

The Know-Nothings and the Tea Party: A Case Study Analysis of America's Enduring  
Strand of Nativist Politics

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## **Abstract**

Racism, discrimination, and prejudice are still very prevalent issues in contemporary America. Such plaguing problems have proved to have staying power in American culture, even as America as a nation continually changes with time. One such persistent form of discrimination is nativism, which in America, is omnipresent throughout the country's political history and continues to this day. This paper will use John Higham's definition of nativism: "nativism "[. . .] as intense opposition to an internal minority on the ground of its foreign (i.e., 'un-American') connections" (Higham 4). Although anti-foreign sentiments are not solely an American phenomenon, in the American context of political nativism, some interesting nuances can be examined when analyzing the country's past with the current political climate in mind. American nativists' opposition to 'un-American' people and values seems to be a cultural trend that has remained largely unchanged for over a century and a half. Examining precisely what political nativism looks like today in America and providing a case study of what political nativism looked like in its earliest political form, circa 1850 in America, is the primary goal of this analysis. By highlighting contemporary nativism, as well as mid-nineteenth century nativism, this paper will provide readers with a better understanding of how America's cultural phenomenon of nativism in politics has hardly changed over time.

The first half of this paper will highlight what contemporary political nativism looks like in America, who supports it and why. An examination of anti-Obama attitudes and beliefs, particularly from the Tea Party and Birther movement,

with prove to be very illustrative. Additionally, this paper will provide a more detailed examination of this nativism strand in America and will illuminate a cultural trend that predates the Birther movement, the Tea Party and even the Republican Party. By analyzing the first explicit and significant nativist political party in America's history, the Know-Nothing party, the second half of this paper will highlight how the Know-Nothings operationalized political nativism in America during the mid-nineteenth century.

Looking at bookend examples of political nativism in America's history, this case study approach will reveal to readers that a significant amount of Americans still discriminate against others in similar ways to their mid-nineteenth century nativist counterparts<sup>1</sup>. By engaging with primary and secondary literature from both periods, as well examining how the Know-Nothings have been studied in the past, it will become apparent to readers that nativism in general, as a cultural trend, remains very similar today to as it did in antebellum America. Specifically, this paper focuses much on the beliefs towards the targeted cultural 'others', or groups labeled as 'un-American', that the Tea Partiers and Birthers of today, and the Know-Nothing party of years past, have so adamantly profess are destroying their America. Investigating these groups' views of their idealized United States of America becomes very telling in terms of American discrimination. By examining these two eras' bout with political nativism, it becomes clear that America still has

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<sup>1</sup> I recognize that there are many more explicitly nativist groups existing between the period of the Know-Nothing movement and the time of the Tea Party and Birther movements; however, this paper aims to use these three specific groups as illustrative examples of early political nativism and contemporary political nativism. Thus, I have intentionally omitted these other nativist groups in American history.

much work to be done if it truly wants to be the ideal asylum for the world's citizens in need.

### **Introduction: Old Nativism as New Racism**

In contemporary America, some citizens claim that racism, prejudice and discrimination, especially institutionally, are not the prevalent issues they were in the past. However, the truth of the matter is that there are still individuals, groups and institutions who hold racist, prejudicial and discriminatory beliefs towards other groups and would rather not see a post-racial America come to fruition. This paper will closely examine and analyze the beliefs, attitudes and views of such Americans, from two very different eras in American history. It is important to note that this paper is not intended to be a psychological study of the roots or origins of prejudice in individuals. In the academic realm of psychology, there exists much study and research on this subject, particularly on the biological aspects of the brain and the scientific nature of prejudice (Passer et al. 726-727). Although the discipline of psychology lends itself to such an analysis as this, this paper will take an American studies approach, utilizing interdisciplinary methods for analysis, rather than a strictly psychological perspective.

In addition, this paper's analysis innately pertains to a topic that is very political in nature. However, for the purposes of this research, the focus is not on the political views, but instead focuses more on the cultural aspect of nativism in the American context. This paper will use a fusion of Peter Jackson's and Don Mitchell's definitions of culture and shall be defined as,

[. . .] the codes with which meaning is constructed, conveyed, and understood.  
[. . .] Cultures are not simply systems of meaning and value carried around in the head. They are made concrete through patterns and social organization. Culture is the way the social relations of a group are structured and shaped: but it is also the way those shapes are experienced, understood and interpreted. Cultures therefore also involve relations of power, reflected in patterns of dominance and subordination. (Jackson 2-3)

In addition,

culture is understood both as a way of life – encompassing ideas, attitudes, languages, practices, institutions, and structures of power – and a whole range of cultural practices: artistic forms, texts, canons, architecture, mass-produced commodities, and so forth. (Mitchell 14)

With this joint understanding, we can therefore conceptualize culture as a site of struggle. As different individuals, groups and institutions vie for resources and power, shared meanings and values are continuously contested and negotiated in society. Exemplifying such contestation is the realm of politics. Culture is thus politically charged as policies, legislation and governments are frequently the battlegrounds for such contests. From America's past, the Know-Nothing party, and presently the Tea Party and Birther movements, are the examples this analysis will use to illuminate this historically significant struggle of political nativism in America.

The first half of this paper's analysis also largely concerns itself with right wing, conservative elements in the American political system, particularly the outspoken detractors of current President Barack Obama. At times, the Tea Partiers and Birthers have claimed to be nonpartisan groups, but the demographic reality is that right wing conservatives dominate both in terms of leadership and membership. This paper does not intend to conflate the Republican Party with Tea Partiers or Birthers, but there are moments when the lines are blurred as to which group is represented, as membership in one group is not exclusive to another. As the

Tea Party and Birther movements are social movements, and not political parties, distinguishing one group from another is acutely challenging. Specifically, Tea Partiers are frequently Republican Party members and supporters, and Birthers are frequently Tea Partiers and Republican Party sympathizers. I hope that this introduction will not confuse readers with this ambiguous political labeling exercise.

## **Section 1: The Obama Cruc**

The presidency of Barack Hussein Obama has been, and is continuously met with, much disdain and contempt, particularly from right wing conservatives. Even before his inauguration, dissenters have harshly criticized him. Criticism of policy, ideology and leadership are to be expected for anyone with aspirations of working in the Oval Office. However, during Barack Obama's first campaign for the United States presidency between February 2007 and November 2008, a unique criticism and unprecedented form of political attack took place (Pearson and Long par. 1). During his presidential campaign, a belief emerged among a substantial number of Americans that Barack Obama was not born in the United States and thus is constitutionally disqualified from holding Presidential office. Article Two, Section 1, Clause 5 of the United States Constitution states,

No Person except a natural born Citizen, or a Citizen of the United States, at the time of the Adoption of this Constitution, shall be eligible to the Office of President; neither shall any person be eligible to that Office who shall not have attained to the Age of thirty five Years, and been fourteen Years a Resident within the United States. (US Const. art. II, sec. 1, clause 5)

This section is the focal point for attacks made against Obama and his Presidential eligibility by certain groups of Americans.

By 2011, the accusers, 'Birthers', became a prominent aspect in public discourse (Hughey 163). The Birther movement makes the claim that President Obama is not an American citizen. However, the Birthers are not alone in maintaining that President Obama is un-American. Other groups, such as the Tea Party, also assert that he is Kenyan, Muslim, a socialist, and the anti-Christ, among other things (Parker and Barreto 191). Following such powerful claims that resonated with many Americans, counterarguments and statements from other groups claimed that the Birthers and the Tea Partiers were merely racist Americans who could not bear to see a black President running their country (Parker and Barreto 9). Certainly, between the Birther movement and the Tea Party, racist views may influence some individual members. Nevertheless, both movements adamantly profess that racism is not a factor in their beliefs. Instead, both movements make claims that they are the true patriots, defending their nation and freedom (Lundskow 535). It is clear that the Birthers and Tea Partiers see themselves as being more than merely racist groups.

The next few sections of this analysis argues that the Birther movement and Tea Party are not overtly racist. Instead, they are nativist; something that is more acceptable in America. In contemporary America, the consensus and adopted norm are that racist views, especially institutional racism, are frowned upon; however, political nativism is a more acceptable, albeit contested, alternative. Political nativism is far from being a recent phenomenon in American culture and history. A detailed examination of the Birthers and the Tea Party will illuminate how these two social movements perpetuate America's continual endeavor with nativist politics.



## 1.1 The Birth of the Birthers

To contextualize the Birthers, a brief history of the movement will be of service. As early as his campaign for president in 2007, conspiracy theories began to circulate asserting that Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen of the United States (Tesler and Sears 127). As such, because of Article Two of the United States Constitution, he is ineligible to be President of the United States of America. From there, these Birthers burst onto the political scene alleging all types of theories about Obama's background, including the theories that his true place of birth is Kenya, that he lost his U.S. citizenship when he became a citizen of Indonesia in childhood, and that he was simply born a dual citizen and therefore is not a natural-born citizen (Obamaconspiracy.org). There are still more fringe theories about Barack Obama's background; however, these numerous views are often very complex, divergent and at times incomprehensible except to the theorists themselves (Obamaconspiracy.org). The most common and general view held by all the Birthers is that Barack Hussein Obama was never born in the United States of America (Hughey 163). As with all conspiracy theories, there are multiples layers to the original claim and this will be explored shortly.

