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Preface

Our business is not to lay aside the dream, but to make it plausible. We have to aim at visions of the possible by subjecting fancy to criticism.
—Walter Lippmann, Drift and Mastery, 1914

“The American Dream” has long been one of the most evocative phrases in our national lexicon. Americans know instinctively what it means: a fair chance to succeed in open competition with others for the good things of life. The grand promise of the American Dream has always been that those willing to learn, work, save, persevere, and play by the rules will have a better chance to grow and prosper in America than anywhere else on earth. Still, as Walter Lippmann said more than a century ago (and as quoted in the epigraph to this preface), the dream needs regularly to be reexamined, criticized, and even challenged, to ensure that it still marks the way to a future that serves the real needs and interests of our nation and its people. The American Dream: In History, Politics, and Fiction brings two rich dialogues, one among the proponents of the dream and the other among its critics, into conversation.

Political leaders, and social and economic elites more generally, all and always praise the American Dream. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Carnegie, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and many others have lauded the singular promise of American life. Most Americans, both leaders and citizens, share the conviction that the American story has been remarkable, even exceptional: a bountiful continent settled over the course of a century and a half, winning freedom, and rising to economic primacy in its first independent century and to cultural and military dominance in its second. The American Dream, the right to rise unfettered, urged wave after wave of immigrants and each new generation of Americans to the effort, innovation, and entrepreneurship that cumulated over time to national wealth and power. Leaders know that citizens will applaud
praise of the American Dream, so they regularly offer it in the hope of basking in that applause themselves.

Nonetheless, there has always been a Greek chorus\(^1\) of skepticism toward, even outright rejection of, the American Dream. Our most prominent novelists—Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Mark Twain, Theodore Dreiser, Sinclair Lewis, William Faulkner, John Steinbeck, John Updike, Toni Morrison, and Philip Roth, among many others—have warned of the dangerous implausibility of the American Dream. The great characters of our national fiction, including Hester Prynne, Captain Ahab, Huckleberry Finn, George Babbitt, Bigger Thomas, Seymour “the Swede” Levov, and Miles Roby, remind us that victories and defeats, dreams and nightmares, all are common to the human experience. Politicians declare that America offers opportunity to all who will prepare well, work hard, save, and invest, but novelists warn, in Kurt Vonnegut’s memorable phrase, that most people are “the listless play-things of enormous forces.”\(^2\)

Political leaders, especially in great national campaigns and while in office, make stirring speeches intended to pluck at our collective heartstrings. They recall our national triumphs, and they promise that America’s best days lie ahead. They work to craft majority support by promising that they, through their policies and programs, will advance (if they are in office) or restore (if they are out of office) the American Dream. For example, Americans were stirred by Franklin Roosevelt’s sixth Fireside Chat, delivered in the depths of the Great Depression, in which he promised that the nation under his New Deal program was moving “to greater security for the average man than he had ever known before in the history of America.” We know why he said it, and we even believe his words had a settling effect on a frightened and doubtful public. But novels offer a different pattern of communication, not famous and powerful speakers addressing anonymous and passive listeners, but ordinary people conversing among themselves. Novels allow us to listen to people talking about their lives, opportunities, choices, limits, dashed hopes, and fears. Readers of John Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*, with tears in their eyes, experienced the anguish of the Joad family as it slowly came apart under the pressure of the very depression that Roosevelt was struggling to combat. Understanding the American Dream requires listening both to Franklin Roosevelt and to John Steinbeck’s remarkable Joad family.

This book weighs the assurances of our political, social, and eco-
nomic elites against the warnings of our literary elite about the role and place, the benefits and the costs, of the American Dream. It presents the history of the American Dream as an ongoing debate between our political and literary traditions. I demonstrate that a distinctive ideal, “the American Dream,” took shape very early in our national experience, defined the nation throughout its growth and development, but has always been challenged, even rejected, in our most celebrated literature.

Fiction holds up a mirror to the American Dream, and the images we see reflected there are often bruised, battered, and broken by forces broader, deeper, and more fundamental than most people can manage. Fiction reminds us that life has always been challenging, often harsh, and frequently overwhelming. Lawrence Buell, a professor of literature at Harvard and the author of *The Dream of the Great American Novel* (2014), described our most prominent fiction as “a custodian and carrier of the collective conscience and national self-criticism . . . disputing conventional valuations of success, satirizing the self-made man myth as chimerical or deformative, and casting themselves more as cautionary tales of failure or overreach than as tales of triumph.”

Readers might take just a moment to think about their own favorites among great American novels: how many, if any, featured heroes who rose from obscurity to prominence, from poverty to wealth, by dint of their own virtues well and steadily applied? For many, Horatio Alger Jr. and his stream of late nineteenth-century rags-to-riches novels will come to mind, and they have won a place in our national consciousness, but few read them today and no one considers them great American novels. Alger’s books belong on a lower shelf with the self-help books of Norman Vincent Peale and Tony Robbins. Until recently, Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960) would have come to many minds, with the noble Atticus Finch standing for justice and the rule of law against a community opposed to either for blacks. But we now know that *Go Set a Watchman* (2015) was the book that Lee wrote and intended to write before being redirected by her agent toward the more positive and comfortable *Mockingbird*. In *Watchman* Atticus is a far less noble figure, defending not justice but community standards, the right of the majority culture to be tragically wrong until their own base instincts grudgingly evolved. Our great novels frequently challenge and seldom reinforce our national myths—that is their great value.

