

## Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

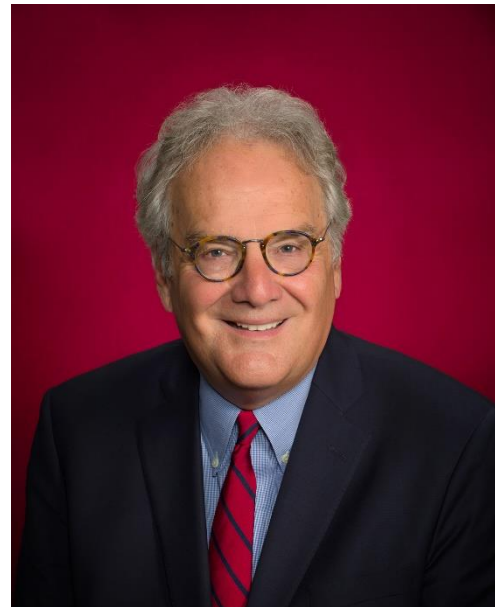
By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence

### *This America: The Case for the Nation* Jill Lepore

Originally, I had intended in this fourth **Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus**, to consider Jill Lepore's 2019 ***This America: The Case for the Nation***, a short, pithy little screed that attempts much and accomplishes even more, but, perhaps, not exactly what Lepore intended. I doubt, however, that she would quarrel that drawing renewed attention to Frederick Douglass's almost but not quite *forgotten* "*The Composite Nation*" speech is a worthy accomplishment.

In this week's Notes we'll sift Lepore's argument in *This America* and next week we'll analyze the lasting importance of Douglass's eloquent exposition of America's defining characteristic – its *composite* character, or, its, what we today call, diversity.

Jill Lepore is a prolific, award-winning writer of both scholarly and popular forays into American history and culture. She is the David Woods Kemper '41 Professor of American History at Harvard University and a staff writer at ***The New Yorker***. Among her many titles, in addition to the current best-selling ***These Truths***, are



***The Secret History of Wonder Woman, The Name of War***, for which she received the Bancroft Prize in 1999, ***The Story of America***, and ***Book of Ages: The Life and Opinions of Jane Franklin***.

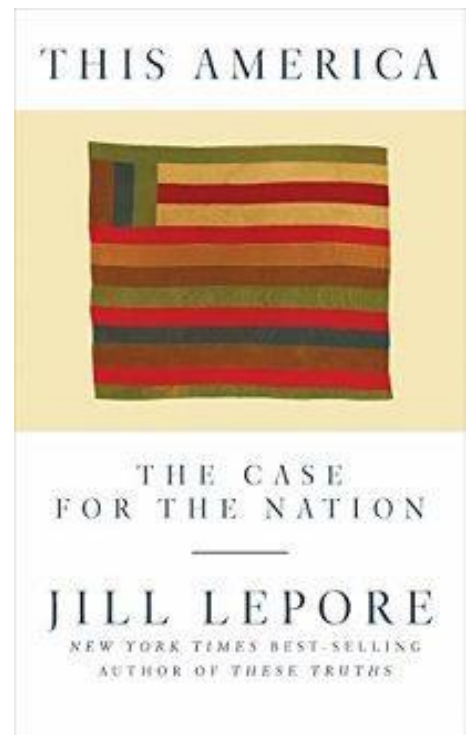
The latter, a personal favorite of mine, illustrates one of Lepore's chief virtues, which is her writing back into American history those who have been left out either through simple neglect or intentional rejection and dismissal as unworthy or irrelevant. Chief amongst those excluded are African Americans; indigenous people; immigrants, at one time or another, of virtually all ethnicities; and women of all origins and hues.

***Book of Ages*** is a biography of Benjamin Franklin's sister, Jane, reconstructed from letters between the siblings, newspapers, and pamphlets of the era and Jane's "Book of Ages," in which she recorded the births and deaths of her children and family members. In her ***Book of Ages***, Lepore provides an awareness of colonial life far from the elite halls Jane's brother frequented; the result is a fuller appreciation of early America, the role of women and the harshness, tempered by resoluteness, of daily life.