The origin of the Birther conspiracy that Barack Obama is not a natural-born citizen takes place somewhere on the Internet. It is because of the diffuse nature of the Internet that makes the exact source, or moment when the first question was raised about Obama's background, difficult to identify without doubt. However, it is known that the idea sparking the Birther conspiracy came from an unexpected location. In a memo to Hillary Clinton on March 19, 2007, Mark Penn, chief

campaign strategist for Hilary Clinton during the 2008 Democratic Party

presidential primaries, wrote,

All of these articles about his boyhood in Indonesia and his life in Hawaii are geared towards showing his background is diverse, multicultural . . . It also exposes a very strong weakness for him – his roots to basic American values and culture are at best limited. I cannot imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values. (Tesler and Sears 127)

From there, the Internet facilitated the rise of this conspiratorial nature of thinking, acting as a catalyst for this fringe theory. A few sources cite right wing forum pages, while many others suggest that during the presidential primaries, a few anonymous emails from supporters of Hilary Clinton questioned Obama's citizenship and are responsible for dispensing the Birther movement (Avlon 196). At this moment, it is next to impossible to pinpoint the exact original outlet of the conspiracy theory because of how much content there currently is online, and how the Birther movement's theories have become so diverse and expanded<sup>2</sup>. However, it is safe to say that the Internet is in no small part responsible for expanding the theory. It was during the Democratic primaries that the Birthers dismissed the "Certification of Live Birth" released by the Obama camp because it was "a computer-generated printout" and therefore not "a copy of the original 1961 document" (Howell 429). The releasing of such documentation only seemed to fuel the Birther movement further.

Shortly after this time, key personalities started to rise to the fore of the Birther movement, such as Orly Taitz, a former real estate agent, dentist and online-

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<sup>2</sup> If readers search the Internet for common Obama conspiratorial beliefs, such as "Obama is Kenyan", the results are plentiful; there are seemingly endless amounts of Internet pages and forums dedicated to this conspiracy theory.

trained lawyer (Avlon 202). Taitz has been a leading figure in the Birther movement since its inception and has made numerous claims regarding the President's ineligibility to serve as such, ranging from conspiracies involving forged Social Security numbers to the Sandy Hook shooting being set up as part of Obama's master plan (Avlon 204-205). However grand and numerous these claims become, they all have their root and origin stemming from the original belief that President Barack Obama is not an American citizen. For Taitz, an immigrant herself, and other Birthers, it is all part of a carefully constructed plot: "The Muslims have said they plan on destroying the U.S. from the inside out. What better way to start than at the highest level, through the President of the United States, of their own!" (Avlon 196). This was proclaimed via chain email during the 2008 campaign (Avlon 196).

John Avlon, an investigative journalist, met with Orly Taitz, who he states is, "the face of the Birther lawsuits in the media, making twenty-nine trips across the United States in 2009, filing more lawsuits and doing more than 100 interviews" (Avlon 200). During Avlon's time with Taitz, he learned that she had originally believed that there was a communist or Nazi conspiracy at work when it came to Obama. She explains, "I realized that Obama was another Stalin [. . .] It's a cross between Stalinist USSR and Nazi Germany" (Avlon 200). Taitz was born to a Jewish family in the former Soviet Union and then immigrated to Israel where she completed her dentistry education (Fletcher par. 3) It is foreseeable why someone who has spent most of their life in these areas would have anxieties about a Stalin-like, or Muslim, or anti-Semitic President of his or her country. Taitz asserts, "I'm just concerned that our constitutional freedoms are being taken away" (Avlon 203).

This is a common tactic utilized by conspiracy theorists – claim that you are the true patriot, on the vanguard for American liberties and freedom. Taitz is no different from the rest of the Birthers who all appeal to a nativist and xenophobic sentiment in America.

With much public discourse surrounding President Barack Obama’s citizenship in April of 2011, Lorretta Fuddy, director of the Hawaii Department of Health, released the long-form version of Barack Hussein Obama’s birth certificate (Fuddy, *Letter to The Honorable Barack Obama*). After this release, Birthers quickly questioned its authenticity. “Instead of removing their bumper stickers, Birthers [. . .] amend[ed] them by hand to read, ‘Where’s the REAL birth certificate?’” (Howell 429). Some skeptics cited smudges, mysterious checkmarks, the signature of a conveniently dead attending physician, a misspelled word, unusual language, and unexplained wear marks on the certificate as evidence that it was crudely photo-shopped (Howell 429). Joseph Farah, another leading figure in the Birther movement, emerged and suggested the long-form version raised more questions than answers, noting “dozens of questions [. . .] concerning Barack Obama’s parentage, his adoption, (and) his citizenship status throughout his life” (Howell 430). Clearly, the Birthers were unwilling to accept Obama’s birth certificate as an answer to their doubts about Obama’s Americanness.

As aforementioned, the Birther movement resonated most strongly with committed conservatives with ties to the Republican Party. Greg Sagan writes, “the people who are the most vocal in their conviction that Obama is foreign born tend to be conservative Republicans” (Sagan par. 12). For example, in April 2010, a *New*

*York Times*/CBS News poll reported that 40% of those who describe themselves as very conservative believe that the president was born in another country (Howell 430). A year later, in February 2011, a Public Policy Poll reported that “51% of likely Republican primary voters believe that Obama was born outside the United States” (Howell 430). There are many other numbers and statistical analyses that researchers have conducted that have similar findings (Tesler and Sears; Parker and Barreto; Murphee and Royster). The important part for our purposes is that the Birthers had struck a chord with a segment of the American public, particularly with conservative Americans. Many have disregarded this movement as a lunatic, paranoid fringe movement from its beginning; however, irrespective of how one views the Birthers, their impact on contemporary American culture is undeniable.

Jaclyn Howell, of the University of Kansas, writes on the early stages of the Birther movement and states, “the Birthers owe much of their public presence to the Internet, when in addition to their official website, WorldNetDaily.com, a right wing political organization with an estimated two million visitors a month, is particularly influential” (Howell 430). She believes that WorldNetDaily has done more than any other website to advance the Birther narrative. The website’s founder, Joseph Farah, a conservative activist, evangelical Christian and outspoken Tea Partier, published several stories on the Birthers and in 2009 produced a DVD commentary titled *A Question of Eligibility: Is Obama’s Presidency Constitutionally Legitimate?* (Carpenter par. 14). Together, the website and the film make Farah “a leading impresario of America’s disaffected right,” and on the website, the Birthers praise Farah as a “hero” and note, “he is helping to awaken the American people to the greatest threat

to our Constitutional Republic” (Howell 430). The resonance that the Birther movement has among committed conservatives must not go overlooked.

As courts all over America, as well as relevant experts and fact-checking websites, universally reject Birther accusations, Birthers persist with their claims against Obama (Howell 430). Despite the Obama administration’s release of legal birth documentation and the defeat of lawsuits questioning his presidential legitimacy, Obama’s belonging is far from settled. Matthew W. Hughey acknowledges this and remarks, “citizenship is not just a matter of legal status; it is a matter of belonging, which requires recognition by other members of the community. Community members participate in drawing the boundaries of citizenship and defining who is entitled to civil, political, and social rights by granting or withholding recognition” (Hughey 177). Hughey also identifies that this withholding recognition of Obama as a citizen is not limited to Birtherism, but applies to its cousin, the Tea Party.

## **1.2 Setting the Table for a Tea Party**

The rise of the contemporary Tea Party, just like the Birther movement, did not occur in a cultural vacuum. Most sources credit CNBC reporter Rick Santelli for planting the seed that would become the Tea Party when he delivered a rant against the Obama administration on the floor of the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, speaking on ‘Squawk Box’ (Ballhaus par. 1). Santelli exclaimed, “how many people want to pay for your neighbour’s mortgages that has an extra bathroom and can’t pay their bills? Raise their hand! President Obama, are you listening?” (Ballhaus par. 1). Amid

the crowd's whistles and cheers, he suggested he might organize a Chicago Tea Party later that year in which capitalists would dump "some derivative securities" into Lake Michigan (Zernike 20-21). From there, the movement was born and coincidentally enough, within days of President Obama's inauguration in January 2009, grassroots protests commenced (Williamson, Skocpol, and Coggin 26). The Tea Party made its national presence known.

For our purposes, it is important to note that the Tea Party has a more broad and generalized agenda than the Birther movement, which has the sole purpose of proving Obama as un-American. From its beginning, the Tea Party, as a loose confederation of leaders, activists and sympathizers, has said that it is about conservative principles: small government, the free market, and government fiscal responsibility (Parker and Barreto 1). For Tea Partiers, Barack Obama embodies all that is wrong with present-day America. Elizabeth Foley, a constitutional law professor, describes the Tea Party very well in her book, *The Tea Party: Three Principles*. She writes, "the Tea Party is a vast, dispersed, grassroots movement. There is no central leader, organization, or even organizing committee. There are small chapters scattered throughout the country, with rough coordination via social media, the Internet, and local activist groups" (Foley xiii). Foley then continues to explain the connection between the Tea Party and the more mainstream conservative political party in America. She notes that "[. . .] Tea Partiers seem to have no interest in forming an independent third political party, but instead have opportunistically infiltrated existing political parties (mostly the Republican Party), pressuring them to embrace principles of importance to the movement" (Foley xiii).

As one can see, in the political era of President Obama, the Tea Party seems to be a manifestation of anxieties about change, as they are a reactionary, populist movement – one which, like the Birthers, wants to blame the man steering the ship.

In America, the Tea Party as a social movement is distinct from the Birther movement; however, the two share a great overlap in ideologies. With outlandish claims that Hollywood was involved with the 2008 Presidential elections, that the President is the son of Malcom X, and even that a young Barry Soetoro<sup>3</sup> (Barack Obama) was sent to Mars as part of an experiment, it becomes conceivable why many people, American or not, would lump Birthers with these other conspiracy theories (Obamaconspiracy.org). However, the Birthers, much like many Tea Partiers, have a significant preoccupation with the current President's American-ness. Coined Obama Derangement Syndrome, or Obamaphobia, these 'conditions' the Tea Party suffers from, along with the Birthers claims, are two sides of the same coin (Parker and Barreto 192; Avlon 42). These are all nativist attitudes directed at Barack Obama, which seek to undermine his legitimacy as President of the United States.