My intent in *The American Dream* has been to juxtapose the commitment of our comfortable classes to the American Dream with the
cautionary lessons that our most prominent novelists teach about life among the vulnerable. Classic American novels, from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Scarlet Letter* and Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* to Richard Russo’s *Empire Falls* and Jonathan Franzen’s *Freedom*, simply have not shown the American Dream, of preparation, hard work, and frugality leading to increasing security, as available throughout the society. Overwhelmingly, they have told not stories of smooth accomplishment by deserving protagonists, not even stories of challenges overcome, but mostly stories of challenges too great to surmount, challenges that grind down, cripple, and eventually crush. Most often, perhaps even always, the message has been that the American Dream was illusory, beyond reach, a nightmare.

Fiction has effectively challenged the broadest claims of the American Dream—that America offers the unfettered right to rise to all of its citizens willing to work and compete—but it has had little to put in its place. Fiction has reminded us that playing by society’s rules is no guarantee of success, that life is hard and failure is common, but it has offered no alternative path to security and success. Azar Nafisi, author of *The Republic of Imagination* (2014), criticized politicians for praising American freedom as the right to compete for power and wealth. She argued that novelists better understood that “the freedom that so many fictional characters lay claim to is . . . a freedom to turn their back on society and what is expected of them and to forge their own lonely path.” Unfortunately, the idea that fictional characters like Hawkeye, Ahab, Huckleberry Finn, Elmer Gantry, or “Rabbit” Angstrom should be our models makes no more sense than that the robber barons of the late nineteenth century or the hedge-fund billionaires of the early twenty-first century should be our exemplars. The problem, obviously, is that the vast majority of Americans live their lives between the freedom of the open road and the freedom of the Madison Avenue penthouse. What the American Dream has to say to real Americans has always been and is still in dispute.

Though the American Dream so cherished by our political and economic elites encourages complaisance and the critique made in our best fiction offers few plausible alternatives, we are fortunate that modern social science is of more service. Social scientists see the American Dream as a structural, even foundational, element of our individual and social identity. Nonetheless, they worry that an ominous gap has
opened between the promise of the American Dream and the reality of too many American lives. An avalanche of recent analysis showing increasing inequality and decreasing mobility demonstrates that many Americans, of all races, ethnicities, and genders, are simply not in the competition for America’s top spots—or even for modest security and comfort. Political scientist Robert D. Putnam, author of Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis (2015), and sociologist Mark Robert Rank and his colleagues, authors of Chasing the American Dream (2014), point to structural inequalities that increasingly perpetuate themselves. Both Putnam and Rank use data analysis and interviews to highlight the dramatic differences in opportunity available to today’s privileged youth and to those who come from less privileged backgrounds. Rank quoted an interviewee named Chris, who said, “You know partly it’s just history. . . . Opportunity leads to opportunity, and lack of opportunity leads to lack of opportunity. . . . People don’t recognize how hard it is if you’re born with . . . headwind, how hard it is to move up compared to someone who’s got a tailwind just helping them along.” So we say again, as Lippmann said a century ago, “Our business is not to lay aside the dream, but to make it plausible.” More pointedly, while we celebrate that the dream remains plausible for those fortunate enough to have “a tailwind just helping them along,” national attention must turn to making the dream plausible for those who struggle against the headwinds of modern life.

The basic structure of The American Dream is broadly historical, describing both the evolution of the American Dream and the fictive challenges to it from first settlement to the early twenty-first century. Chapter 1 describes the American Creed and the American Dream and the shaping role that these seminal ideas and ideals have played in American history. Chapters 2 through 8 divide American history into familiar periods and trace both the evolving content of the American Dream and the classic challenges to it in our national fiction. In each chapter I ask how the American Dream was articulated, how it was voiced, and what promises it held out to the doers, the strivers, and the achievers of that era. In each chapter I also ask how fiction described the reality and plausibility of the American Dream. What forces did our greatest storytellers—Hawthorne and Melville; Stowe and Twain; Dreiser and Sinclair; Morrison, Updike, and Roth; Russo and Franzen—believe kept the dream beyond the reach of many, perhaps even most,
Americans? Those forces include human weakness and fallibility, but also what Ralph Waldo Emerson called “the lords of life”—the fury of nature; poverty and need; sex, gender, and race; religion and culture; violence and war—those natural and social forces against which individuals struggle and frequently fail.

Chapter 9 opens by asking how the American public feels about its dream today. Extensive polling over the last half century shows that majorities still cling to the idea of the dream, the idea that hard work is the best path to success and prosperity, but they also show that confidence has begun to erode, particularly among parents about the prospects of their children. We also ask how the average working- or middle-class citizen stands in regard to the American Dream today and more particularly how those formerly excluded, women and minorities, stand in regard to the dream. Every reader will be aware that concern is rife today that rising inequality and falling mobility threaten the dream for many. Some contend that opportunity is so constrained in modern America that the dream is slipping away for all but a privileged few.

American mythology, whether in the Declaration of Independence’s stirring assertion that “all men are created equal” or in the American Dream’s promise that “all” who work hard and play by the rules will have the chance to prosper, has always been couched in general, even universal, terms. Our politicians and social elites have always assured common citizens that the national promises are made to all. Perhaps the greatest service that our novelists have performed—from the beginning and to this day—has been to show us that it has never been so. Great themes, broad, deep, and continuous themes, in our literature highlight the narrow choices and bleak prospects facing the poor, minorities (especially blacks), and women. These Americans, two-thirds of our citizens, when they were considered citizens, often cried but rarely dreamed. The fact that they cry less today is progress, but there are miles left to go.

