

Humanities Scholars Collaborative, Worcester Public Schools | April 6, 2011

Theme: Painting by Numbers: America's Changing Portrait

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“The Changing Face of America and the Most Important Law You’ve Never Heard Of”

The United States is “peopled” in two ways: births and arrivals. Every 10 years since 1790, we take an inventory of all our nation’s households. That data freezes a snapshot of the people in the United States and by comparing it with data from previous censuses, we can track change over time. For example, we can learn that the “mean center” of population (the geographic point that represents the mathematical center of the country with half the population to its east and half to its west) has been steadily moving South and West & is now located in central Missouri. Knowing how things have changed and in what direction that change has been headed not only helps policymakers decide on future priorities and where resources may be needed in the future, it helps historians measure and chart past change.

As the new 2010 census data is being released this month, one thing is clear: the nonwhite population in the United States is growing. (In this map, dark blue represents places that have experienced more than 60% increase in the nonwhite population, while dark orange represents places where the nonwhite population is declining). Since the last census, the US population has gained over 27 million people (9.7% growth), and the vast majority of that growth came from population increases among people reporting their race as other than white and among those reporting their ethnicity as Hispanic or Latino.¹

This question that interests me as a historian is, how did this happen? When did this remarkable transformation begin? And when was the “tipping point” when we noticed it happening? So today I’d like to

¹ Karen R. Humes, “Race and Hispanic Origin and the 2010 Census,” Blog, *Random Samplings: The Official Blog of the U.S. Census Bureau*, March 24, 2011, <http://blogs.census.gov/censusblog/2011/03/race-and-hispanic-origin-and-the-2010-census.html>.

talk about a computer-generated woman who appeared as a cover girl in 1993, and one piece of legislation that profoundly—but apparently accidentally—helped design her face.

First, let me provide some background on American immigration policy. Of course it is a commonplace that America is a nation of immigrants and that nearly everyone within its borders is from somewhere else, with the notable exception of those who are part of a remnant indigenous population. For its first hundred years, the United States essentially permitted any free person who arrived in its ports or crossed over its borders to remain and settle.

“Prior to 1882, there were no significant restrictions on any group of free immigrants who wanted to settle in the United States of America.² In that year, however, Congress passed the... Chinese Exclusion Act ([which] barred... Chinese laborers) and began a 61-year period of ever more restrictive immigration policies. By 1917, immigration had been limited in seven major ways... most Asians were barred as a group [as were] certain criminals, people who failed to meet certain moral standards, those with various diseases and disabilities, paupers or ‘persons likely to become a public charge,’ some [political] radicals, and illiterates.”³

Despite this, in the period of the 1890s through World War I, millions of new arrivals poured into the United States through the ports of Ellis Island, Angel Island, and Galveston Island in Texas. Many of these so-called “new immigrants” were fleeing poverty, war or persecution in Eastern and Southern Europe. They tended to look, speak, eat, and worship differently from the “old immigrants,” and those differences provoked new fears and anxieties in American society because the newcomers seemed so “exotic” and so difficult to assimilate. Several pieces of restrictive immigration legislation were passed in the 1920s, most notably a 1924 Act that set strict national quotas on visas, quotas that were linked to the ethnic composition of the United States in the

² Which does not mean that the nation wasn’t planned or that there wasn’t deliberate strategy in shaping who was allowed to come and who was allowed to stay; see for example Aristide R. Zolberg, *A Nation by Design: Immigration Policy in the Fashioning of America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

³ Roger Daniels, “The Immigration Act of 1965: Intended and Unintended Consequences,” in *Historians on America*, US Department of State Publications, n.d., <http://www.america.gov/st/educ-english/2008/April/20080423214226eaifas0.9637982.html>.

1890 census (year deliberately chosen to pre-date the influx of new immigrants from Eastern and Southern Europe).

In debate over the 1924 act, opponents pointed out that the immigrants the act would deem undesirable actually tended to file naturalization papers sooner than northern & western Europeans, and that they had demonstrated their loyalty and patriotism by volunteering in large numbers to fight in World War I.⁴ Indeed, 1/5 of the American armed forces in World War I had been born in another country; Army censors had to read 49 languages to check the letters sent home by American servicemen.

