

NOTES ON A SURREALIST PAINTING

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When Paul Beatty came to Turin in November 2016 to talk about his National Book Critics Circle Award-winning novel *The Sellout* (2015), people in the audience asked him a question about THE election. The question had been looming large in the overcrowded room akin to a bad omen even before the Q&A section started. The discussion about the book itself felt like a preamble to that question. Donald J. Trump had just become the 45th President of the United States, and the incredulity at the fact was still fresh as if we had been woken up to discover that surrealism could, after all, invade the real and claim dominion over a vast swathe of it. Like in a surrealist painting, Trump's presidency seemed a *non sequitur*, an unexpected juxtaposition. The question ran along the lines of “what are we to make of this?” and Beatty did not seem to be taken off guard by it. “More art will come out of it,” he replied, and although his answer sounded tentative, the tension in the room seemed to dissipate and be replaced by a general sigh of relief.

Beatty is not the only one to emphasize this aspect. In an essay on the challenges of becoming an American writer included in *How to Write an Autobiographical Novel* (2018), Alexander Chee recounts a similar moment of disbelief following the election results. It felt as if someone had assassinated the president, Chee recalls, “but the president was alive. Instead, the country we thought we would be living in was dead. As if a president had assassinated a country” (Chee 2018, 253). Akin to those writers who experienced writer's block immediately after 9/11, Chee finds himself wondering whether there is any sense in pursuing a career in writing. What is the point of that, one of his students asks in class, “if this can happen?” Chee's reply follows Beatty's almost to a tee: “art endures past governments, countries, and emperors, and their would-be replacements” (276) and our

biggest failure would be to stop engaging with it either by creating it or weighing its implications.

What both Chee and Beatty seem to agree on is that when politics fail, we turn to art. If not to repair that failure, then at least to make sense of it. What they both fail to mention, or at least specify, is what they mean by *art*. Considering that both of them are writers, are we to infer that what *they* regard as art is confined to the realm of literature? Yes and no. Beatty's novel, *The Sellout*, has been described by book reviewers as a “deliberate subversion of harmful cultural assumptions” challenging “the sacred tenets of the United States Constitution” (Walls 2015). Chee's highly autobiographical novel, *Edinburgh* (2001), tackles the issue of sexual abuse and examines “the unspeakable” (McIntosh 2018) that surrounds it akin to a protective cocoon. To them, art is literature, but that is only because both happen to be writers. Given the nature of their work, art is more like a label attached to works that challenge and subvert, as well as drive debate. Literature, then, becomes art only when it engenders a particular response outside itself, opposing jaundiced discourses to make space for a critical stance. This kind of criticism, in its most political and thus artistic form, is what we wanted to accomplish with the creation of the *Journal of American Studies in Italy* (*JAm It!*).

It is within this context, at the nexus between politics and art, that the first issue of *JAm It!* wants to leave its mark by engaging young scholars in a lively debate about the intricacies of contemporary U.S. politics and beyond. The papers included in this inaugural issue engage with some of the most critical debates in this historical moment, looking at the discordant trajectories of social drifts marked by the antonymic relationship between hyper-nationalist and post-nationalist ideologies and the political movements representing them. They make new connections and look at both past and present with a keen eye for detail and contradictions to shed new light on nuances and grey areas. The concepts these papers scrutinize also touch upon more consolidated notions of contemporary academic discourse, such as cultural hegemony, ethno-nationalism, exceptionalism, transnationalism, subversive narratives, and representations. The examples these authors choose in their scrutiny are not merely representative but also challenging because most of

them are poised between the transformative desire to trigger action and the disheartening awareness that the society they seek to alter is ultimately unable to produce satisfying outcomes.

In “The Death of the Transformational Presidency?”, Laura Ellyn Smith introduces the main debate of our current issue. By employing the notion of “transformational presidency” to interpret the current political situation in the U.S., Smith argues for the twenty-first century as a post-national era, in which globalization can act as a check to presidential power. Modern technology, Smith contends, alongside globalization, have strengthened America's system of checks and balances meant to curb presidential powers and have magnified context by adding to it a form of international accountability and an extra layer of obligations. The paper draws a crucial distinction between the concept of transnational election campaigns and that of transnational presidency by demonstrating how the two do not necessarily intertwine, as was the case with Trump's election.

Global issues, such as climate change, can also be interpreted (and reinterpreted) in light of the discussion regarding hyper- and post-nationalism. In “Intersections Between Streams of Nationalism and Global Issues: the Influence of Hyper-Nationalist Elements in the Climate Politics of the Trump Presidency,” Sakina Groeppmaier argues that different nationalistic ideologies have had an impact on Trump's climate change agenda. She does so by analyzing Trump's speeches and interviews in conjunction with the works of political analysts and sociologists such as Arjun Appadurai, Francis Fukuyama, and John Mearsheimer, and scientific studies on climate change produced by prominent national and transnational organizations such as the U.S. Department of Energy and the United Nations.