The health of the American Dream has always been defined by the interaction between individual preparation and effort and the structure of social and economic opportunity. Individuals must prepare themselves well and work hard when they get the opportunity, but only well-designed law and policy can ensure that social and economic opportunities are available for Americans to compete over. Government creates, maintains, and updates the legal and political structures that define opportunity and how it is pursued within American society. The
triumph and the tragedy of American history has been that for nearly 400 years the nation’s dream has drawn it forward to a fuller and fairer future than it has ever quite been able to realize. America has entered a new century, as it has entered other new centuries, challenged to make the dream real in every American life.
Acknowledgments

Many people, over many years, in ways large and small, have contributed to the evolution of this book. The matchmaker that brought me together with the idea for a book about the American Dream was Fred Woodward, then the director of the University Press of Kansas. In the fall of 1997, I told Fred that my next book would treat one of the key ideas of American life—liberty, equality, opportunity, responsibility, or some such—but that I had not settled on a topic. Fred said, How about the American Dream?, and we were off to the races. Pursuing the American Dream appeared in 2004, but the ensuing years proved difficult for the nation and its dream, and I revised my thinking. The University Press of Kansas, now in the capable persons of Director Chuck Myers and editor Larisa Martin, has continued to support my thinking and writing. The result, The American Dream, is a broader, and in some ways bleaker, reading of what the dream has meant and means in American life. To gauge that meaning, we must listen as closely to the doubters as we have always listened to the dreamers.

Many thoughtful people, led by my wife, Jane, have read drafts, listened to musings, and responded to queries along the way. I am grateful to all of them, especially Phil Abbott, Lawrence Buell, Joe Cooper, Cecil Eubanks, Ruth Grant, Ezra Greenspan, Jennifer Hochschild, Jim Hollifield, Mike Lienesch, Jeff Stonecash, Guillermo Velasco, and Steve Weisenburger, for helpful comments and astute guidance. As always, librarians, curators, and other angels of the world of letters deserve special praise. I am exceedingly grateful for the support of Southern Methodist University’s Political Science Department, the John Tower Center for Political Studies, and the Southern Methodist University libraries.

As always, perfection eludes, and the faults that remain are mine.
1 | The Ambiguity of the Dream in American History

The new world... once pandered in whispers to the last and greatest of all human dreams; for a transitory enchanted moment man must have held his breath in the presence of this continent... face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.
—F. Scott Fitzgerald, The Great Gatsby

No phrase captures the distinctive character and promise of American life better than “the American Dream.” As Bill Clinton said in his 1997 State of the Union address, “America is far more than a place. It is an idea.” And as Barack Obama said in a 2007 campaign address entitled “The American Dream,” “Americans share a faith in simple dreams... American dreams.” Throughout our national history, and even earlier as we shall see, our leaders have lauded the broad promise of American life, what we have come to call “the American Dream,” but dreams have to be embodied in the lives of real people before they have substance and weight. Our dilemma is that while our American hearts swell to the idea of the American Dream, we know it was denied to many Americans for most of the nation’s history. So how are we to think about ourselves and our history: with undiluted pride, with deep shame and remorse, or with some complicated and evolving mix of pride, shame, and hope?

Fortunately, hope is justified, because a society born in hierarchy and exclusion has become dramatically more free and inclusive. As Barack Obama said in the heat of the 2008 presidential campaign when he was called upon to disclaim the incendiary racial comments of his pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright, “America can change. That is the true genius of this nation. What we have already achieved gives us hope—the audacity of hope—for what we can and must achieve tomorrow.”¹ That America has changed over the course of its history, all agree; but
what were the forces of exclusion that historically barred some from full access to the American Dream, and what were the alternative forces of inclusion that promoted, sometimes haltingly and often only partially, equality and opportunity for the formerly excluded? And, because we know that the inclusion of some has been only partial, what remains to be done? To answer these questions we must first unpack two related ideas: the American Creed and the American Dream.

The American Creed

Louis Hartz, one of the leading American historians of the mid-twentieth century, described colonial America as a “fragment” society. Hartz meant that the Englishmen and women who immigrated to America in the seventeenth century did not represent the full range of English, let alone European, political, social, and religious opinion. The fragment of English society that fled the tensions and conflicts of the Old World to seek a better life in the New World was composed mostly of middling men, small landowners, artisans, and tradesmen. In the political battles of the 1620s, these men placed their hopes with the reformers in Parliament and in the Church of England. When King Charles I and Archbishop William Laud began to resist reform with force in the 1630s, John Winthrop, John Cotton, and more than 20,000 of their followers removed to North America.

