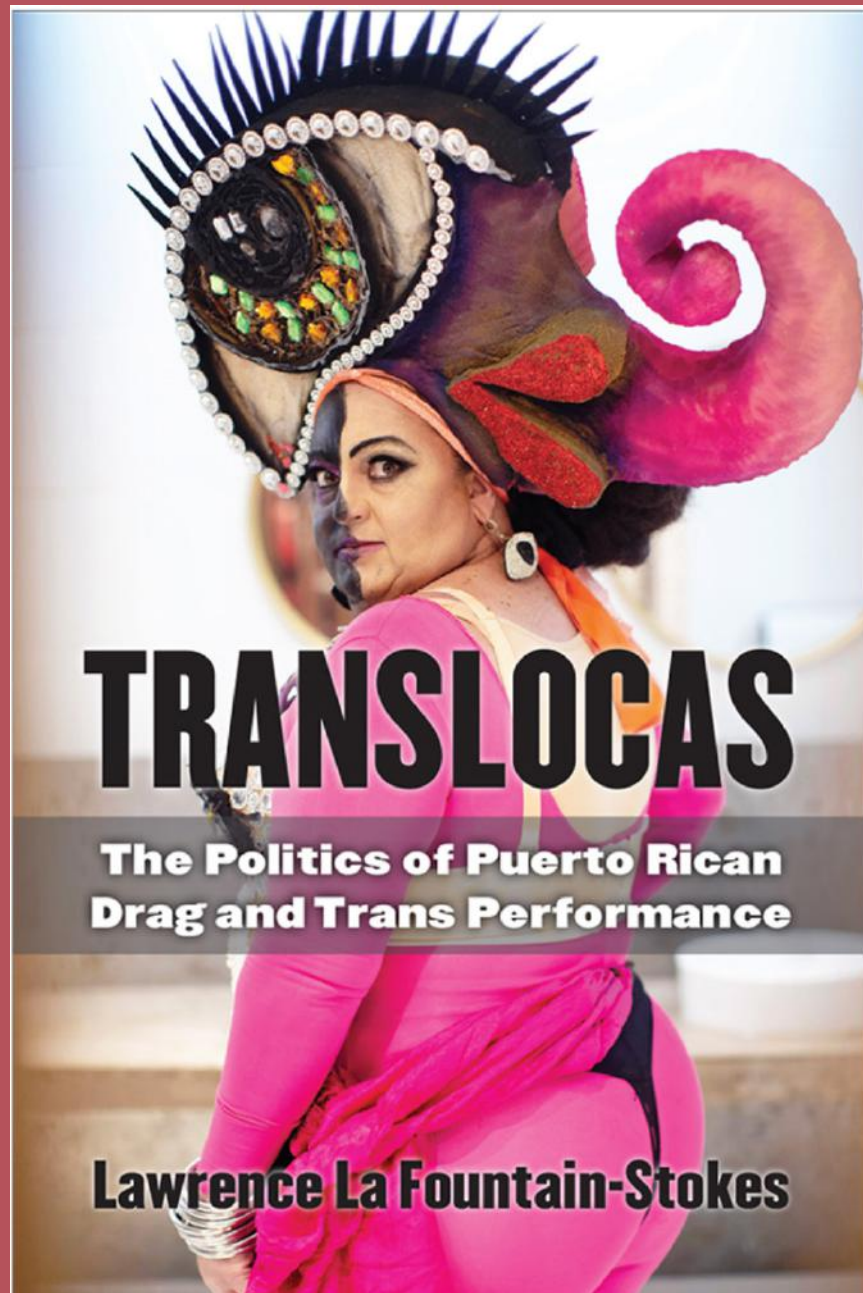
“Various genres of discourse, often aggregated by Twitter as ‘trending topics,’ are just a few of the composite contexts woven into the mosaic of Black Twitter. In my view, Black Twitter’s most distinct commonalities are its investment in public representations of blackness, the enjoyment of reciprocal communication, and the cultural and political utilities of social media.” (46)



“While many other hashtags on social media platforms trend and then fade away, entering popular use for a brief period during a particular cultural or political moment, #nohomo has appeared with notable consistency throughout Twitter’s history. In this sense, the phrase #nohomo is an endemic fixture of the site’s discursive landscape. This is also true of a number of other homophobic terms and phrases used on Twitter (e.g., ‘so gay’), as well as racist, sexist, transphobic, and ableist expressions of hate speech. However, #nohomo stands out among these terms precisely because it is, first and foremost, a hashtag: a unique unit of communication that emerged from within the Twitter-sphere.” (218–219)



