

The Myth of the Melting Pot

What is an American? How do we define our national identity? One idea that has persisted over generations is the image of America as a "melting pot" - a vast cauldron into which individuals from different backgrounds are tossed and, through some alchemy, emerge as one distinct people. But the truth is, that metaphor has never really fit. Certain groups in the United States were considered "unmeltable"; the mainstream culture - White, Christian, Western European - maintained that the races, religions, languages, traditions and values of these groups made them unable to become truly "Americans."

Because of their skin color alone, Blacks were excluded by the dominant White culture from the melting pot metaphor. Some thought Indians might "learn to walk the White man's road" and could therefore be successfully incorporated into the mix; but others believed that Native peoples' "heathen" and "savage" ways made them undesirable.

The dominant culture also worried that certain immigrant groups would dilute the White racial stock. Darker-skinned immigrants from Mexico and southeastern Europe were greeted with suspicion. Asian immigrants, like men and women of African descent, were rejected outright from the nation's melting pot. And even those immigrants who were deemed acceptable were expected to abandon their native cultures so that they might better blend into American society.

But even if their skin color and "alien" customs and beliefs prevented them from "melting" into the mainstream culture, groups that had been pushed to the margins of American society still demanded to participate in its civic culture. They fought to be recognized as citizens, to vote, to testify in court and serve on juries. And as they won these rights, assimilation became beside the point. In the eyes of the law, they were Americans.

Recognizing the limitations of the metaphor of the melting pot, American writers, historians and political leaders in recent years have offered alternate visions of our national identity: America as a mosaic, a kaleidoscope, a tapestry - even a salad bowl. In each of these images, the different parts retain their unique characteristics but, in coming together, create something new.

Jesse Jackson, U.S. political leader and a lifelong civil rights activist, described his view of our nation: "America is not like a blanket - one piece of unbroken cloth, the same color, the same texture, the same size. America is more like a quilt - many pieces, many colors, many sizes, all woven and held together by a common thread."

These new metaphors allow us to acknowledge and value our differences - in physical appearance, history, custom, language, religion - and yet affirm that there is still something that unites us as a nation. Once that "glue" was widely believed to be a core culture, Western European in origin. Now it is generally recognized as a commitment to a set of ideals: democracy, freedom of religion and expression, equality.

Our differences themselves can even be a source of national pride and unity. The abundance of cultures that constitute our nation is unique in all the world. As Walt Whitman wrote in a poetic tribute to America's pluralism, "Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion/I resist anything better than my own diversity."

A Place at the Table.