The liberal fragment of English thought that wave after wave of settlers carried to the New World drew heavily but selectively upon the Old World. First, the seventeenth-century Protestantism that the Puritans and Quakers shared, even when leavened by the Anglicans in Virginia, the Catholics in Maryland, and the thin smattering of Jews and others throughout, stressed covenanted communities, Christian millennialism, and a consuming sense of God’s immediate presence in the world. Second, the early eighteenth-century focus on Enlightenment ideals highlighted the individualism latent in Protestantism while bringing increased attention to natural rights, popular sovereignty, and limited government. And finally, throughout the colonial period, most Americans maintained a deep reverence for English political and legal traditions. For example, the English common law tradition lay behind American reverence for such ideals as a government of laws, not men; law and order; and the rule of law.
Colonial Americans drew on this cultural and intellectual heritage to create communities that then developed and evolved in interaction with the continent itself. By the late eighteenth century, America’s self-image, its political creed, was set. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and their revolutionary colleagues in the Congress of 1776 grounded the new nation’s independence on the declaration “that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” The luminous phrases of the Declaration of Independence put liberty, equality, and opportunity at the core of the American Creed. While Jefferson and the Founding generation knew that they were articulating an aspiration rather than a current truth, that aspiration has been resonant and powerful throughout U.S. history.

Nor is the importance of the Declaration to the American Creed simply American mythology. A long line of foreign observers have pointed to the Declaration as the wellspring of American values. The British sage G. K. Chesterton, in his 1922 classic What I Saw in America, declared, “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed. That creed is set forth with . . . theological lucidity in the Declaration of Independence.” Another prominent foreign observer, the Swedish sociologist Gunnar Myrdal, writing during World War II, declared that the American Creed was grounded on “the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity.”

Moreover, contemporary analysts still point to the same familiar ideas and concepts as being fundamental to the American Creed. Samuel Huntington concluded his study of the American Creed by declaring that “the same core values appear in virtually all analyses: liberty, equality, individualism, democracy, and the rule of law under a constitution.” Seymour Martin Lipset concluded that “the American Creed can be described in five terms: liberty, egalitarianism, individualism, populism, and laissez-faire.” Both Huntington and Lipset highlighted liberty, equality, and individualism. These are the Jeffersonian core of the American Creed. Finally, Lipset’s inclusion of laissez-faire (by which he means a dedication to capitalism, markets, and competition) and Huntington’s of rule of law under a constitution draw attention to our base commitments to democracy, limited government, and free markets. Hence, a general description of the fundamental values of the
American Creed would include liberty, equality, individualism, populism, laissez-faire, and the rule of law under a constitution.

Yet even as we proudly describe the American Creed, we know that these ideals have never been fully embodied in our public life. Consider three of the authors and books referred to in the paragraphs immediately above. Myrdal’s famous book *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy* is a landmark study of the continuing presence of racism in a society that boasts of its commitment to liberty, equality, and opportunity. Huntington’s study of the American Creed is entitled *American Politics: The Promise of Disharmony*, and Lipset’s study is entitled *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. All three titles exude ambivalence about the state of our national life. The source of this ambivalence is not hard to find. America has never fully lived up to its creed.

One of the most insightful analyses of the conflicting strains of thought and action in American life is Rogers M. Smith’s *Civic Ideals* (1997). Smith described the American civic culture as made up of “multiple traditions,” including the liberal individualist tradition that Hartz highlighted, the hierarchical tradition of civic republicanism that scholars identify with Bernard Bailyn and Gordon Wood, and an exclusivist (nativist, racist) tradition that he calls “ascriptive Americanism.” In Smith’s description of American history, the hierarchical influences of republicanism and the exclusivist strains of nativism and racism are woven throughout American culture, thought, and action, are always present, and often triumph. Moreover, as we shall see immediately below, they explain why the American Dream was denied to many, including women, minorities, and poor white men, for much of American history.

**The American Dream**

At the dawning of the eighteenth century, decades before American independence, Virginia planter Robert Beverly (1673–1722), building on William Penn’s description of America as “a good poor man’s country,” described America as “the best poor man’s Country in the World.” Benjamin Franklin made a similar point in assuring immigrants that though many arrive in America as poor “servants or Journeymen, . . . if they are sober, industrious, and frugal, they soon become Masters, establish themselves in Business, marry, raise families, and become respectable Citizens.” Penn, Beverly, and Franklin were at the head of a long line
of commentators who have seen America as holding out a distinctive promise of opportunity to citizens and immigrants alike. Throughout the nineteenth century, Franklin was the most widely cited exemplar of opportunity and success in the society. One nineteenth-century orator lauded Franklin as “a man who rose from nothing, who owed nothing to parentage or patronage, who enjoyed no advantages of early education, which are not open,—a hundredfold open,—to yourselves, . . . but who lived to stand before Kings, and died to leave a name which the world will never forget.” By the end of the century, Emma Lazarus’s famous lines “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . . Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost, to me” adorned the new Statue of Liberty. America’s reputation for openness to the dreams and aspirations of common men made it the destination for many in Europe and, later, elsewhere.

While the idea of a distinctive American Dream has been central to our national history, the phrase itself did not come into common use until the twentieth century. Still, both J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, the author of *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782), and Henry Adams, the grandson and great-grandson of presidents, in his magisterial *History of the United States during the Administration of Thomas Jefferson* (1889), described the powerful American ethos of freedom and opportunity as a “dream.” The young Walter Lippmann used the phrase “the American dream” in *Drift and Mastery* (1914) to condemn the Jeffersonian localism of the nineteenth century and to call for a new “dream” worthy of the new century. James Truslow Adams’s classic *Epic of America* (2001) popularized “the American dream, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.” While the exact phrase “the American Dream” may have been popularized by Adams, the idea, the insight, and the feeling have been present from first settlement.