Tala Makhoul takes a different approach to transnationalism by comparing three different ethno-nationalist movements: the alt-right in the U.S., Zionists in Israel, and Maronite Christian ethno-nationalists in Lebanon. The main contribution of “Ethnonationalism in the U.S., Lebanon, and Israel: a Transnational Analysis” is to prove that all three movements rely on the same ideology, as well as to move away from the tendency to paint the alt-right and other right-wing movements worldwide with a broad

brush. By focusing on the three groups' reception of Trump's decision to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, Makhoul traces a connection between the alt-right tendencies that fueled Trump supporters, Israeli Zionists, and Lebanese Maronites by defining them as ethno-nationalist, a category that is much more accurate and less stereotype-ridden than fascist or neo-fascist.

Other contributions to this issue place the Trump presidency and its policies into historical perspective by looking at inherent continuities and disharmonies. In "Darkest Italy Revisited: American Hyper-Nationalism and the Making of the 'Criminal Immigrant' from the Age of Thomas Jefferson to the Rise of Donald J. Trump 1776–2018," Anthony J. Antonucci establishes a connection between the refusal of admission of Mexican (and, more generally, LatinX) immigrants into the U.S. by Donald Trump and the treatment Italian immigrants received upon entering the country. For Antonucci, both these reactions, which he sees as hyper-nationalist manifestations, are rooted in the same premises: the compulsion to establish a distinction between 'real' Americans and immigrants. To support this thesis, Antonucci analyzes the descriptions given by three American writers who visited Italy in the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his view, contemporary Trumpian ideas descend from an old and well-established notion of Italian 'national character,' as expressed by the three writers and to a view of Italy that dates back to the age of Jefferson.

American nationalism in the age of Trump is also put into perspective by Karl E. Martin when he frames it into a religious discourse expressly construed to represent Americans as a chosen people. Although it is part of our journal's open section, Martin's paper obliquely engages with the topic of our first issue. "Laying Claim to a Christian America: Evangelical Narratives of Exceptionalism" analyzes *The Light and the Glory* (1973), *From Sea to Shining Sea* (1985), and *Sounding Forth the Trumpet* (1997), a trilogy of historical narratives written by Peter Marshall and David Manuel, in view of unearthing their rhetorical structure and showing their adherence to the American Jeremiad as described by Sacvan Bercovitch. In doing so, Martin demonstrates how the texts blend

religious rhetoric with U.S. secular history, following and renewing the classic Puritan bias to view American history as a reflection of God's will.

Transnationalism can take different forms that aim to reform different parts of society, particularly in politically-charged climates. In “‘To Work Black Magic’: Richard Bruce Nugent’s Queer Transnational Insurgency,” Ryan Tracy argues that Nugent’s provocative short story, “Pope Pius the Only,” stands out as a radically non-aligned way of considering identity and human relations, especially if one considers this text in the broader context of post-WWI nationalistic resurgence. The short story is thus a means to describe the author’s belief that blackness and queerness could redefine intimate relations between men in a historical context where nationalisms of all kinds were at work as disruptive and dividing forces. In Tracy’s view, Nugent deconstructs American national identity by opposing white nationalism (specifically, Italian jingoism) with a “decadent” work that aims at defining a non-hegemonic, ex-centric identity based on ethnicity and gender.

At other times, notions of transnationalism morph into ones of post-nationalism to challenge, albeit obliquely, the *status quo*. In “Postnational Visions in Thomas Pynchon’s *Against the Day*,” Ali Dehdarirad argues that Pynchon’s novel depicts a post-national vision that questions the metanarrative of “nation-ness,” as defined by Sascha Pölmann. Given this, Dehdarirad reveals how the alternative worlds of the novel portray a trans/post-national vision that is resistant to the rooted hegemony of nationalism in the world.

Dehdarirad is not the only one to point to how fiction reveals the inner workings of the American cultural apparatus. In “The State as the Intruder: Cultural Hegemony and Self Repression in *The Boys in the Band*,” Simone Aramu explores the relation between the gay community and the state by undertaking an in-depth analysis of the only heterosexual character, Alan, in Mart Crowley’s play (1968). The paper thus discusses the role of the State in the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity and cultural hegemony during the sixties, a crucial period for the creation of a revolutionary movement fighting for sexual and racial freedom. By using Michel Foucault’s theoretical framework concerning biopower and

panopticism, the paper explores the relations between the gay community and the State through the bonds and attitudes of the play's main characters.

On a similar line of reasoning, in “Message Queens': AIDS Protest Literature, the Gay Community and Writing as a Political Act,” another paper included in our open section, Anna Ferrari aims to show that during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s in the U.S., and specifically in NYC, literature became a space of protest. Within it, writers strived to inform and warn the gay community of the dangers of the epidemic, as well as to raise the awareness of the American political apparatus. To do this, Ferrari discusses texts by Larry Kramer, David B. Feinberg, and Sarah Schulman, literary works that corroborate the idea that throughout the crisis fiction became a space of protest. Given that the mainstream media avoided the topic because the victims were mostly members of the gay community, literature became the only way to disseminate the message.

Debates might not always lead to meaningful, or noticeable, change. However, it is the insufficiency of debate that leads to the deadening effects of entrenched dogmas and notions. By empowering discussion among young scholars about contemporary issues, *JAm It!* thus seeks to make space in an academic world that seems to be increasingly insular and prone to entrenchment. If more art is to come out of hard times, we will strive to supplement the debate that not only strengthens its effects but also makes it even more conspicuous.

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