

American Identity

an editorial preface by:

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When formulating this issue, we deliberately held the door wide open. Rather than knowing at the outset a solid notion of what the American Identity is, instead we faced a sort of conceptual vacuum. This blank slate of what constitutes the essential United States citizen today was not a true absence. In brainstorming what it is to be American, we came up with so many ideals, contingencies, hyphenations, cultures, influences, etc. ad infinitum that we literally couldn't define it. Some of the categories we considered were ethnicity, mass media, entertainment, conservative and liberal ideologies, access to education on multiple levels, style of free speech, and regional attitude, yet none seemed appropriate for the task at hand. None of these agents could stand entirely alone to summarize a quintessence of America—every piece depended on another for its definition or implementation. In this mode, each cultural element constitutes at least a partial identity in play. Thus to be American means in some way to have a surfeit of identities operating simultaneously in conjunction and also jockeying for space. After reading the great influx of responses to our theme, the concept of American Identity developed into even more complexity and variation. Is the essence of the U.S.A. to be open-ended, a non-identity? Upon reflection, this is not wholly the case. While most Americans hold certain values like the right to free speech as a sign of nationality, I find these rights a bit too general and vague to make up an identity proper. Instead, what emerges from the storm of conflicting and interconnected pieces of self is a limited freedom. The American inherently has the choice to be whoever he or she wants to be. Why else would adults always ask kids, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" However social conditions do hamper this ability to invent oneself in any manner. For example, I, situated as a Caucasian middle-class educated female, define myself as a Scot-Irish intellectual when asked. Latent in this claim is a deferral of my thoroughly American bloodline, as if it didn't matter or—more accurately—fellow Americans expect a foreign identity to be a part of the U.S. My social situation forces a complication onto an otherwise straightforward definition of myself, and hence reins in my ability to call myself whatever I please. All those extraneous influences discussed above place the constraints of reality into the American psyche, and in turn give birth to that very complicated identity of partial identities. Nowhere present in this definition of the American lays a negative stance; rather than stressing the limits which create a fractured identity, the freedom appears merely counterbalanced to enable a delightfully complex and culturally credible identity. The emphasis falls on the flexible agency inherent in the hyphenation. What is the American Identity? Good question. I still don't know. There cannot be one all-encompassing solution. The American is any number of things all at once,

straining for primacy within the boundaries of society. Presented in this edition are numerous versions of that active heterogeneity. We aim not at an authentic representation of specific groups, no futile attempts to absolutely define subsets of America and the country at large, but rather desire to display some of the boundless extant versions of this country's selfhood with the various influences guiding each one. The American Identity remains a glorious mystery of freedom, multiplicity, and limitation.