Moreover, contemporary analysts describe the American Dream in terms almost identical to those used by Franklin, Lazarus, and Adams. Harvard political scientist Jennifer Hochschild’s prominent book *Facing Up to the American Dream* (1995) declared, “The American Dream . . . promises that everyone, regardless of ascription or background, may reasonably seek success through action and traits under their own control.” John Schwarz wrote that the promise of the American Dream is that “everyone who steadfastly practices certain practical virtues will
find a place at the table. . . . These virtues—self-control, discipline, effort, perseverance, and responsibility—stand at the core of our . . . idea of good character. . . . The notion that people do have a capacity to control their own destinies is an enormously strong, almost insistent feature of our American culture.”

The American Dream is the promise that the country holds out to the rising generation and to immigrants that hard work and fair play will almost certainly lead to success. All who are willing to strive, to learn, to work hard, to save and invest will have every chance to succeed and to enjoy the fruits of their success in safety, security, and good order. Education (physical and intellectual skills), good character (honesty, cleanliness, sobriety, religiosity), hard work (frugality, saving, investing), and a little luck form a broad pathway to the American Dream. Some start life with more wealth, more prominence, and more influence, but the opportunity to rise in society is promised to everyone—and not just to rise but, if the breaks go right, to have a shot at the top. If Abraham Lincoln and Barack Obama could become president and if Andrew Carnegie and Bill Gates could become the richest men of their times, then others can reasonably seek to rise as well.

So that is the dream—a shimmering vision of a fruitful country open to all who come, learn, work, save, invest, and play by the rules. The reality, as we all know, has had darker dimensions. The continent’s original inhabitants were slowly but inexorably dispossessed by a rising tide of alien settlement. Of the new arrivals, not all came in any meaningful sense: some were brought, held, and used. Others were barred. Only America’s most fortunate sons and few if any of her daughters were allowed, at least initially, to compete for her accolades and prizes. What influences and forces limited the application of the dream to some Americans while barring others?

Patterns of Exclusion

The American Dream has always been more open to some than to others, more open to wealthy white men than to women or people of color. In fact, Howard University’s Jane Flax argued that “the normative American citizen has always been a white man and, though others have won rights, he remains so.” Moreover, when immigrants, minorities, and women did achieve new rights, those rights usually amounted to
the right to compete against well-entrenched white men in a matrix of established law and policy that they had developed to protect their current interests and future prospects. Hochschild reminded us that throughout American history, “the emotional potency of the American Dream has made the people who were able to identify with it the norm for everyone else. . . . Those who do not fit the model disappear from the collective self-portrait.”

Others might have a place in society, but it was a limited and subordinate place. Race, gender, wealth, ethnicity, and religion have all been used to exclude persons and groups from the community of American citizens. The treatment of blacks has been the most glaring deviation from the American Creed. The Virginia House of Burgesses formalized chattel slavery in 1661, Maryland followed in 1663, and over the remainder of the century, the “peculiar institution” spread throughout the South. The Constitution recognized slavery, without ever mentioning the word, in its provisions on continued importation, representation, and taxation and in subsequent legal guarantees concerning the return of fugitive slaves. Even though the slave trade formally ended in 1808, slavery continued to expand right up to the outbreak of the Civil War. Moreover, throughout the nineteenth century, even after the end of slavery, most blacks continued to live in the agricultural South, and most were tied to the land almost as effectively by the sharecropping and crop-lien systems as they had been by slavery. Early in the twentieth century, the black social scientist and social activist W. E. B. Du Bois declared that the movement to erase the “color line” from American society would be the defining struggle of the new century. As America entered the final decade of the twentieth century, the legal scholar Derrick Bell declared, “Racism is permanent.”

Women’s struggle for equality in America, while less overt and less obviously intense than the struggle of blacks, has in its own way been just as difficult. Women were held in subjection at least partially by religious and cultural assumptions in which they shared. The Christian teaching that wives were to love, honor, and obey their husbands was powerfully reinforced by the common law principle of “couvertere.” Couvertere held that a woman was subsumed, or covered, by the legal personality of her father until marriage and of her husband after marriage. With limited exceptions prior to 1850, a woman’s property went to her husband at marriage, as did any wages or income she might earn after marriage. She could not sue in court in her own name, serve on juries, vote, or
otherwise assume a posture of equality in the public sphere. Divorce was rare, but when it did occur, property and children remained with the husband. Not until the middle of the twentieth century did growing movements for racial and gender equality gain traction in America.

Despite the presence of inequality and discrimination, the dream made America a magnet for immigrants. Throughout the colonial and early national periods, most Americans saw immigrants as important to settlement, defense, and economic development. But when too many immigrants arrived too quickly, concern grew that the fundamental nature of the country might be submerged in a sea of unacculturated newcomers. Major nativist reactions against immigrants erupted in the mid-1790s with Federalist concerns over Irish and French radicals and again when Irish Catholic immigration picked up substantially in the 1840s. An upsurge in immigration and a change in the sources of immigration heightened nativist concern between 1880 and 1920. About 25 million immigrants came to the United States, including 4 million Italians, mostly Catholic, and 4 million eastern European Jews, mostly from Russia, Germany, and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. These new immigrants aroused widespread suspicion, and a wave of discrimination ensued that lasted through World War II. Immigration remains a prominent national issue today.