The Act of 1924 served its purpose of immigration restriction almost too well. While from 1900-1914 13.3 million immigrants had entered the US--including on one peak day of the peak year of 1907 a staggering 11,747 people processed at Ellis Island alone—from 1929 to 1939 the total number of immigrants was only 2.5 million. Furthermore, during the Dust Bowl era of the 1930s there was a determined backflow of Mexicans when migrant worker camps in California and throughout the Southwest were purged and tens of thousands of people were forcibly “repatriated” to Mexico, including many who were American citizens by birth.⁵

“From 1930 to 1950, the foreign-born population of the United States declined from 14.2 million to 10.3 million, or from [about] 12 percent to 7 percent of the total population. These declines reflected the extremely low level of immigration during the 1930s and 1940s. The foreign-born population then dropped slowly to 9.6 million in 1970, when it represented a record low 4.7 percent of the total population.”⁶ One (unintended) consequence of the 1924 Act was that by establishing quotas based on race and national origin, the law

⁴ Chin Jou, “Contesting Nativism: The New York Congressional Delegation’s Case against the Immigration Act of 1924,” *Federal History Online* (2011): 74.

⁵ Francisco E. Balderrama and Raymond Rodríguez, *Decade of Betrayal: Mexican Repatriation in the 1930s*, Revised. (University of New Mexico Press, 2006); Oakland Museum of California, “Picture This: Depression Era: 1930s,” Museum, n.d., http://museumca.org/picturethis/3_2.html.

⁶ Campbell Gibson and Emily Lennon, “Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population of the United States: 1850 to 1990,” Web page, *Historical Census Statistics on the Foreign-Born Population*, July 9, 2008, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/documentation/twps0029/twps0029.html>.

“constructed a white American race, in which persons of European descent shared a common [legal category of] whiteness distinct from those deemed to be not white.”⁷ After World War II, this system appeared increasingly unfair because it had basically closed off immigration to anyone outside the Western Hemisphere or Europe; Lyndon Johnson called it “a very deep and painful flaw in the fabric of American Justice.”

Which brings us to the most important law you’ve never heard of: the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationalities Services Act of 1965. Named for Democratic Congressmen Phil Hart of Michigan and Emanuel Celler of New York,⁸ the law proposed to eliminate national quotas for immigration and to substitute in their place a system which gave higher priority to people trying to reunite their families or who possessed certain desirable job skills.

While this represented a significant change from earlier immigration policy, the Hart-Celler Act was not seen as a radical new direction or even a controversial policy, as these sound bytes from John F. Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson indicate.

[Sound clip: Jennifer Ludden, “1965 Immigration Law Changed Face of America” NPR: All Things Considered, 5/9/06, 1:45-4:00]

The 1965 Immigration Act was constructed to prefer relatives of existing residents and people with specific technical skills, and this had some striking consequences over the next several decades. It resulted in a surge of migration, particularly from regions of the world that had been virtually unrepresented in previous waves of immigration, the Middle East, Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. “By century’s end more than three million refugees had come from Hungary, Cuba, Vietnam, [Laos and Cambodia], Tibet, and elsewhere... the bulk of the 22.8 million immigrants who entered between 1966 and 2000 were family members of recent immigrants participating in continuing streams of so-called ‘chain migration,’ with

⁷ “Modern America | Industry / ImmigrationPolicy,” Wiki, *Modern America*, April 28, 2007, <https://wikis.nyu.edu/ek6/modernamerica/index.php/Industry/ImmigrationPolicy>.

⁸ Jou, “Contesting Nativism: The New York Congressional Delegation’s Case against the Immigration Act of 1924,” 67.

arriving immigrants making still other family members potential future immigrants. Fewer of those immigrants came from Europe. No one in 1965 could have envisioned this result.”

One scholar writes, “It is common to attribute the liberalization of immigration requirements to the lessening of racial and ethnic prejudice in America over time, a social trend that has resulted in diversity rather than homogeneity in population as an ideal among many.” So, it would seem that this was a consequence of the Civil Rights Movement and the nationwide effort towards racial integration. However, it turns out that the more important reason was the passage of this seemingly insignificant change in immigration law.⁹

By the early 1990s, the “changing face” of America was obvious. The 1992 rioting in Los Angeles between blacks and Koreans after the Rodney King beating raised awareness of social tensions in rapidly-changing neighborhoods where many new immigrants lived and worked. What happened in Los Angeles was happening, on a smaller scale or with less outward violence, in many American communities as old fears of the “exotic” and the “unassimilated” immigrant took on new faces.