These implicit, and at times explicit, nativist attitudes towards Barack Obama within both movements are, for our purposes and analysis, the unifying aspect of the two social movements. Both the Tea Party and the Birthers see Barack Obama as the focal point for all that is wrong in America today (Parker and Barreto 5; Howell 438). Richard Hofstadter's seminal work, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, lends itself to these groups' behaviours and claims. Hofstadter argued that some

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<sup>3</sup> Ann Dunham, Barack Obama's mother, married her second husband, Barack's stepfather, Lolo Soetoro, and this leads some Americans to refer to Barack with this surname. (Scott 103)



members of dominant social groups will use any means at their disposal to forestall what they believe is a loss in social prestige as social change takes root. For him, paranoia was not a clinical diagnosis. Rather, he used the term as a means of describing the ways in which dominant groups, and the right wing movements to which they become attached, perceived social change as an attempt to subvert their group's status in American society. At the crux of the paranoid style, according to Hofstadter, is the perception of a "vast and sinister conspiracy [. . .] set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life" (Hofstadter 29). In response to such threats, to protect itself from "forces of almost transcendent power," right wing movements must not dispense the "usual methods of political give-and-take, but an all-out crusade" is needed to defeat the enemy (Hofstadter 29). Hofstadter's work seems to resonate today as Birthers stand behind their claims and the Tea Party crusades onwards.

Both the Birthers and the Tea Party view Obama as a fundamental threat to American values and to the American way of life (Parker and Barreto 5; Howell 438). Christopher S. Parker and Matt A. Barreto, political science professors at the University of Washington, remark,

if the Tea Party is in any way similar to right wing movements of the past, we think it likely that President Obama represents a threat to the mostly male, middle-aged and older, middle-class, white segment of the population on par with ethnocultural and political threats that motivated participation in right wing movements. (Parker and Barreto 5)

In addition, Parker and Barreto observe that a study issued by Democracy Corps in 2013 reports that 90 percent of Tea Party supporters believe President Obama to be a socialist. As such, these Tea Party supporters view him as the "defining and motivating threat to the country and its well-being", because to be a socialist is to be

un-American in right wing conservative ideology (Parker and Barreto 5). It is perceivable that the Tea Party, its supporters, and the Birthers may perceive social change as subversion and come to fear it. In 2010, Frank Rich, a *New York Times* columnist, seemingly captured this perceived threat when he wrote,

the conjunction of a black president and a female speaker of the house – topped off by a wise Latina on the Supreme Court and a powerful gay Congressional committee chairman – would sow fears of disenfranchisement among a dwindling and threatened minority in the country no matter what policies were in play [. . .] When you hear demonstrators chant the slogan “Take our country back!,” these are the people they want to take the country back from. (Rich par. 11)

Along these same lines are the continuous cries of the Tea Party and Birthers that they have “lost their country” to ‘others’ like President Obama who usurped what is rightfully “theirs”:

In their lifetimes, they have seen their Christian faith purged from schools [. . .] They have seen their factories shuttered in the thousands and their jobs outsourced in the millions to Mexico and China. They have seen trillions of tax dollars go for Great Society programs, but have seen no Great Society [. . .] They watch on cable TV as illegal aliens walk into their country, are rewarded with free education and health care, and take jobs at lower pay than American families can live [and] then carry Mexican flags in American cities and demand U.S. citizenship [. . .] Neither they nor their kids ever benefited from affirmative action, unlike Barack and Michelle Obama [. . .] America was once their country. They sense they are losing it. (Howell 436)

This account suggests that the change witnessed in America, prior to and, during the time of the Tea Partiers was simply too much change for some. As Rich indicates, these people believe their country is being stolen from them and that their connection to their beloved America is rapidly dissolving. Jaclyn Howell notes that a “feeling of disorder is therefore evident in a perceived loss of a hegemonic, White order and also the disappearance of capitalism and ‘freedom’” (Howell 436). Parker and Barreto also contend that although it is true that conventional conservatives do

not embrace social change, they realize that incremental *evolutionary* change is sometimes necessary as a means of preventing *revolutionary* change.

The reactionary conservative doesn't want to stop at the prevention of change: he prefers to reverse whatever progress has been made to that point. He hopes for America's return to a point in history during which the cultural dominance of the group to which he belongs remains unchallenged: this appears consistent with the Tea Party's desire to 'take their country back'. (Parker and Barreto 6)

This presents a great irony of relating themselves to the Boston Tea Party of the 1770s. An examination of political nativism and how it manifests itself in the reactionary conservative discourse and rhetoric on President Barack Obama will illuminate how this type of language and thinking is nothing new in American culture.

### **1.3 Identity Politics and Cultural Racism: Barack Obama as the 'Other' President**

Together, both the Tea Party and the Birther movement are engaging in a classic case of identity politics where they portray Barack Obama as their 'other'. Both groups predicate their idealized identity on who they believe is best suited to represent America and what 'America' itself means. "Notions of identity are invoked in defining our sense of SELF and in marking ourselves off from various culturally constructed OTHERS" (McDowell and Sharp 132). This is precisely the basis for what some commentators call 'Obamaphobia' or 'Obama Derangement Syndrome', where Tea Partiers and Birthers see Barack Obama as a perverse version of a president (Parker and Barreto 192; Avlon 42). The position of the president has always been filled by an exclusive group of white males and is almost sacrosanct, as it dates back to the Founding Fathers and their political institutions. As the first

black President in America's history, Barack Obama did in fact face overt racism from some of his opponents and detractors (Parker and Barreto 9). These citizens, however, were truly the minority, as these explicitly racist views are increasingly being associated with true fringe and extremist views (Parker and Barreto 9-10). Rupert Brown, a social psychologist of the University of Sussex, observes, "levels of overt prejudice were falling whilst other forms of discrimination were continuing [stimulating] a number of new conceptualizations of prejudice over the past 20 years" (Brown 217). Brown later states that "these come in a multitude of guises [and] that 'old-fashioned' or 'red-neck' prejudice is gradually being supplanted by a 'modern' form in which the antipathy towards outgroups is symbolically or indirectly expressed" (Brown 217). This explanation wonderfully illuminates the tactics utilized by the Tea Party, and especially the Birthers. As a type of xenophobic nativism, both movements attempt to prove Barack Obama's 'otherness' and how he is un-American, downplaying the role of racism in their views.

As aforementioned, the Tea Party and its members, as well as the Birthers, are not explicitly racist groups, even if they both have racist overtones. As history has revealed, there have certainly been episodic moments and individuals who have openly showcased racist behaviours and language (Parker and Barreto 2). These, however, are the exception rather than the norm. Such incidents are isolated from the agendas of their respective movements, and both the Tea Party and the Birthers seek to acknowledge that their members are not purportedly racist. However, while denying that they are racist, they introduce a new kind of racism with their views. As Rupert Brown suggested, 'old-fashioned' or 'red-neck' prejudice is shifting to

where opposition and hostility is symbolically or indirectly expressed. Sociology professor Ali Rattansi offers one such expression in what he calls 'cultural racism'. Rattansi's concept of cultural racism is an explanation of when a purely cultural or religious argument devoid of any reference to biological relations is made and the term 'racism' is not appropriate. He describes,

In principle, a form of group identification or classification that relies only on criteria such as mode of dress, language, customs and religion, to name but a few, might more properly be subsumed under the ideas of *ethnicism* or *ethnocentrism* rather than having any connotations of 'race', and may be said to border on *xenophobia* if the criteria include membership of national groups and contain elements of hostility to 'foreigners' and non-nationals [. . .] To argue, as many do, that there has to be an explicit reference to biological features such as shape of nose or skin color or genetic inheritance if a proposition is to be described as racist is strictly speaking accurate. But it misses the point that generalizations, stereotypes, and other forms of cultural essentialism rest and draw upon a wider reservoir of concepts that are in circulation in popular and public culture. Thus, the racist elements of any particular proposition can only be judged by understanding the general context of public and private discourses in which ethnicity, national identifications, and race coexist in blurred and overlapping forms without clear demarcations. (Rattansi 104-105)

Applying Rattansi's explanation of how cultural racism is distinct, but not separate, from conventional racism and other forms of prejudice or discrimination helps to explain the rhetoric and beliefs of the Tea Party and Birthers towards Barack Obama. Moreover, as mentioned earlier, both groups adamantly assert that they are not racist (Parker and Barreto 9). Utilizing cultural racism to highlight both groups' viewpoints towards President Barack Obama will allow for a deeper understanding of why the issue of racism is so contentious from both inside and outside perspectives of the movements.

With these groups' adoption of cultural racism, one can understand how the 'old-fashioned' or 'red-neck' racism is being displaced. Many commentators claim that *institutional* racism is no longer a significant problem in America because using race as a biological explanation, which is associated with this old-style racism, is

now unacceptable (Parks and Hughey xix-xx). Cultural racism offers an alternative, as the claims against Obama are not genetically based, but instead attempt to reveal that somehow his views and values are not compatible with the true and patriotic American values (which they themselves define). For example, a 15 December 2010 comment reads, “if Obama didn’t act like an alien, nobody would question his birth place. But he is so un-American in words and actions, people look for an explanation. The Birthers are just one group of questioners” (Hughey 172). Other comments furthered the narrative of ‘othering’ Obama through cultural racism stating, “it is clear that Obama does not meet the ‘spirit’ of the requirement that a president be a natural born citizen. Hawaii is pretty far from mainland US, Kenya is farther still and Indonesia still further” (Hughey 172). In both comments, the respondents avoid overtly racist remarks regarding biology, and instead emphasize how Obama is not truly American and does not possess the necessary ethos to be president of the United States. Tea Parties and Birthers attempt to hide their racist views by focusing on culture.