Finally, the relationship between Native Americans and later settlers remains a deeply tragic story. From the first appearance of Europeans in the Americas at the end of the fifteenth century to the last Indian wars of the late nineteenth century, the population of Native American peoples declined, because of war and disease, from perhaps 10 million to a mere quarter of a million. From the earliest days, colonial and later state and federal government policy was to remove Native Americans from the advancing line of white settlement. By the closing decades of the nineteenth century, Native Americans had been subdued and restricted to reservations. Throughout the twentieth century, with brief interludes in the Franklin Roosevelt and Lyndon Johnson administrations, national policy was to wean Indians from federal protection and support and to immerse them in the mainstream society and economy. As the twenty-first century dawned, Indian reservations still existed, and despite the glitz of the occasional casino, they were among the bleakest and most impoverished places in America.
The Special Power of Fiction

Scholars and general readers know that blacks, women, immigrants, and others long had only limited access to the American Dream. But knowing and feeling this history are two different things. While any description of discrimination is sobering, one rarely feels a lump in the throat or a tear in the eye with social science and historical research. Not so with the two novels we turn to now: Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin; or, Life among the Lowly* (1852) and Henry Adams’s *Democracy: An American Novel* (1880). Fiction has an emotional depth and range that nonfiction simply cannot plumb.

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811–1896) was the seventh of thirteen children borne by two wives to the prominent New England minister Lyman Beecher. Though Stowe had been a writer for two decades, passage of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 moved her to address slavery directly for the first time. She initially envisioned a modest project, “some sketches” of slavery as she had seen it during her travels in the upper South, but her deepening emotional involvement in the subject motivated a broader treatment. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was serialized in the anti-slavery weekly the *National Era* from June 1851 to April 1852. The book appeared in March 1852. The serial was widely read, but the book was a phenomenon, selling 3,000 copies on the first day, 10,000 in the first two weeks, and more than 300,000 in the first year. *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the second-best-selling book of the nineteenth century, after only the Bible, and the most impactful novel in American history.

*Uncle Tom’s Cabin* reflected Stowe’s intensely personal, deeply emotional, evangelical conviction that slavery was simply inhumane and had to be not just opposed but exposed. The novel’s emotional power came from its unblinking focus on the absolute control that slave owners, even the best of them, like Arthur Shelby and Augustine St. Clair, let alone the worst of them, like the loathsome Simon Legree, had over their human property, selling husbands away from wives and children away from mothers. Deepening the northern white revulsion against slavery’s destruction of families was the unremitting focus on the rampant inter-generational sexual violence of slavery. Several of the leading slave characters in the novel are described as being of mixed race: mulatto (half white/half black), quadroon (three-quarters white/one-quarter black), and octoroon (seven-eighths white/one-eighth black), with quadroons and octoroons regularly being described as white enough to pass. Crit-
ically, both northern and southern audiences knew quite well that a quadroon child meant two successive generations of white owners had raped their female slaves and an octoroon child meant that three successive generations had done so. Mixed-race slaves declared that sexual exploitation was pervasive in slavery.

There were many notable characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, including Tom (the title character), Eva, Topsy, Cassy, and Simon Legree. But the novel began and ended with a slave family, George Harris, his wife Eliza, and their son Harry. Their travails showed the radical sense in which the American Dream and the pursuit of happiness remained their goals even as they were denied them in America. Eliza was the young, beautiful, quadroon or octoroon slave companion and servant of Emily Shelby, wife of Kentucky plantation owner Arthur Shelby. Mrs. Shelby acquired Eliza young, raised and educated her, and treated her well, allowing and respecting her marriage to George Harris, an intelligent and inventive mulatto slave from a neighboring plantation. George and Eliza were as happy as slaves could be, well treated, married, and the parents of a young son. This happy tableau was soon shattered by two undeflectable blows. George’s owner hired him out to a bagging factory where he thrived and where his talents were appreciated. George’s evident pride and pleasure in his accomplishments at the factory aggravated his owner, who, to teach him his proper place, took him out of the factory and put him to mindless manual labor. George’s manly pride was hurt, and he declared to Eliza his plan to escape to Canada, saying in slavery, “What’s the use of our trying to do anything, trying to know anything, trying to be anything? What’s the use of living? I wish I was dead.” George declared that the American Dream’s promise that those who learned well and worked hard would have a good chance to succeed simply did not apply to slaves. Eliza reminded George of his duties as a slave and a Christian, but soon Eliza’s world was even more deeply shaken when she discovered that her seemingly good but indebted master had agreed to sell her young son Harry to a slave trader. Eliza took Harry and ran too.

One of the great scenes in American literature is Eliza’s flight, Harry in her arms, from slave Kentucky across the Ohio River to the free state of Ohio. Pursued by slave catchers and their dogs, Eliza and Harry reached the river in winter. The river was jammed with floating ice, and no boat was available, so, dogs baying at her rear, Eliza swept up Harry and crossed the river on foot, leaping from ice floe to ice floe, until she
collapsed on the Ohio shore. A Good Samaritan took Eliza and Harry to Old Cudjoe, the free black servant of a prominent local family, John and Mary Bird. Senator John Bird was an Ohio legislator who supported the Fugitive Slave Act as an unfortunate but necessary compromise in a nation divided by slavery. Bird explained to his skeptical wife that peace and order required that southern interests be respected. Mary, a good Christian woman, wife, and mother, was unwilling to believe that the Bible’s injunction to help those in need could be overridden by man’s compromising laws. As their desultory, fairly abstract, argument went on, Cudjoe beckoned Mrs. Bird to the kitchen, and Mary then called the senator. In the kitchen was “a young and slender woman, with garments torn and frozen, with one shoe gone, and the stocking torn away from the cut and bleeding foot.”

