



# We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity

*Paul Spickard*

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As the twentieth century closes, ethnicity stands out as a powerful force for binding people together in a sense of shared origins and worldview. But this emphasis on a people's uniqueness can also develop into a distorted rationale for insularity, inter-ethnic animosity, or, as we have seen in this century, armed conflict. Ethnic identity clearly holds very real consequences for individuals and peoples, yet there is not much agreement on what exactly it is or how it is formed. The growing recognition that ethnicity is not fixed and inherent, but elastic and constructed, fuels the essays in this collection. Regarding identity as a dynamic, on-going, formative and transformative process, *We Are a People* considers narrative -- the creation and maintenance of a common story -- as the keystone in building a sense of peoplehood. Myths of origin, triumph over adversity, migration, and so forth, chart a group's history, while continual additions to the larger narrative stress moving into the future as a people. Still, there is more to our stories as individuals and groups. Most of us are aware that we take on different roles and project different aspects of ourselves depending on the situation. Some individuals who have inherited multiple group affiliations from their families view themselves not as this or that but all at once. So too with ethnic groups. The so-called hyphenated Americans are not the only people in the world to recognize or embrace their plurality. This relatively recent acknowledgment of multiplicity has potentially wide implications, destabilizing the limited (and limiting) categories inscribed in, for example, public policy and discourse on race relations. *We Are a People* is a path-breaking volume, boldly illustrating how ethnic identity works in the real world.

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