In 1993, TIME Magazine devoted a special issue to the “changing face” of America as the 1990 census made clear that the United States had become—rather suddenly, it seemed, a multicultural, multiracial nation. The editors chose to represent this new reality by creating a computer-generated portrait of a mixed-race young woman and suggesting that faces like hers were the future of America.

[Why that choice? How’d they do?]

TIME’s editors reported that the magazine’s imaging specialists worked over 65 hours to produce this face, computer-morphing the faces of 14 female models in the following ratio to make the fictional cover woman

⁹ Daniels, “The Immigration Act of 1965: Intended and Unintended Consequences,” 82.

“15% Anglo-Saxon, 17.5% Middle Eastern, 17.5% African, 7.5% Asian, 35% Southern European and 7.5% Hispanic.”¹⁰

I included one essay from that issue of *TIME Magazine* in your reading, a whirlwind tour of the global village. Pico Iyer writes, “more and more of the globe looks like America, but an America that is itself looking more and more like the rest of the world.” He describes a deliciously dizzying global mestizo moving at the speed of light, driven by youth culture (a “hip-hop mishmash” as he puts it)—and this was BEFORE the internet. Where was it heading? Towards Jose Vasconcelos’s *Raza Cosmica*, or towards a global “circuit” of technopoles, connected city-regions linked by a common language and the language of commerce? What do you think?

Scott London’s reflections on the beautiful multicultural cover girl, written in 1998, take a slightly more personal direction. He sees the “browning of America” resulting less from the proximity of diverse cultures in globalized urban settings than from the rise of interracial marriages, what used to be called “miscegenation” or “race-mixing” in earlier decades of the twentieth century. He notes that Americans have a paucity of positive language to describe these alliances and their offspring, adding hyphens instead of coining new terms. I heard a news report on NPR just this week that echoed his comment about the possible “statistical extermination” of Native Americans as it described the higher incidence of outmarriage among some Indian tribes, resulting in descendants with too small a proportion of Indian genetic heritage to remain on tribal rolls as Indian but who may self-identify as “American Indian” culturally and linguistically.

Both articles I gave you for reading note that as America became noticeably more mixed-race and multicultural at the turn of the 21st century, that anxiety, nativism, and anti-immigrant hysteria also ratcheted up. One anti-Semitic newspaper calls the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Hart-Celler Acts “a malicious duo: two acts that destroyed America’s culture.”¹¹ Concerns about white “race suicide” were very present

¹⁰ James R. Gaines, “From The Managing Editor: Nov. 18, 1993,” *Time*, November 18, 1998, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,979727,00.html>.

¹¹ Vanguard News Network Staff, “A Malicious Duo: Two Laws that Destroyed America’s Culture”, March 13, 2005, <http://www.vanguardnewsnetwork.com/v1/2005/Staff031305MaliciousDuo.htm>.

during the immigration bulge in the late 19th century, and we hear them again now from white supremacist fringes of society, from elected members of Congress and media pundits, and from state legislators like those in Arizona who passed a stringent law last year aimed at identifying and deporting undocumented workers who were portrayed as a drain on state services and a menace to peaceful society.

Historians aren't usually in the business of predicting the future. However, statisticians predict that by the 2050 census the United States may become a majority non-white nation,¹² something which has already happened in at least four states, including California (where as recently as 1970, 8 of 10 residents were white).¹³ As that happens—because it surely will—and as the new faces of America emerge, in all their shades, accents, and shapes, it is up to us to make our nation a welcoming mirror for that face, with “liberty and justice for all.”

¹² CNN.com, “Minorities expected to be majority in 2050,” *CNN U.S.*, August 13, 2008, http://articles.cnn.com/2008-08-13/us/census.minorities_1_hispanic-population-census-bureau-white-population?_s=PM:US.

¹³ Anthony Browne, “The Last Days of a White World,” *The Observer* (London, September 3, 2000), Sunday edition, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/sep/03/race.world/print>; Associated Press, “Texas White Anglos Become Minority,” *FoxNews.com*, August 11, 2005, http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,165395,00.html.