Political abstractions evaporated in the moment, and within hours Cudjoe and the senator were spiriting Eliza and Harry away in the dead of night to a safe connection to the Underground Railroad and the route to Canada and freedom.

Before the conductors on the Underground Railroad could reunite George, Eliza, and Harry, George, literate and light-skinned enough to be staying at an inn posing as a businessman, encountered Mr. Wilson, his former boss at the factory. Wilson advised George to go back to his master and admonished him for breaking the law, saying, “Why, to see you, as it were, setting yourself in opposition to the laws of your country,” to which George replied, “‘My country,’ . . . with a strong and bitter emphasis; ‘what country have I.’” Later in the exchange, George was even more vehement, saying, “Sir, I haven’t any country. . . . But I’m going to have one. I don’t want anything of your country, except to be let alone, to go peaceably out of it; and when I get to Canada, where the laws will own me and protect me, that shall be my country, and its laws I will obey.” Once George, Eliza, and Harry were reunited, Eliza echoed George’s rejection of America, saying, “O, Lord, have mercy! . . . let us get out of this country together, that is all we ask.” When the slave catchers finally overtook them, George again declared that the country and its laws had no meaning for him: “We don’t own your laws; we don’t own your country; we stand here as free, under God’s sky, as you are; and, by the great God that made us, we’ll fight for our liberty till we die.” Later, with Canada just a day away, freedom just a day away, George whispered to Eliza, “Oh, tell me! can this great mercy be for us? Will these years and years of misery come to an end?—shall we be free!”

White Americans in the North were horrified by the intimations of
pervasive sexual violence in slavery, but they were also troubled by the rejection of the nation and its laws by those who were denied its freedom. The novel closed with George, Eliza, and Harry having left Canada for Europe, where George was educated in France, looking forward to a life of accomplishment—but not in America. In a letter to a friend, George declared, “I may be excused for saying, I have no wish to pass for an American. . . . The desire and yearning of my soul is for an African nationality.”23 Stowe has been criticized for having George Harris and his family choose Africa over America, suggesting that she was unable to envision a biracial America.24 On the other hand, Stowe made entirely believable George and Eliza’s rejection of America as incapable of providing a home for black people, even accomplished black people such as they had become. Why would they not simply say Hell no to a country that refused to foster their dreams?

No one doubts that nineteenth-century American blacks, both before and after slavery, faced exceedingly narrow options. In fact, George and Eliza saw no path at all in America to fulfilling their dreams of peace, security, and respect. Similarly, nineteenth-century novels are full of stories about poor white girls, city girls like Stephen Crane’s Maggie and small-town girls like Theodore Dreiser’s Carrie, struggling against long odds merely to survive. But Madeleine Lee, Mrs. Lightfoot Lee, the central figure in Henry Adams’s Democracy: An American Novel (1880), was distinctive. Young, beautiful, intelligent and well educated, wealthy and connected, Madeleine Lee emerged from the devastation of the death of her husband and son in search of meaning in her life. Surely society had ways to use her time and talents that would distract her from her loss and leave her accomplished and fulfilled—useful.

Henry Brooks Adams (1838–1918) was a leading figure in the Washington power circles of the second half of the nineteenth century. A scholar and author, a sometime Harvard professor of medieval history, he was deeply concerned about the rise of corporate power and political corruption in post–Civil War America in the period frequently referred to as the age of the robber barons. Adams’s authorship of Democracy, with its slashing picture of political corruption in Washington, was not revealed during his lifetime, though guessing who might have written it was a Washington parlor game for decades.

Madeleine Lee was as personally, socially, and financially secure as a woman could be, but all was not well. After the death of her husband and son, she was bereft, without direction or purpose. She first sought
refuge in the world of New York philanthropy. When this proved unfulfilling, Madeleine moved with her younger sister, Sybil, to Washington, where she was well-known and well connected. Her cousin was married to a U.S. senator, and the Lee family ancestral home had been, before the war, just across the river. Madeleine’s desire to be involved, to be useful, to make a contribution, was soon discovered to mask a deeper desire. “What she wished to see, she thought, was the clash of interests, the interests of . . . a whole continent, centering at Washington; . . . the tremendous forces of government, and the machinery of society, at work. What she wanted, was power.” But there were two problems. One was that while she flattered herself that she wished to do good, post–Civil War politics was rife with corruption. The other, just as challenging, was that she was a woman. How would a woman get power, and if she got it, what would she do with it, and what would it cost her to wield it?

As Madeleine moved in Washington society, she quickly came into contact with a Republican senator from Illinois, Silas P. Ratcliffe, “the Prairie Giant.” The widowed Ratcliffe was a leading figure in the Senate and a leading candidate for the presidency. Ratcliffe, a master politician, sensed Madeleine’s ambition and played on it. Ratcliffe flattered Madeleine that she could reach her goal through him, in partnership with him, as his wife. She had youth, beauty, status, and wealth; he had power. Ratcliffe took Madeleine to the mountaintop and offered her all that she saw below, saying, “You are kind, thoughtful, conscientious, high-minded, cultivated, fitted better than any woman I ever saw, for public duties. Your place is there. You belong among those who exercise an influence beyond their time. I only ask you to take the place that is yours.”