Frequently, when the issue of race arises on the topic of Obama, many Tea Partiers and Birthers will deny that race has any role in their interpretations (Parker and Barreto 9). As Matthew W. Hughey illustrates, the Birthers attempt to distance themselves from being associated with biological racism with comments like,

I don’t care what race or races Obama is. I don’t like his white side either. Race has absolutely nothing to do with it. I have two problems with Obama. First, he is a Marxist. Second, he is ineligible to be President until he proves with a birth certificate that he was born here. Its [sic] in the Constitution. If you don’t like that then change the Constitution. Obama would like to trash the Constitution anyway.

I believe these rumors about Barack Obama not being from America are true. I mean, who in this country would name their child Barack Hussane [sic] Obama. Remember Saddam Hussane. [sic] Coincidence? (Hughey 171)

The Birthers assertions of a race-neutral stance are accurate if one is referring to old-fashioned, biological racism. Accusations that Obama wants to do away with the American Constitution and paralleling him to an Iraqi and Muslim dictator may be free of biological racism. However, these attempts to portray Barack Obama as very un-American and thus, as a person who should not be running their country, are not entirely free from racism, as these views exemplify cultural racism, which is still racism. Representations of Obama as the un-American 'other' are not as simple as the above statements. A detailed examination of how cultural racism is employed by the Tea Party and the Birther movements will illuminate how they utilize such tactics for their nativist agendas.

#### **1.4 President Barack Obama's 'Other' Quality: Being un-American**

It was not long after Obama's January 2009 inauguration that literature, images and other mediums began to circulate, attempting to 'other' the President, but not simply because of any biologically rooted qualities (Berlet 307). A slew of books emerged to spread this message of 'otherness'. There were books that demonized Obama, stopping short of overt conspiracy theories, but instead using the frame of a threat to the nation:

- Newt Gingrich, *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular-Socialist Machine*
- Sean Hannity, *Conservative Victory: Defeating Obama's Radical Agenda*
- Brad O'Leary, *The Audacity of Deceit: Barack Obama's War on American Values* (Berlet 307)

These are only a few examples of the many titles that surfaced, all attempting to portray Obama as incompatible with America and its values<sup>4</sup>. Race was not the sole cause of the doubts about Obama's 'Americanness'. Rather, because Obama seemed too different from many,

Americans on several dimensions: his hybrid ethnicity, his unusual name, his Muslim middle name, his intentionally traveled childhood, and his family tree spanning three continents, all of which were perceived as too different from the typical Anglo-Protestant American. (Parks and Hughey 76)

The proponents of such views want Obama out of power because he is not like them and they are more than willing to vocalize this sentiment.

Tea Partiers, Birthers and many conservatives alike actively engage in presenting Obama as un-American. Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck are two of the best known and most influential of those employing such antagonistic language (Reifowitz 180). In a November 17, 2009 *Washington Times* piece, Wesley Pruden, the former editor in chief of the stridently conservative *Washington Times*, shared his thoughts on Obama and stated,

it's no fault of the president that he has no natural instinct or blood impulse for what the America of 'the fifty-seven states' is about. He was sired by a Kenyan father, born to a mother attracted to men of the third world, and reared by grandparents in Hawaii, a paradise far from the American mainstream. (Pruden par. 7)

Here, Pruden provides a representative remark of many of the claims that many Tea Partiers and Birthers assert. Pruden encapsulates the essence of some of the most common grievances these people make against Obama, as he clearly defines Obama as outside the circle of America because of his "blood" and "natural instincts," and paints him as foreign, exotic, and "outside the mainstream." The use of "sire" – a

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<sup>4</sup> If readers search the Internet for allegations that Obama is un-American, there exists a plethora of different sources making such claims from all different types of mediums: television programs, books, movies, images, advertisements, etc.



term used to describe the breeding of horses, or in popular culture, the process by which vampires reproduce – suggests something unnatural or even nonhuman about Obama. Moreover, “sire” is a racist slur in this context. When Blacks were ‘bred’ for labour; a black man was a ‘buck’ and he would ‘sire’ the ‘bitch’ (Reifowitz 180). Pruden’s highlighting of Barack Obama’s mother, Ann Dunham, and her two ‘third-world’ husbands plays on old racial stereotypes whereby women in interracial sexual relationships must be somehow morally suspect. Moreover, the cryptic-seeming mention of ‘the fifty-seven states’ alludes to a verbal slip Obama made on May 9, 2008:

it is wonderful to be back in Oregon. Over the last fifteen months, we’ve traveled to every corner of the United States. I’ve now been in fifty-seven states? I think one left to go. Alaska and Hawaii, I was not allowed to go. (Reifowitz 180)

The context of the remark makes it clear that Obama meant to say forty-seven states (fifty minus three: one other unnamed continental state plus Alaska and Hawaii). Pruden’s mention of the remark is almost certainly a dog-whistling reference to a rumour spread via email during the campaign that Obama’s “fifty-seven states” comment unwittingly revealed that he is, in fact, a secret Muslim because there are fifty-seven member states of the Organization of the Islamic Conference. “In sum, the statement is a bald attempt to other Obama” (Reifowitz 180). Pruden’s attempt to ‘other’ Obama provides an archetype for many of the claims made by Birthers and Tea Partiers to alienate the President and promote their nativist ideologies.

As Pruden's comment highlights, attempts are made to depict Barack Obama as a Muslim to de-Americanize him. According to Sarah Palin, a figurehead for the Tea Party, Obama,

is someone who sees America, it seems, as being so imperfect, imperfect enough, that he's palling around with terrorists who would target their own country. This is not a man who sees America as you see America and as I see America. (Tesler and Sears 140)

As one can see, attacks made against Obama on the basis of religion attempt to show a connection between Islam and terrorism and how Obama is not just un-American, but anti-America. One of the primary characteristics that Americans view as important to *their* definition of American (in addition to love for one's country and civic engagement) is faith in God, especially the Christian God (Parks and Hughey 77). Obama's Muslim middle name and the fact that some of his family members are Muslim cast doubt on his *Christian* faith. In fact, during the Presidential campaign, several conservative media commentators repeatedly emphasized Obama's middle name to subtly suggest that he is not sufficiently American (Parks and Hughey 77). This is a very commonly used tactic by Obama detractors of all types to prime the audience to think of the President as a Muslim and, by extension, to subtly encourage the conclusion that a Muslim Obama cannot be a loyal American (Parks and Hughey 77). It is certainly true that Obama lived in Indonesia when he was between the ages of six and ten, from 1967 to 1971, where Islam is the dominant religion (Jeffries 30). However, freedom of religion is part of the Indonesian constitution, and in Indonesia, Obama attended a school with students of diverse religious backgrounds (Jeffries 30). In June 2007, *Insight* magazine, a subsidiary of the *Washington Times*, reported that while in Indonesia, Obama attended school at a

“madrassa,” an Arabic word that means “school” but is wrongly associated with extremist institutions that deny the rights of non-Muslims (Jeffries 30). In response, CNN sent a reporter to Obama’s school to investigate the claim, which was revealed to be completely baseless (Jeffries 30). Nonetheless, Tea Partiers and Birthers adhere to the narrative of Barack Obama as the un-American ‘other’.

Paralleling the allegations of Obama’s religion are the statements made by Tea Partiers and Birthers about the President’s biological parents. Barack Obama’s family structure was very different from the nuclear, or traditional, American family, which was privileged and acknowledged as normal when he was born in 1961 (Scott 86). The President’s father, Barack Obama Sr., was born in Kenya and was selected for a special program to attend university in the United States, where he went to the University of Hawaii (Scott 81). Here, Obama met Ann Dunham, whom he would later marry in 1961 (Scott 86). The couple had a son, Barack Obama II, before they divorced three years later (Scott 92). Obama Sr. would eventually return to Kenya in 1964 (Jacobs 165). The President’s mother was Kansas born and spent her childhood and teenage years in a few different states (Scott 43). Her adult life was spent in Hawaii and Indonesia (Scott 102-103). Ann Dunham would eventually meet her second husband, the Javanese Lolo Soetoro, when she resumed her studies at the University of Hawaii after spending two years out of state (Scott 97). Entire biographical books are dedicated to the lives of both Barack Obama Sr. and Ann Dunham (Jacobs; Scott). For our purposes, one need not know their life stories, but rather, recognize and understand that Barack Obama II did indeed have an atypical upbringing and familial life for an American boy. However, his atypical upbringing

does not somehow necessitate that he is an un-American President. Nevertheless, the President's familial background does prove to be a target for his detractors and fuels the nativist objectives of attempting to discover the President's un-Americaness.

On February 24, 2010, Michael Savage, host of *The Savage Nation*, a conservative talk radio show, asserted that President Obama's mother "had contempt for America" and cited as evidence the fact that she married two "third-world men" who were both Muslim (Reifowitz 180). To Savage and his followers, the combination of their religion (in reality Barack Obama Sr., whose father was indeed Muslim, declared himself an atheist early in life) and non-Western origin indicate that any American woman attracted to them must be anti-American, or 'race' traitors (Reifowitz 180-181). Savage and his followers ignore the fact that both Obama's father and stepfather chose to study at American universities where each met and fell in love with his mother (Reifowitz 181). In *Obama's America: Unmaking the American Dream*, author Dinesh D'Souza portrays Ann Dunham as a child abandoner and as a disciple of Barack Obama Sr. D'Souza writes that, sharing "his anti-American, anti-colonial views, [Dunham] was the main vehicle for communicating those views to her son and building his life long obsession with the absentee father" (D'Souza 55). D'Souza also depicts Dunham as a "playgirl" and as never having "serious boyfriends who were white and American" (D'Souza 56). Further, D'Souza writes that Dunham used "her American background and economic and social power to purchase the romantic attention of Third World men" (D'Souza 63).

