



Editorial

IN our current electoral season, *identity politics* has become a hot topic. Does a woman have a shot at the White House? does a Mormon? an African American? What significance does each citizen's gender, religion, race, and ethnicity hold for his or her view of who is best qualified to lead a complex democracy? The term *identity politics*, which has lost much of its philosophical and historical nuance in the popular press, emerged in the second half of the twentieth century, when it referred to the organizing efforts of marginalized groups who saw solidarity, consciousness raising, and collective action as means for addressing their grievances. But in a broader sense, of course, the nation's identity politics predates its founding, as immigrating Puritans sought to distinguish themselves from their unworthy countrymen and from the indigenous population they encountered in the New World. From those early days, a politics and culture of inclusion and exclusion along a spectrum of separateness, resistance, cooperation, manipulation, and assimilation has characterized America as a whole and its constituent parts. *NEQ's* September 2008 issue tackles this grand subject of how individuals and groups define and redefine identity, of self and others, to achieve their own interests within a larger polity they are unable to control.

In 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first U.S. law to restrict the immigration of a group based on race, went into effect. Intended to protect the jobs of U.S. workers, it allowed only certain, distinct classes of Chinese to enter the states. Shauna Lo demonstrates not only how the law curtailed Chinese immigration during the six decades when it was in force, thus defining the demographic profile of the Chinese American community for several generations, but also how prospective immigrants gathered intelligence from other Chinese and expertly negotiated their identities—birth, marital, and national status—to gain admission to the United States.

Borders were also of concern during the period of the First Great Awakening, when myriad religious sects and splinter groups vied for the attention of the populace, including Native Americans. Having been pushed to the edges of English settlement, Indians occupied a

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buffer zone between colonial authority and French incursion. In 1743, a small band of Moravian missionaries entered the Connecticut Indian community of Pachgatgoch. As Linford Fisher explains, their German nationality, their adoption and encouragement of Indian ways, and their troubling similarity to Roman Catholics introduced yet another category of “foreignness,” of uncertain identity and motives, into a socio-religio-political setting rife with suspicion.

A century later Mary Baker Eddy was reading sentimental literature and drawing from it traits that would help her, as Claudia Stokes shows, found and popularize a new religion, one especially appealing to women seeking an outlet and a balm for their sufferings. Fashioning herself as a protective, if absent, mother, Eddy adopted a sentimental persona that allowed her to set herself apart while also rivaling such female spiritual leaders as the Shakers’ Mother Ann and even the Virgin Mary. The value of self-construction was also not lost on another, very different religious figure of the period. As James O’Toole’s investigation documents, Cardinal William O’Connell went to surprising lengths to ensure his place in history.

About the time Eddy was writing the foundational text for Christian Science, George Bancroft was completing his monumental, ten-volume *History of the United States*. Believing that his professional engagement had granted him prophetic vision, Bancroft, William Leeman maintains, urged President Abraham Lincoln to emancipate the slaves during the Civil War. The efforts of the two powerful white men, who held differing views about the slaves, the nation, and each other, illustrate how the historian’s long view can obscure his understanding of what is near to hand and that sympathy for those less fortunate is not a prerequisite for justice.

Gender, religion, race, and ethnicity: they were there from the moment Europeans settled in North America, and they are with us still as we, as a nation, decide how inclusive or exclusive we want to be. Of course, my brief summary of the essays that follow is inevitably reductive, and so I urge you to read them for the many fascinating insights they have to offer. As you will see in this month’s Communications feature, all readers do not agree with all judgments expressed in these pages, but having been trained as a pluralist, I am convinced that our collective wisdom—and, hopefully, our tolerance—expands each time one of us makes a sincere effort to understand another individual’s considered opinion. And so, please keep your essays—and your letters and e-mails—coming!

—LINDA SMITH RHOADS