Madeleine was at sea, stranded between the emptiness of all the good things that she had—the money, home, furnishings, fine intelligent friends, and travel—and the power beyond her grasp. Adams wrote, “She had only asked whether any life was worth living for a woman who had neither husband nor children. Was the family all that life had to offer? could she find no interest outside the household? And so, led by this will-of-the-wisp, she had, with her eyes open, walked into the quagmire of politics.” Ratcliffe had, of course, beckoned her forward, but he had not been entirely dishonest. When Madeleine asked him about corruption in politics, he plausibly explained that “great results can only be accomplished by great parties,” so sometimes power had to
be secured through darker arts. “If virtue won’t answer our purpose, we must use vice, or our opponents will put us out of office. . . . To act with entire honesty and self-respect, one should always live in a pure atmosphere, and the atmosphere of politics is impure.”

The Prairie Giant, the man of influence and power, had made his best case, Madeleine had nearly succumbed, but finally, with the help of Sybil and others, the scales fell from her eyes. Evidence was brought to hand that Ratcliffe had accepted a bribe, not to buttress his party against its enemies but to enrich himself. Madeleine was both relieved, as the fever for power had been broken, and devastated by the realization that there was no useful place for her in the world. “Life was emptier than ever now that this dream was over. Yet the worst was not in that disappointment, but in the . . . keen mortification of reflecting how easily she had been led by mere vanity into imagining that she could be of use in the world.”

Adams’s words, put in Madeleine’s mouth, are powerful indeed. What was the American Dream for nineteenth-century women? Was there a dream, outside marriage and family, for women rich or poor? Adams said not. Even a woman as prominent, wealthy, and secure as Madeleine Lee had no path of her own to walk in the world. Madeleine’s disappointment was cushioned by her wealth; the money clearly had uses, but it just as clearly had limitations. Democracy concluded with Madeleine again plagued by ennui, saying, “Sybil, dearest, will you go abroad with me again? . . . I want to go to Egypt, . . . democracy has shaken my nerves to pieces.”

Processes Leading to Inclusion

Exclusion has been a persistent and destructive fact of American social life, but it has not been a permanent and unchanging fact. Over time, the right to dream the American Dream has been opened, at least formally, to new and increasingly diverse groups. Critically, the core ideas of the American Creed—liberty, equality, opportunity—were always available to be claimed by the excluded. Not every claim was honored or even acknowledged immediately; resistance was continuous and often tenacious, but the claimants had Jefferson’s words and America’s best sense of itself on their side.
Vernon Parrington, a prominent historian of the early twentieth century, explained the power of the American Creed as an inclusionary vehicle. He wrote, “The humanitarian idealism of the Declaration has always echoed as a battle cry in the hearts of those who dream of an America dedicated to democratic ends. It cannot be long ignored or repudiated, for . . . it is constantly breaking out in fresh revolt.” To the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights, later generations of Americans added the Gettysburg Address, the Pledge of Allegiance, and the “I Have a Dream” speech of Martin Luther King Jr. These sacred texts evoke the central tenets of the American Dream in each new generation. Poor white men, women, and minorities achieved rights incrementally and over time as they doggedly pressed for the right to share in the promise of the American Dream. Paul Berman makes the critically important point that all these movements were long-term “campaigns to lead one sector of society after another upward from the gloom of bottom-place standing in the social hierarchy into the glorious mediocrity of the American middle.”

The long and winding spiral staircase that leads to “the glorious mediocrity of the American middle” is well-worn because, as Pauline Maier has observed, “the ultimate authority of the Declaration,” and of the American Creed and American Dream more generally, “rests, as it always has, . . . in the hearts and minds of the people, and its meaning changes as new groups and new causes claim its mantle, constantly, reopening the issue of what the nation’s ‘founding principles’ demand.” But hearts and minds do not change mysteriously; there are no showers of moral clarity that leave them pure and new. Usually society must evolve and change in ways that draw old ideas, or at least their existing institutional embodiments, into question. Nobel Prize–winning economist Robert William Fogel has described this process, arguing, “There has been a recurring lag between the vast technological transformations and the human adjustments to these transformations. It is this lag that has provoked the crises that periodically usher in profound reconsiderations of ethical values, that produce new agendas for . . . social reform, and that give rise to political movements that champion the new agendas.” Socioeconomic change can so reconstitute society that its political structures no longer seem to promote the fundamental principles of equity and justice that Americans believe is their birthright.

Key dynamics creating change within American society have included democratization, westward expansion, the rise of markets, urbanization,
industrialization, education, and the transition from physical to mental labor. These have steadily carried yesterday’s others closer to the center of American life. Great differences in status, wealth, and opportunity still remain, and some of them are growing, but over time new groups of contestants entered the great game, learned its rules, and began to take home at least some of the prizes. The easy availability of land, the presence of a whole continent to conquer and tame, created a powerful and enduring sense that America was the land of opportunity. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur, Alexis de Tocqueville, Frederick Jackson Turner, and many others have been eloquent on these points.

How, then, has American society and the opportunities that it provided to citizens, whether the “normative” white male or those once marginalized and excluded, evolved and changed over four centuries? This book tells that story by looking closely at both the claims our politicians and their elite allies make for American exceptionalism and widespread opportunity and the doubts and reservations expressed by our greatest novelists and storytellers.