In, if I counted correctly, Lepore's more than 15 books, either explicitly or implicitly, she surveys "the story of America" or "the American story." The latter phrase appears as the title of her essay collection ***The American Story***. The essays range from a mini biography of John Smith to a study of Presidential Inaugural Addresses. Along the way one meets Kit Carson, Edgar Allan Poe, the Hemmings in Annette Gordon Reed's study of Thomas Jefferson's complex family life, and Noah Webster in his attempt to create an American language.

What one does not find, however, is a definitive statement of "the American story," for, as Lepore says, "No one can write that story". [1] As she notes "The story of America isn't carved in stone, or even inked in parchment; it is, instead, told, and fought over, again and again." [2]

The question immediately arises: "What is the fight about?"



If history – the word, after all, means “inquiry”, “to inquire”, “to ask” – is the attempt, while avoiding the trap of presentism, to answer questions about how we got to now, then ‘the story of America’ is the ongoing attempt to resolve what “the fight is about.”

In her “*Introduction*” to ***These Truths***, Lepore only partially answers that question. Riffing on Alexander Hamilton’s question in Federalist No. 1 – “...the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection or choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force,” [3] Lepore argues “...is ***the*** question of American history.” [4] ***{Emphasis added.}***

I agree with her but submit that is only part of the story. “The story of America” is both the story of our ongoing attempt at self-government while simultaneously attempting to forge a national identity out of the disparate people who comprise America. For, as Frederick Douglass says, “We are a country of extremes, ends, and opposites; the most conspicuous example of composite nationality in the world. Our people defy all ethnological and logical classifications. In races we range all the way from black to white, with intermediate shades which, as in the apocalyptic vision, no man can name or number.” [5]

Doing the first – successfully governing ourselves – would be challenge enough for the most homogenous of peoples, but for our heterogeneous, polyglot selves the challenge is compounded. Yet, tribalistic as we are, here we are more or less unified fighting COVID-19.

How did that happen? What ensures (does anything?) it will continue to happen?

In This ***America*** Lepore sketches an answer. Lepore sets herself three tasks: 1) to explain the origins of nations; 2) to offer a brief history of American nationalism; and 3) to make the case for the nation and “for the enduring importance of the United States and American civic ideals.” [6]

In short, Lepore makes the distinction between a *nation* and a *state*.

A *nation* is a community of people who share common characteristics, amongst which are a shared sense of origin, “as if”, she says, “they were a family.” [7] A nation, therefore, is a cultural artifact – it is a shared culture, which by definition is a shared sense of values, beliefs, attitudes, and mores. More to the point, those cultural values are shared through common stories.

It's an interesting question – which came first the nation or the stories? Or did they co-evolve? The short answer to that extremely complex question is that the stories came first – the sequence being stories of common origin, common experiences, and shared values told in a common language give rise to a “nation” or “nationality.” All of which is to say, nations and nationalities are social constructs. It is also a very modern notion, first appearing in the late 17th and 18th centuries.

What is a *state*? To quote Lepore, “a state is a political community governed by laws.” [8] A state, therefore, is distinct from a nation in that the nation is a community bound by cultural values as opposed to political constructs. A nationstate, then, is “political community governed by laws, that, at least theoretically, unites a people who share common origins...”. [9]

So, in sum, a *state* is a political entity that could take any one of a multitude of forms; a *nation*, however, is a cultural entity identified by its intangible attitudes, values, mores, language, and shared history. Theoretically, in the natural order of things, the nation precedes the state; that is, a cultural community comes into existence and then determines how it will govern itself.

In Lepore's extremely shrewd and insightful analysis, the United States reversed the process. We have, as a result, spent the past 244 years trying, if not to unscramble the egg, trying to make of it at least a reasonable facsimile of an omelet. Okay – bad metaphor, but the point is the United States was a state before it was a nation . The Articles of Confederation had at least this virtue – they made no pretense at being a nation . They were something more than a treaty of amity between sovereign states and something less than a nation. When that didn't work the Founders crafted the U.S. Constitution. The more progressive of them wanted to create a nation , while the more conservative simply wanted an enhanced confederation.