**BE WHO YOU
ARE**



Translocas
The Politics of Puerto Rican
Drag and Trans Performance
by Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes
University of Michigan Press, 2021



“Locas produce drama, disagreement, and anger, and suffer social exclusion and marginalization, even when they can also entertain audiences and challenge authority. While key queer Latin American writers such as the Argentine Néstor Perlongher, the Chilean Pedro Lemebel, and the Cuban Reinaldo Arenas provocatively recuperated and deployed the term *loca* in their essays, fiction, and poetry as a term of radical alterity in the late twentieth century.” (28)





This visibility, however, exists alongside real vulnerability. La Fountain-Stokes illustrates how public attention can invite danger, as queer performers and artists are often turned into spectacles while simultaneously facing social exclusion and violence. The cases of violence against these artists reveal how queerness can be hyper-visible in moments of tragedy yet disregarded in everyday struggles for safety and dignity. These realities underscore its precarious position.





After reading *Translocas*, I am at once mournful and affirmed. The violence saddened me, the artists inspired me, and I was forced to recognize that identity is both real and a performance. La Fountain-Stokes suggests that “*transloca*” performance unifies while transgressing. I understand that I want my life to reflect this—to be who I am, innovate, and resist unabashedly. After reading this, I think identity is a fluid performance of societal, historical, and personal courage.

Collage, Minorities and Celebration

Today, certain cultures are too often painted as problematic or dangerous by organizations and individuals who forget who first envisioned America's promise. The nation's founding ideals, articulated by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, were meant to affirm the equal dignity and natural rights of all people. To paint communities as threats rather than contributors betrays that original vision and diminishes the beauty that has defined America since its birth. The pursuit of happiness was never intended to belong to some and not others—it is the force that gives life to liberty itself. To honor minority communities, then, is to honor the founders' vision of a nation grounded in shared rights and human worth, where each person's fulfillment strengthens the whole.

When I think about America at 250 years, I don't see perfection—I see a collage. Each fragment and layer tells the story of struggle, endurance, and triumph. The word minority has often been used to divide or diminish, yet in truth, minorities have been the threads that give this national fabric its color and strength. It's about the courage to exist where the balance of opportunity leans away from you, and still to create, speak, and dream.

Minorities stand as living proof that America's promise continues to unfold. Each community—shaped by race, faith, language, or heritage—has carried histories of both exclusion and hope. Their cultural markers, the accents, rituals, shared meals, music, and stories passed across generations, are brushstrokes in the great mural of the nation, painted through centuries of resilience. Even when institutions closed their doors, minority communities created their own spaces of belonging, drawing strength from solidarity and transforming hardship into shared endurance. Together, their perseverance has not only sustained them but has continually reshaped America itself into a richer, more vibrant democracy.

And when I look at that mosaic, at the pieces that have been bruised, reshaped, or brightened over time, I see what America truly is: not a single portrait, but a layered masterpiece. Minorities have not just survived within this country; they have helped build it. Their hands, ideas, and resilience have stretched the meaning of equality itself, teaching us that liberty must always be shared to be real. That is why the idea of America as a collage feels so powerful. It reminds us that our beauty comes not from uniformity, but from our ability to fit together, imperfect and vibrant, into one enduring work of art.

About *Soul of America: 250 Years Through Books*, by Larnell Gross

What does it mean to pursue happiness in America? Through the lens of eleven books from the University of Michigan Press—a publisher renowned for its exploration of American identity—University of Michigan Honors undergraduate Larnell Gross invites us to discover the vibrant tapestry that makes up the soul of our nation.

Part art project, part history, and part literary study, this book weaves Larnell's personal journey with illuminating selections spanning gender, class, race, and more. With the guidance of U-M mentors, Larnell reflects on the 250th anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, breathing new life into the founders' vision by celebrating not only the struggles but the enduring beauty, richness, and joy of American identity.

Soul of America aims to spark student-to-student connections with a personal selection of University of Michigan Press books, inspiring readers to question, reflect, and engage with the stories that have shaped the United States across generations. Each book selected by Larnell is being made freely available online via press.umich.edu.

Join us in this innovative journey through literature, history, and personal reflection. Experience how the pursuit of happiness continues to manifest, surprise, and enrich our lives, 250 years after America's founding.



This project was generously supported by the U.S. at 250 Program of the Initiative for Democracy & Civic Empowerment at the University of Michigan.

Scan this QR code to find a collection of the books featured as well as references for the art included in this book and other materials.