Unfortunately, Birthers and Tea Partiers do not only depict Ann Dunham as trashy, promiscuous, morally-suspect and anti-American. Barack Obama Sr. is also the target of much of the same criticisms. Sally H. Jacobs writes a biography of Barack Obama Sr., chronicling his entire life until his death in 1982 (Jacobs 251). In her preface, Sally Jacobs acknowledges how Obama II, the current President of the United States of America, is 'othered' simply by association with his father:

Every man who has served as the president of the United States had parents who lived out their lives upon American soil. Barack H. Obama did not. That fact has lent the president with the singular name both a hint of the exotic and – as his critics see it – a whiff of something decidedly un-American. The blood that makes Obama black flows from a place that is distinctly Other. His father, the other Barack H. Obama, did not come from a place known to most Americans, like England or Canada – places where the habits and manners are akin to that of America. Although several of the parents of early presidents were born in England or Ireland, they soon made their way across the channel and built their homes here. But Obama's paternal roots lie in far away Africa, specifically in the Western region of Kenya that is populated by an ethnic group known as Luo. (Jacobs ix)

Jacobs continues to explain some of the cultural practices of the Luo, such as coming-of-age rituals and polygamy (Jacobs ix). These practices, in theory, should not have a direct impact on the President of the United States, but Jacobs acknowledges that,

no other American president could say that about the land of their forefathers, nor would they likely brandish such information even if they could. Such a dramatic reflection of foreign roots – of 'otherness' – is not exactly the kind of thing that wins the hearts and minds of voters in mainstream America. (Jacobs ix)

Jacobs's words seem to be prophetic when it comes to the Tea Party and the Birther movement –especially the Birthers, as their earliest allegations claimed that the President was born in Kenya (Obamaconspiracy.org). Tapping into classic stereotypes of black men being oversexed, chasing after white American women and being absentee fathers, both movements use President Barack Obama's African father as a primary reason for his foreignness, his exoticness, his perverseness, and

his un-Americanness – altogether, his ‘otherness’. By attempting to accentuate and emphasize President Barack Hussein Obama’s African ancestral roots, both the Tea Partiers and Birthers are trying to create a narrative that excludes Barack Obama. As history has revealed, exclusionary politics is nothing new in America. Unfortunately for Mr. Obama, he happens to be the target of America’s contemporary nativist agenda.

In their movements, Tea Partiers and Birthers claim to be the true Americans and patriots of their country. They believe that they are on the vanguard for American values and traditions. Reactionary in many ways politically, both these movements at their core are nativist movements, which contest what they believe are a loss of political and cultural hegemony personified by the leader of their country, Barack Obama. By engaging in cultural racism and attempting to ‘other’ President Barack Obama, both groups are not only communicating who they believe should be in power, but also who gets to decide who should be in power. Racism and exclusion via ‘othering’ are not new phenomena in America; they have been part of American culture for centuries. The difference today is that these now take a more modern, subliminal and nuanced form, which is more socially acceptable than the old methods of exclusion in America. Through both cultural racism and the conspiracy theory that is the Birther movement, nativism is operationalized in contemporary America. Both the Tea Party and the Birther movements perpetuate America’s tradition of political nativism into the present and foreseeable future. Although only time will tell, it seems likely, unfortunately, that nativism will always remain a part of American culture.

## Section 2: The Know-Knowing Legacy

An examination of history reveals that these nativist attitudes and ideologies of the Tea Party and Birthers are nothing new in American culture. Exclusionary politics and practices via ‘othering’ certain groups and individuals is centuries old. This classic binary of the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ mentality is persistent in America’s history. It is crucial to recognize that for the most part, the privileged ‘us’ group with whom the nativists self-identify and represent has remained the same identity throughout American history. Generally, white, Anglo-Saxon, protestant and frequently (but less so in present day) males are the ‘us’ group. This has remained the constant identity that nativists claim as the ‘true’ American citizen (Parker and Barreto 5). It is the ‘them’ or the ‘other’ group that is always changing because America is always changing. This targeted subordinate group has differed throughout the last few centuries.

For Tea Partiers and Birthers in the twenty-first century, in the political sphere, President Barack Obama has come to represent the un-American ‘other’ for their groups. Nativist attitudes and beliefs are directed against the President, who as we have seen, has come to represent change in their America. Such political nativism directed against the perceived un-American ‘other’ as a cultural tradition can be traced back to its earliest political beginnings to a movement that most Americans know virtually nothing about – the Know-Nothings (Behdad 116). This political party “[. . .] made hating the ‘alien’ and the immigrant an integral component of American identity” (Behdad 116). Compared to the contemporary movements of the Tea Party and the Birther movement, the Know-Nothing party,

operating in the mid-1850s, functioned in a completely different cultural context (Ramet and Hassenstab 570). The point here is not to understand all the major disparities between antebellum America and the present era, but to recognize and understand that just like their contemporary counterparts, the Know-Nothing party was its period's nativist political party, responding to the group that it believed was destroying its America (Leonard and Parmet 8). With both eras' nativist groups overtly 'othering' their cultural enemies, these nativist groups (the 'us' group), as aforementioned, have remained largely unchanged throughout time, even if the target of such groups (the 'them' group) has continually changed in American history. As a cultural phenomenon, nativism to some extent remains unchanged through time as it continues today. A closer analysis of Know-Nothing nativism will illuminate the connection to the present.

## **2.1 Know-Nothing Nativism: A Cultural Analysis**

Some scholars attribute certain historical events to a seemingly cyclical pattern of nativism (Fry 36). Others point to economic factors; however, the reality is that since the short-lived Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 that authorized the president to expel political dissidents, a paranoid fear of 'foreign influences' has always existed in the United States (Behdad 117). It was not until the mid-nineteenth century that xenophobia became an organized political movement,

[. . .]legitimizing its claim to an exclusive form of national identity. The rise of anti-foreign parties in New York and other cities in the eastern United States during the late 1830s, which eventually grew into the powerful Know-Nothing movement of the 1850s, helped to transform xenophobia into an acceptable and powerful form of patriotism [. . .]. (Behdad 117)



These xenophobic attitudes, under the guise of patriotism, survive to this day and are truly nativist. The Know-Nothing movement played a seminal role in the national identity-building process, as they illustrated how nativism struck a chord with many Americans and continues today.

As a political movement and party operating in the mid-nineteenth century, the Know-Nothings sought to limit all foreign influences that they deemed harmful to America. Fueled mostly by anti-Catholic hostility, the movement was adamantly anti-immigration, particularly against Irish Catholic immigrants, who the Know-Nothings saw as being opposed to republican values because of influences by the hierarchical Papal system (Leonard and Parmet 8). To the Know-Nothings, Irish Catholics were the cultural 'other'. The Know-Nothings operated in a much different cultural context exists in America today. In antebellum America, slavery was rife, the Republican Party was yet to be created, and ideas of 'race' were different than today, as the American majority considered Irish immigrants as non-white people and therefore discriminated against them and opposed them as a group (Ignatiev 2). "[T]hey [Irish immigrants] commonly found themselves thrown together with free Negroes. Irish- and Afro-Americans fought each other and the police, socialized and occasionally intermarried, and developed a common culture of the lowly" (Ignatiev 2). Today, the cultural circumstances for Irish-Americans are much different, as they are not the contemporary targets of xenophobic and nativist attacks. The point here is not to have a complete history of the Know-Nothing Party, but instead to recognize that this party is *the* first relevant nativist party in America and that it operated in a much different America than the America of today. However, it is

important to also recognize that the core ideology and nativist beliefs about who should represent America remain largely unchanged today.

The Know-Nothing party and movement certainly have a detailed history in terms of how scholars have remembered them. Central to the entire historiography of this American political party is the fact that it only operated on a national basis during the mid-1850s (Baker xi). Having its antiquity in a fraternal order, the Order of the Star Spangled Banner eventually burst onto the American political scene in 1854, and was most commonly known as the Know-Nothing party (Anbinder ix). By the end of the following year, the party had elected governors, congressmen, mayors of cities like Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, and thousands of other local officials (Anbinder ix). This newly-founded and rising party attracted prominent politicians from various backgrounds, such as Thaddeus Stevens, Simon Cameron and former President Millard Fillmore, who all took the Know-Nothing oath (Anbinder ix). Even with its brief experiment with national politics, the Know-Nothing party was more than just an obscure political party with a ridiculous name and a blatantly nativist platform. The Know-Nothing party of the mid-nineteenth century left its mark on the larger American political climate. A detailed examination of particularly how the party attempted to exercise its ideologies and political power will illuminate the nature of the movement's goals. As an archetype of American nativist political movements, the Know-Nothings embraced exclusionary politics as fundamental to its ideology and existence. As such, an understanding of how the Know-Nothings exerted such beliefs will highlight precisely how, and why, they are the quintessential American nativist party of the 1850s. Employing a cultural studies

perspective, specifically Frank Parkin's theory of social closure, allows for such an analysis and will illustrate the nativist elements of the Know-Nothings.

The study of American nativism as it relates to the Know-Nothing party is significant for numerous reasons. First, it avoids the convenient and superficial labeling of the movement as a nativist movement without the addition of a substantiated and dedicated analysis of the party as to why it is indeed fundamentally nativist. Second, it can expand our understanding of not only mid-nineteenth century American history and politics, but also of the greater American culture and society, deepening our understanding of the time and its people. As we know, the concepts of American nativism and exclusionary politics are not just a fact of nineteenth-century America. As Peter Brimelow acknowledges, in public discourse, 'nativist' is a term of opprobrium that usually, only the opposition use. Nativists rarely use the term 'nativist'; instead, they tend to call themselves 'patriots' (Brimelow 254). In contemporary America, self-identified Tea Partiers and Tea Party Patriots from all over the country protest. Thus, nativist politics and policies are of utmost relevance, as they continue to persist, illuminating how deep this cultural trend truly lies in America's social fabric. Recognition of how the Know-Nothing party historically attempted to exercise its power will reveal how central nativism was to the Know-Nothings and their ideologies.