So, what the Founders founded was a *state*; in some sense, in a Pirandello-like moment, the Founders founded a state in search of a nation . When Jefferson mentioned his “country,” by which he meant nation , he was referring to Virginia; perhaps not Hamilton, but when his father-in-law, Philip Schuyler, referred to his “country,” he meant New York.

So, if the 13 colonies were each a *nation-state*, what then was *the American nation* that had chosen a) to govern itself by this new Constitution and b) to become a *nation-state*?

What was, what is, the *nation*?

The quest for an answer to that question is the history of the story of America. History in both senses of the word – the chaotic, unprogrammed unfolding of events (what Toynbee called “one damn thing after another”) and history in the sense of the attempt to tell the stories (a story?) that makes sense of the unfolding events.

In short, what is the American *nation*? How did it come into being? What is it today? And where is it going tomorrow? And, what at any point along that continuum guides its transit?

Lepore says the American nation is the fragile, often fractured but enduring cultural consensus around America’s civic ideals. What are those ideals? They are the “*American Creed*,” a term first coined by Gunnar Myrdal in the 1940s. The “*American Creed*” is the enduring American values of liberty, equality, and opportunity.

Their most lasting statement is the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” [10] The Creed continues to say people holding these values come together to form a government based on the consent of the governed, and they reserve the right to change that government should it fail to meet their needs.

It was Lincoln at Gettysburg who transformed the Declaration from a statement of values into a visionary government of, by, and for the people. But he did not say who the people were. He implicitly meant the “American people,” and by extension, implied these values have universal relevance.

But, still, if a ‘nation is a community of people who share common characteristics, amongst which are a shared sense of origin, language, and values, then who are the people, as in “*We the People...?*”

What is their origin? How does one become a member? Who is admitted, and who is excluded? By what measure are they included or excluded? Who decides?

Answering those questions is the second part of the answer to what constitutes ‘the American story,’ the story of an ever-changing, ever-adapting, ever-shifting community of people striving to govern themselves. Or, as I argue in ***The American Tapestry Project***, one of the main threads of the American Tapestry is

the ever-expanding inclusiveness of the “**We**” in “*We the People...*”.

That expansion has been contested at virtually every turn in the story (stories) of the American people; in fact, one might say the plot-twists that drive the story of America is the shifting composition of the “We” in “We the People...” who hold “these truths to be self-evident.”

Next week in **Book Notes**, we’ll examine one of the earliest and still most eloquent statements of the beauty of that shifting composition: Frederick Douglass’s “*The Composite Nation*” speech. First delivered in 1867 at the Parker Fraternity Course in Boston, it is a brilliant vision of America’s evolving “**Tapestry**” in all its colors, shades, and ethnicities.

However, to keep this “**Note**” at something approximating “**Note**” length, I’ll conclude by saying that Jill Lepore’s ***This America: The Case for the Nation*** is a brilliant primer for understanding America’s ongoing quest for a coherent national identity. That Lepore is also an extremely gifted stylist and storyteller makes what could have been a dry analysis lively, vivid, and easily accessible to all discerning readers.

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Information about purchasing ***This America: The Case for the Nation*** can be found [here](#).

#### End Notes

1. Lepore, Jill. *The Story of America: Essays on Origins*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012), p. 16.
  2. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
  3. Hamilton, Alexander. Federalist #1, in *The Federalist*. Ed. Benjamin Fletcher Wright. (New York: Barnes and Noble Books, 1996. Originally published in 1961 by Harvard University Press), p. 89.
  4. Lepore, Jill. *These Truths: A History of the United States*. (New York: W.W. Norton Co., 2018), p. xiv.
  5. Douglass, Frederick. “The Composite Nation” speech (1869), p. 5 available at Black Past (1869) <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1869-frederick-douglass-describes-composite-nation/> accessed Sunday April 5, 2020.
  6. Lepore, Jill. *This America: The Case for the Nation*. (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2019), p. 11.
  7. *Ibid.*, p.26
  8. *Ibid.*
  9. *Ibid.*
  10. “The Declaration of Independence”, in *The Constitution of the United States of America, with The Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation*. Edited with an “Introduction” by R.B. Bernstein. (New York: Fall River Press, 2002), p. 81.
- The photo above is from Amazon.com

# Next week: Frederick Douglass's "The Composite Nation" speech!



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