## **2.2 Understanding Know-Nothing Hegemony and Power**

History has revealed that the party was not merely a single-issue party and that for their relatively brief experiment with politics, the Know-Nothings

experienced quite remarkable support and success (Anbinder ix). Indeed, the Know-Nothing party's political successes began in its antiquity as a secret fraternal order and it was here that the party consolidated its power (Anbinder xiv). As Richard Hofstadter acknowledges, "all political behavio[u]r requires strategy, many strategic acts depend for their effect on a period of secrecy, and anything that is secret may be described, often with but little exaggeration, as conspiratorial" (Hofstadter 29). This quotation encapsulates the Know-Nothing party, as it began in secrecy and because of this, when the Know-Nothings exploded on the national stage, many critics denounced them, often for their outlandish views (Anbinder ix). In 1854, one critic of the Know-Nothing party, a self-proclaimed 'Know-Something,' referred to the party as "[. . .] new cliques and fanatics banding together for the secret and nefarious purpose of overthrowing the existing order of things in general, and to restore back, in all their hideous blackness, the terrible enormities of by-gone generations [. . .]" ("The Know Nothings An Expose" 2). Since the party's underground inception, people from all walks of life have denounced the Know-Nothings and continue to do so (Anbinder ix). The important element to realize is that what these critics almost all are universally attacking is the Know-Nothing's ideology to "overthrow the existing order of things in general, and to restore back [. . .] by-gone generations" ("The Know Nothings An Expose" 2). An understanding and recognition of how the Know-Nothing party attempted to achieve such goals will reveal precisely how this political group sought to enact its nativist ideologies.

The Know-Nothings, as a political movement desired hegemony. Cultural geographer Peter Jackson states, "in common usage, hegemony refers to a situation

of uncontested political supremacy” (52). This definition epitomizes almost all political parties, and certainly the Know-Nothings on their quest for political clout in America during the mid-nineteenth century. However, to advance this definition and venture into an area of analysis uncharted by academics and scholars of the Know-Nothings to date is to conceptualize the Know-Nothings and their agenda using the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Peter Jackson explains that Gramsci’s work has a rather different meaning,

referring to the power of a dominant class to persuade subordinate classes to accept its moral, political and cultural values as the ‘natural’ order. In this sense, hegemony refers to the power of persuasion as opposed to the power of coercion thorough use of physical force. (Jackson 53)

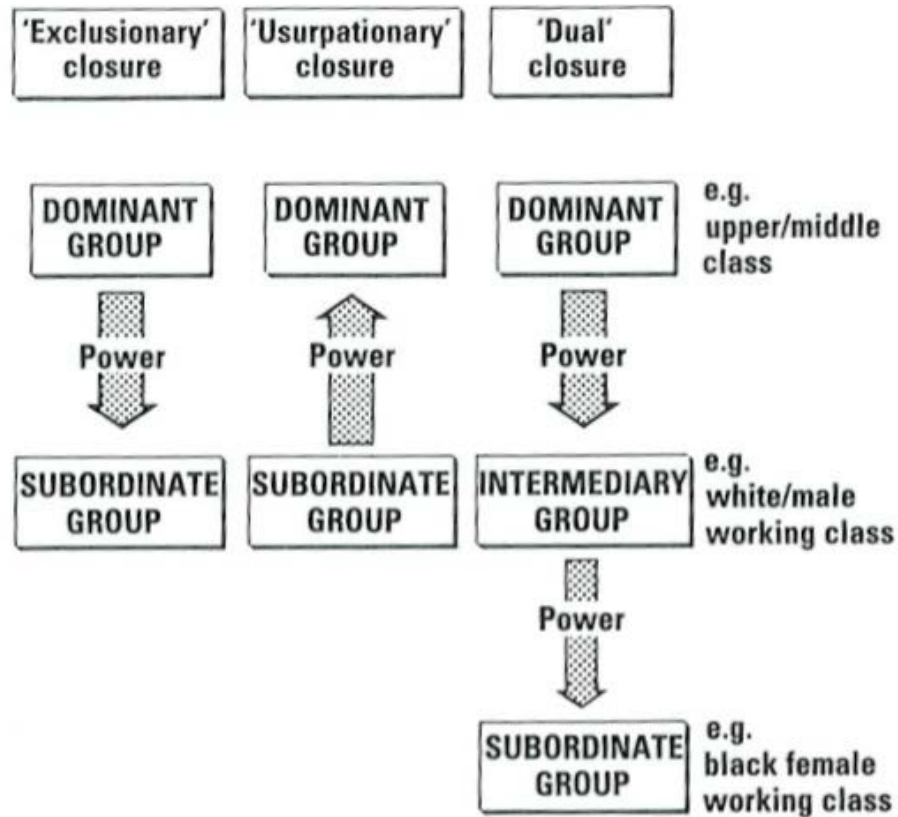
Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony wonderfully characterizes the Know-Nothing party and its members. One only has to read *The Know-Nothing Platform*, used in the presidential elections of 1856, to understand how fitting Gramsci’s definition is to the Know-Nothings. The very first platform point listed states, “(1) Repeal of all Naturalization Laws,” revealing how the Know-Nothings had a strong sentiment to maintain what they believed to be the ‘natural’ order, which Gramsci acknowledges (*The Know-Nothing Platform*). Furthermore, Jackson notes that Gramsci’s notion of hegemony is opposed to the power of coercion. The Know-Nothings typified this approach as they chose democratic means as the primary course of action and this manifested in aggressive politics, policies and the odd riot, but coercion was never part of the overall systemic goal for the national party (Baker xvi). Antonio Gramsci’s work on hegemony provides a working understanding of what the Know-Nothing party was attempting to accomplish in the 1850s. Perhaps even more telling is *how* the Know-Nothings attempted to accomplish hegemony in America.

## 2.3 Know-Nothing Politics and Social Closure

As an explicit American nativist party, the Know-Nothings attempted to exert their hegemony, power and ideology at the national scale to further their political ambitions. To conceptualize exactly how this party sought to operationalize its political supremacy, one can apply Frank Parkin's notion of *social closure*. Peter Jackson explains, "according to Parkin, dominant social groups are characterized by their ability to exercise power in a downwards direction, excluding less powerful groups from resources over which dominant groups exert control and to which they have privileged access. Parkin calls this process *exclusionary closure* [. . .]" (Jackson 54). Jackson remarks that in contrast, "subordinate social groups do not have this privilege and are forced to seek power in an upwards direction, attempting to make inroads into the resources controlled by more powerful groups. Parkin calls this *usurpatory closure* [. . .]" (Jackson 54). Identifying this model and situating the Know-Nothing party within its framework reveals the true nativist elements of the party.

## The Theory of Social Closure

Source: *Maps of Meaning*, page 55.



Understanding and applying Parkin's theory of social closure, specifically *exclusionary closure*, to the Know-Nothing party is not difficult to conceive.<sup>5</sup> As the Know-Nothings were practitioners of exclusionary politics, subordinating Catholics and immigrants was central to their agenda (Anbinder ix). Mark Voss-Hubbard explains the central issues the Know-Nothings had, demonstrating how we can understand the party through social closure.

Know-Nothings called for the election of native-born men to office, laws to prevent the organization of foreign-born militia companies, and legislation to extend the nation's naturalization period to twenty-one years. Beyond all their promises to keep immigrants and

<sup>5</sup> For the purposes of this analysis, the Know-Nothings constitute what Parkin refers to as the 'Dominant Group', as they are, more often than not, members of a privileged social class in antebellum America. The Catholics and immigrants that the Know-Nothings oppose are the 'Subordinate Group' in relation to these Know-Nothing members.

professional politicians out of the political process, in short, the Know-Nothing legislative agenda was fairly thin. (Voss-Hubbard 126)

The party did speak to other issues besides immigration, even if it only rarely proclaimed them part of its movement's platform and Voss-Hubbard acknowledges this in his book (Voss-Hubbard 126). For our purposes, it is crucial to recognize that what Voss-Hubbard describes is essentially how the Know-Nothings epitomize *exclusionary closure* and how this paradigm is necessary to their operation as a political movement and party. On the national political scene, the Know-Nothings exerted the constant and vigorous suppression of any Catholic or foreign influences on American society. The Know-Nothings and their values and ideologies illustrate Frank Parkin's idea of *exclusionary closure* within the social closure framework. Using this framework to understand the Know-Nothings reveals how and why they are a truly nativist political party in more ways than just *exclusionary closure*.

The Know-Nothing party and its members typified Parkin's *exclusionary closure* while simultaneously attempting to restrict any opportunity their political enemies had at *usurpationary closure*. The party's entire existence was predicated on subordinating Catholics and immigrants, particularly the Irish. Ira M. Leonard and Robert D. Parmet note how the Know-Nothing party garnered its support from all across the political spectrum. They state that "the cause of Catholicism became intermingled with the fear of a loss of political power and nativism offered the Whigs an opportunity to gain support among the native born Protestant Democrats" (Leonard and Parmet 93-94). The Know-Nothings appealed to many Americans who were part of a privileged social class (or using Parkin's terminology, the 'dominant group'), as they aimed to suppress the 'subordinate group', in this case Catholic and



Irish immigrants. Leonard and Parmet highlighted how the Know-Nothing party fit into Parkin's 'usurpatory closure'. Jenny Franchot thinks along the same vein when she writes, "many antebellum Protestants imagined that a resurgent, disturbingly immigrant Catholicism aimed for their land, their children, their very souls" (Franchot 99). Members of the Know-Nothing party perceived anyone of the Catholic faith and Irish immigrants as attempting to attain upwards social, economical and political mobility, or as Parkin states, "[. . .] seek power in an upwards direction, attempting to make inroads into the resources controlled by more powerful groups" (Jackson 54). As history has revealed, central to the Know-Nothings' political goals were the targeting, isolating and eradicating of Catholic and Irish influences in America (Anbinder ix). The important point is not to try to understand whether the threat these groups actually posed to the Know-Nothing members was real or fabricated. Instead, it is pertinent to recognize that the political actions the Know-Nothings took, encapsulated in Frank Parkin's theory of social closure, exemplify and demonstrate precisely how the Know-Nothings attempted to quell any chance their political foes had at *usurpatory closure*. By employing such political tactics, the Know-Nothing party exhibited its fundamental nativist elements.

Similarly, in the present political context, the Tea Party, as a social movement, seeks not only to maintain its cultural position, but also aspires to affect the political landscape in America enough that it can reestablish the cultural hegemony that its group had in the past and that is seemingly slipping away from it in contemporary America. As aforementioned, the members of the Tea Party

represent a historically dominant group in America. Even if the movement claims that identity politics plays no role in its cause, the demographic reality is consistent with the claim that the Tea Partiers represent a historically privileged group. Using Parkin's theory, one can understand how the Tea Party is easily categorized as the "dominant group," as they actively seek to subordinate other groups in society to control more cultural and political power in America. As the Tea Party official website indicates, Judeo-Christian values as well as "sharing a common belief in the values which made and keep our beloved nation great" are all part of being a true American (Teaparty.org). On the same webpage, the authors list the "15 Non-negotiable Core Beliefs" the Tea Party stands for. Included on this list are restrictions to immigration, privileging American workers in the work place, as well as privileging the English language universally, and traditional family values (Teaparty.org). These listed core beliefs articulate what the Tea Party, as a dominant group, wishes to instill, or, as it believes, to recapture, in American society through exclusionary closure.

As recent history has revealed, particularly in post-9/11 America, the target of the Tea Party's doctrines, in addition to Barack Obama, are now primarily Latino and Muslim Americans (Parker and Barreto 12). Jonathan Kay notes that in contemporary America, "[...] the word 'Russian' has been replaced with 'Muslim' in the accusatory lexicon" (Kay 130). Attacks on the basis of religion often attempt to show a connection between Islam and terrorism. As mentioned earlier by Gregory Parks and Matthew Hughey, one of the primary characteristics that Americans view as important to their definition of American, in addition to one's love for one's

country and civic engagement, is faith in God, especially the Christian God (Parks and Hughey 77). Muslim-Americans do not share this same value (and as purported by conspiracy theorists, Barack Obama too). Thus, using the Tea Party's definition of American, Muslims are un-American. Often regarded simply as 'illegals', Latino-Americans face much discrimination because, as Ron Paul, characterized as the 'intellectual godfather' of the Tea Party, writes, they " [ . . . ] take jobs from American working people [and] federal mandates require states to provide free medical and educational benefits to illegals [ . . . ]" (Paul 150). It is because of the frequent targeting of Barack Obama, Muslims and Latino Americans that these groups represent three of the "subordinate groups" that the Tea Party, through the belief system it promotes and professes, seeks to exercise power in a downwards direction to elevate its own political and cultural standing in society.

Frank Parkin's theory of social closure as a paradigm to understanding the Know-Nothings and Tea Party is a useful exercise to conceptualize how the parties attempted to exert their hegemony. In both cases, the parties' experiment with national politics and push for power equated to nativist platforms and policies. This nativist ideology of the Know-Nothings, like many other nativist movements, was under the guise of patriotism and nationalism in America, professed as protecting American interests. As Ray Allen Billington states, "Anti-Catholicism, therefore, became a patriotic as well as religious concern" (Billington 2). Thus, the Know-Nothing party sought to 'other' Catholics and immigrants, portraying them as un-American. Using Parkin's theory of social closure, one can see exactly why and how the Know-Nothings epitomized a nativist party and what this looks like in a practical

sense. Moreover, this phenomenon of nativist attitudes and politics is not something that is confined to a pre-civil war America. Instead, both the Tea Partiers and Birthers of today take up this discriminatory legacy as nativism has rippled through American history.

## **2.4 Scholarship Review and What is Missing**

For many years after the rise and fall of the Know-Nothing party in America, scholars gave no serious attention to the party. This is most likely because historians of this period just before the Civil War, often called the 'middle period', devoted their energies to the causes and consequences of the Civil War (Anbinder iv). The Civil War overshadowed much of the political history of America during this epoch and historians cast the Know-Nothings aside. Scholars often regarded the party itself as political aliens, seekers of union during a period of separatism, and practitioners of extremist ideologies (Baker xii). The Know-Nothings seemed to offer little to scholars interested in antebellum America when it came to the sectional crisis. If scholars gave any attention to the Know-Nothings, it was often through county historical societies, which chronicled the local history before anything else. However, with the turn of the century, the history of the Know-Nothing party turned as well.

The concept of American nativism and how pervasive it was, and still is, in American culture is central to the Know-Nothing party and their ideology. Unfortunately, scholars have significantly glossed over or have simply failed to properly acknowledge this continual trend in their work and analysis, particularly

comparing this to contemporary politics. An examination and understanding of the various contours in the literature on the nativist movement that was the Know-Nothing party will illuminate how historically, scholars have overlooked political nativism as a much broader *continual* cultural phenomenon as it pertains to the Know-Nothing party. Select few historians have dedicated their work to the Know-Nothing party; however, they have done so in very distinct ways.

The Know-Nothing party started to decline as early as the late 1850s and by the 1860 United States presidential election, they were no longer a serious national political movement (Anbinder xv). For many years after the rise and fall of the Know-Nothing party in America, scholars gave no serious attention to the party. It was not until the 1920s when Professor Richard Purcell of Catholic University began to write dissertations on antebellum nativism and the Know-Nothings began to receive serious scholarly attention (Anbinder x). This new focus on nativism and the Know-Nothing party in Antebellum America seemed to spark interest. Much credit is due to Purcell for a growing body of sources, as he took a number of graduate students who did much research on the Know-Nothing party. In the late 1930s, these students produced theses examining the party in nearly every state (Anbinder x). These papers described the history of anti-Catholicism in a particular state, examined the successes or failures of the elections that were held, and applauded the eventual demise of the party (Anbinder x). The Purcell school of thought was not without its limitations when it came to historical research on the Know-Nothings, as the students and the subsequently produced papers primarily focused on documenting the history of American anti-Catholicism (Anbinder x). This is not to

say that Purcell's students did not produce well-researched or scholarly works; they did. However, the Know-Nothings anti-Catholic ideologies were of central importance for Purcell and his students; thus, the concept of nativism did not figure prominently in their works. With a type of Catholic studies approach to the Know-Nothing party, they rarely examined or even acknowledged additional factors other than the anti-Catholic sentiment that led to the success of the Know-Nothings. This is not to say that this approach is invalid, or misguided. This is only to highlight that the earliest historians of the Know-Nothings, because of their preoccupation with Catholic studies, failed to realize that even though the Know-Nothing party had an anti-Catholic agenda, the overarching theme was that at its core, the Know-Nothing party was an early American nativist movement. The Know-Nothings were indeed nativists not only because of their anti-Catholic beliefs but their broader ideologies about who gets to be 'American'. The earliest nativists targeted Catholic Americans during this time, but as history has revealed, this theme was not an isolated occurrence.

Shortly after Purcell and his students conducted their research, historians seemingly became interested in a more general perspective of where the Know-Nothing party fit into American history (Baker xii). Historians tended to view America just prior to the Civil war as a nation of sectional and class disagreement. This new school of thought, taking a general perspective of American history, saw America as a stable, continuous and cohesive society (Baker xii). In this new historiographical context, the sources examining the Know-Nothings generally regarded them as an exception that marked American politics (Baker xii). Scholars

began to regard the party itself as political aliens, seekers of union during a period of separatism, and practitioners of extremist ideologies (Baker xii). There was also some analysis at this time by historians, such as Michael F. Holt, who explained the party in terms of the social and economic disruption of the 1850s (Holt 325). Holt attempts to explain that a temporary malfunctioning of the economic system can explain the success of the Know-Nothing party in liberal America.

These same historians essentially casted the Know-Nothings aside when it came to Antebellum American politics. Few studies examined the party's organizational structure, its supporters or legislative behaviour. Moreover, historians essentially dismissed Know-Nothing leaders as political opportunists who jumped on a popular bandwagon during the early 1850s (Baker xiii). The party's eventual (and some of these historians would argue, inevitable) demise was something that seemed to cloud much of their scholarly work on the party (Baker xiii). For many of these historians, the combination of inexperienced xenophobes unfamiliar with the mechanics of politics, as well as experienced politicians uninterested in Know-Nothing ideology, plagued the party and explained their eventual demise and failures (Baker xiii). These same historians judged the party as politically inept, and as Jean H. Baker states, not as a "true political party" (Baker xiii). Hence, the only memorable aspect of the Know-Nothings remains its ideology. Even as a number of historians subscribed to this school of thought and produced many works, this historiographical trend would not persist for long; a new trend of historical scholarship and approach arose to examine the Know-Nothing party.

Beginning in the late 1960s, the Know-Nothings began to emerge as a more central part of American history, no longer relegated to the fringes of history (Anbinder xi). One can attribute this newly gained prominence to not only the election and assassination of a Catholic president, but also to the emergence of the 'new political historians' who continued the trend of overlooking the central issue with the Know-Nothing party, albeit with a different approach (Anbinder xi). These historians have by and large de-emphasized much of the work that previous historians have done on how issues such as slavery, tariffs, religious affiliation and generally ethno-cultural divisions determined the partisan affiliation of most American voters (Anbinder xi). These historians took a very strict political history route to studying the Know-Nothings in the 1850s, analyzing the political climate of the era and examining other parties too, such as the Whig party and Free Soil Party (Anbinder xi). These 'new political historians' often applied quite different methodology to their study and work (Baker xiii). They applied quantitative methods and analysis to American parties. Hypotheses tested by regression analyses, Q sorts and census samples were employed to emphasize statistical analysis (Baker xiii). These 'new political historians' used different types of methods to determine different types of qualitative questions such as voting behaviour, party appeals, and electoral alignments (Baker xiii). Some refer to this quantification process and analysis as a type of sociology of politics (Baker xiii-xiv). This new-aged approach and methodology persisted for approximately two decades as historians wrote sources about the Know-Nothing's political success and failures through quantitative analysis of many of the states where they existed (Anbinder xii). These



sources fail to realize, on the same grounds as their predecessors who studied the Know-Nothings, the broader American nativist phenomenon displayed by this party. By concentrating too narrowly on the politics of the day, these authors and academics neglect the crucial element to the Know-Nothings and their success. Political nativism is not a new concept or field of study. Nevertheless, until recently, all of the authors, researchers, scholars and academics have largely overlooked how nativism is at the core of the Know-Nothing party ideology and political goals, and how this cultural trend persists through time. Owing to this oversight is their fixation with other academic endeavors such as Catholic studies, political science and political history, which have until this point failed to properly examine and study this party in a nativist framework. This fixation presents a void in the study of nativism and how dating back to the 1850s with the Know-Nothings it is has had a ripple effect through American history and culture.

Unfortunately, these preoccupations with other academic matters have left the contemporary literature on the Know-Nothing party of the 1850s a sparse and overall lacking field of study. No recently published books on the Know-Nothing party exist (Anbinder ix). In the past few years scholars have only written a mere handful of journal articles about the Know-Nothings, and again, these articles mostly relate the party back to state politics. Where literature on how nativism relates to the Know-Nothings *does* exist is in books such as *American Nativism, 1830-1860* by Ira M. Leonard and Robert D. Parmet or Tyler Anbinder's *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s*. It is in sources like these where an analysis of nativism and the concept of nativism are a central topic, and

there is mention of the Know-Nothing party. However, such sources have significant other focuses as well. Frequently, if there is any mention of the party in such texts, it is often brief and in passing - a case study example with lacking extensive and in-depth analysis. Often authors do not dedicate their texts to solely examining the Know-Nothings and their nativist agendas and ideologies, such as Anbinder's book, whose focus is in fact the Know-Nothings, but primarily concerns itself with a much broader political history and the politics of the issue of slavery in the Northern states.

Along this same vein, a plethora of sources exist dealing with race and identity, and particularly with how these relate to Irish immigrants in nineteenth-century America. The Know-Nothings were adamantly opposed to the Irish and they made this very clear while they were politically active (Anbinder ix). In his book, *How the Irish Became White*, Noel Ignatiev gives brief mention to the Know-Nothing party, which is typical of the literature in this genre. Similarly, in Ray Allen Billington's *The Protestant Crusade 1800-1860: A Study of the Origins of American Nativism*, not more than a chapter exists in regards to the Know-Nothing party. Billington's book examines the anti-Catholic prejudice in America during this time period, taking a holistic approach to the topic and leaving the Know-Nothings as a case study example. Again, this is typical of the Catholic studies genre.

Immigration studies also uses the Know-Nothings merely as an illustrative example to exemplify the anti-immigration sentiment in 1850s America. Typifying this is *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States*, where author Ali Behdad mentions the Know-Nothing movement, but only focuses

on one member and politician's views of immigration in America. The point here is to recognize a general void in scholarship and for American Studies scholars to realize that when literature does exist on the Know-Nothing party or movement, these sources often do not adequately study the Know-Nothings as an early nativist party and why, or how, such ideologies have persisted throughout American cultural. An inadequate amount of research exists to explain what this reveals about American culture today as this phenomenon continues, albeit in a contemporary and nuanced form. This makes the annals of the literature on American nativism a collection of episodic moments when nativist groups have arisen in American history, giving the appearance of a cyclical, rather than constant presence in America. Currently, all scholars who have produced works thus far on the Know-Nothings have drifted, leading us astray and diverting our attention from the essential and underlying issue of a persistent and continual cultural trend that nativism has in American politics and culture. Understanding that nativism does not act in a compartmentalized fashion in American history helps illustrate how 1850s attitudes and ideologies continue today in a very similar manner. This is very significant for a paper such as this because as scholars continually study historical nativist groups, all too frequently they portray nativism as fixed in time: an era specific phenomenon. As such, these researches do not attempt to connect nativist groups like the Know-Nothing party to nativism of today.

It is only with further study and analysis that Americanists can answer questions as to why such values and views persist. Understanding American nativism through the Know-Nothing party can shed light upon this persistent

cultural phenomenon that is neither abstract nor only present in history textbooks, but rather remains pertinent and relevant today. As nativism has endured in America as an ideology, it has proven to be malleable, adaptive and always in a state of flux as the target of such prevalent views shifts. Even with the constant variation in perceived enemy groups, the prevailing view amongst nativists remains that America needs to be for 'Americans' first and foremost. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary studies such as American Studies lend themselves to studies such as this one and can greatly enhance and inform our overall understanding of not only American politics, but also the broader American culture and its components.

### **Conclusion: American Asylum Myth**

As one can see, there certainly are similarities between political nativist groups of today, notably the Tea Party and Birther movements, and the earliest political nativist group in America, the Know-Nothing party of the mid nineteenth-century. Specifically, these groups have very comparable ideologies about who should have political and cultural power in America and who should decide who gets the privilege of this power. Although these groups certainly have their numerous differences and nuances too, the important factor to realize is that when analyzing the political nativist groups from each era (the bookend case studies of each period), it becomes abundantly clear that nativist beliefs are very similar in each case. As mentioned in the opening lines of this paper, there are many other nativist groups in between the Know-Nothing party and the Tea Party and Birthers;

however, these groups reveal how American culture has not only maintained, but perpetuated this tradition of political nativism. With this fact and this study in mind, piercing questions about American identity and culture come to the fore.

The United States of America, despite the predominance of the white, Protestant, English tradition, has always been a culturally heterogeneous land – an immigrant nation composed of different linguistic, religious and nationality groups spread over a huge geographical area and living amid socially and economically diverse conditions (Leonard and Parmet 5). This articulation is fundamental to the American “myth of asylum, in which immigration is defined as a matter of national hospitality [. . .].” In reality, however, this view of America “has always obscured the role of xenophobia in the construction of national identity” (Behdad 116). Professor Ali Behdad of the University of California, Los Angeles remarks,

[. . .] America as an immigrant-loving nation, permeates every expression of American nationality, from speeches of presidents and politicians to the poetry of Emerson and Whitman to the historical interpretations of American nationalism by liberal intellectuals like Oscar Handlin and Louis Adamic. Crèvecoeur’s description of America as the asylum for the needy humanity of the globe has always been the quintessential description of American national identity. (Behdad 116)

As demonstrated historically by the Know-Nothings, and continually demonstrated today by Tea Partiers and Birthers across America, such descriptions of the nation, as quintessentially an expression of American identity, obscure much of the reality of attitudes and beliefs of a significant number of Americans. This reality leads to many questions being raised about the American national consciousness and about the function and nature the act of forgetting plays in American history and culture. Questions about what lessons can be learned from the dynamic relationship between xenophobia and xenophilia are all very important issues that America

continues to contend with (Behdad 117). With further study of the role nativism plays in American culture, these questions, and similar pressing issues, may one day be solved.

The Know-Nothings, Tea Partiers and Birthers all illustrate how culture is a continuous site of struggle. Culture is inherently political and, as demonstrated in this paper, these historically dominant groups attempt to exert their cultural hegemony over subordinate groups. An uneven scale of power exists between the dominant and subordinate groups and this is something these nativist groups seek to maintain. These nativist groups perceive that they are losing the battle in this contest over culture and have targeted a specific cultural enemy in an attempt to exercise their cultural dominance. By imposing and privileging their dominant culture, nativists continually marginalize the subordinate culture as they actively pursue uncontested cultural hegemony. This is nothing new in America.

In some ways, in the last one hundred and fifty years, the United States of America has not made as much progress in terms of discrimination and prejudice as many would likely claim. The instances of discriminatory beliefs and behaviours certainly appear to be quite different from generations ago, but this is due to the fact that America *was* a much different place at this time. As history has revealed, America has continuously changed. Discrimination and prejudice, particularly in the form of political nativism have proven to be malleable and adaptive to such societal changes. When examining nativism in its earliest American form, which occurred in a much different cultural context, and realizing the contemporary counterparts of nativist ideology, it becomes clear that nativism today is not as dissimilar as it

appears in textbooks and encyclopedias. Unfortunately, nativism seems to be just as commonplace in America today as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century when it made its political debut.

As American society now sees discrimination, prejudice and racism as unacceptable, the more nuanced version of nativism, under the guise of patriotism and defending liberties and American values, continues as a more acceptable alternative. As an alternative that is decades old, political nativism has taken a more modern, subliminal and nuanced form in contemporary America compared to the explicit forms of years past. As a slightly more socially acceptable form of discrimination, nativism persists and continues today. We need to understand its pervasiveness and the crux of such issues if we want to rid this harmful form of prejudice and discrimination from society.

In its desire to become a post-racial nation and an asylum for all, America is continually held back by certain groups from reaching such goals. The Know-Nothings of the mid nineteenth century tried their best to oust their alleged un-American enemies. This is much the same today as the Tea Partiers and Birthers attempt to 'other' their contemporary perceived enemy and threat. Political nativism as a form of discrimination and prejudice has not abated America. As part of larger cultural trend, nativism continues to reveal its staying power in American culture and how it truly has struck a chord with a significant number of Americans. Inevitably, America will continually change over time and only time will tell what this change will mean for nativism and its seemingly perpetual course in American culture.

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