IS MULTICULTURALISM WHO AMERICA IS? INVESTIGATING THE UNITED STATES' "PATCHWORK HERITAGE"

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Over the decades, the interaction among ethnic communities within the United States has produced an intense discussion that is far from being exhausted. We found it relevant to explore it further in its contradictory and ambivalent nature, especially in relation to a country which has never ceased to be a target destination for migrants. The result of this collective analysis is the fourth issue of *JAm It!*, which gathers recent perspectives from young scholars in different disciplinary fields, namely Cultural Studies, Literary Criticism, and History. Ethnic identity and relations in the United States are investigated through the articulation of positions ranging from reflections on multiculturalism and disability, to the disruptions brought about by phenomena of gentrification, to diasporic self-fashioning and returns to the 'motherland.'

This discussion has often revolved around labels such as the controversial multicultural category: broadly definable as the set of policies established by societies to protect, and equitably treat, their cultural diversity, multiculturalism appears indeed to be constantly (re)conceptualized—when not plainly misused or abused—according to one's individual standpoint. A recent exemplary iteration of this dynamic occurred on January 19, 2021, when Mike Pompeo declared in a tweet that "multiculturalism [...

is] not who America is."[1] On his last day as a Secretary of State, the Italian American and former CIA director maintained that the claim to cultural differences as a key component of the American ethos is a tactic adopted by America's internal enemies. In just 34 words, Pompeo's aggressive, retrotopian rhetoric brought the often-fraught multicultural paradigm back to the spotlight after some years of relative oblivion, and this reappearance obviously attracted several reactions in its defense. Such statements emphasized the status of multiculturalism as a (normatively) positive framework, in that "it gives us something to be *for* and not just something to be *against*" (McLennan 2006, 99). Notwithstanding this enthusiastic definition, since the Nineties the concept of multiculturalism has been variously criticized within intellectual *milieux*. While in declaring multiculturalism divisive and a threat to national unity (Kivisto and Rezaev 2018, 180), Pompeo's accusation seems to refer to Arthur Schlesinger's claims in *The Disuniting of America* (1992); on the left side of the spectrum, Nancy Fraser has pointed out that a process of redistribution (1995, 2007) should integrate politics of recognition (Taylor 1992). In the feminist debate arena, a tension between multiculturalism and feminism has famously been highlighted by Susan Moller Okin, who posited that the former may be detrimental to the latter's conquests (1999). This controversial stance elicited a huge number of responses from intersectional feminists, countering Moller Okin's white, ethnocentric (thus extremely limited) perspective. In the wake of the 2008 economic recession, the discussion about social inequalities in the United States has shifted its focus from multiculturalism to wealth distribution and the disastrous consequences of globalized economy on minorities, especially in sociological studies. And yet, to quote Peter Kivisto and Andrey Rezaev, "while there is clear evidence of a backlash to multiculturalism, analyses reveal that in terms of concrete policies and practices, there is little evidence of the retreat of multiculturalism" (179). Rather than completely disappearing, discussions concerning multiculturalism seem to

[1] The entire tweet reads: "Woke-ism, multiculturalism, all the -isms — they're not who America is. They distort our glorious founding and what this country is all about. Our enemies stoke these divisions because they know they make us weaker." (Pompeo 2021)

have gone undercover, thanks to the acquired discursive practice of using 'code words' to refer to race and ethnicity without explicitly mentioning them.

After undergoing a number of attempts at theorization (especially in the 1990s, a period in which the study of ethnic interaction held prominence in American Studies), multiculturalism seems to have slipped today into the general discourse as an empty rhetorical formula for inclusivity. The reality of America's social fabric rather displays a waiting room for its multifarious ethnic identities, which the groups who can claim access to the white mainstream are eager to leave. Through this lens, Pompeo's outburst on Twitter could be read as the epitome of the Italian American history of assimilation into the United States white mainstream. This attitude confirms Fred Gardaphé's provocative claim about Italian Americans becoming 'invisible people' and embracing discrimination against ethnic minorities as a rite of passage to enter the American whiteness, rather than contributing to fighting it (2010, 1). Nonetheless, this aspect does not exhaust, but rather further complicates the discussion about the problematic racial positioning of Italian Americans and other ethnic groups, which is an on-going subject of inquiry that cannot be reduced to a single perspective.

In fact, the investigation of the encounters between ethnic communities within American urban spaces appears today more relevant than ever, after the tragic events of 2020 and 2021, highlighting the controversial evolution of the debate regarding ethnicity (and its discontents) in the United States. The call for unity in Joe Biden's inaugural address as the 46th President of the United States, delivered on January 20, stands as a sharp turn away from Pompeo's previous statement. Biden's words seem rather to faintly echo Barack Obama's first inaugural address, delivered twelve years earlier, when Biden was a newly elected vice-President. On that occasion, a reassuring and quasi-utopian self-portrayal of the United States undergirded Obama's address, highlighting the strength of America's "patchwork heritage," defined as the very fabric of its society. The election of the current vice-president Kamala Harris, serving her role as the first African American and Asian American woman in the country's history, seems to (nominally) go further toward fulfilling Obama's vision. Harris emblematically embodies the potential empowerment of multiple racial and gender identities so far

underrepresented in political hierarchies. On the other hand, it would be naïve to downplay the fact that this single (hence purely symbolic) achievement follows the blatant awakening of white supremacy, most recently epitomized by the brutal killing of George Floyd and the assault on the US Capitol.

In the current state of events, the idea of an amicable interaction between diverse ethnicities in the cities of the United States seems as far as ever. It rather sets the stage for a paradoxical friction, which nonetheless does not cease to be advertised as a harmonious togetherness by hegemonic cultural narratives. By and large, the productive intellectual debate concerning multiculturalism peaking in the nineties has in fact frequently been obscured, in the US context, by a Jeffersonian exceptionalist ideology promoting the myth of America as an ideal place of peaceful coexistence, which obliterates all the historical tensions and racial conflicts inherent to the fabric and institutions of the United States (Daniele 1996). From this angle, liberal bourgeois multiculturalism has also been defined 'a fetishism of difference' (Mooers 2005), creating an arena for democratic discussion that remains abstract and counterproductive to the objectives of cultural pluralism. And yet, the proliferation of cultural narratives foregrounding the connections among different communities seem to express an unstated desire to bring the multicultural category back to the center of critical discourse, in an attempt to problematize it and investigate its limits, by pushing against its foundational concept.

On these premises, multiculturalism has been explored in the first essay of this issue by Elisa Bordin, who looks at the figure of the freak *vis-à-vis* the multicultural category. She analyzes the case of the Tocci brothers, two Italian conjoined twins who were exhibited as oddities/wonders from their birth in the 1870s until their twenties and travelled in Europe and the United States as members of freak shows. Her fascinating and original analysis of the case investigates the category of the disabled body and the ways in which it intersects with, clashes against, and exceeds the categories of 'nation,' 'culture,' 'gender,' and 'ethnicity' in the formation of a subject's identity. Bordin eventually concludes that extreme bodies are defined by the transnational figure of the 'freak' as their only possible cultural classification.

While Bordin's contribution directly addresses the multicultural paradigm, the following four articles focus on specific articulations of a dialogue between different ethnicities in their attempt at cohabitation. In fact, the articles address from four specific angles the often-fraught relationship between abstract notions regarding ethnic interaction and the latter's inscription in the specific urban contexts of the United States. In particular, Anna Maria Marini's article shifts the focus of our exploration to a TV show investigating the gentrification of the Latinx neighborhood of Boyle Heights in Los Angeles, as represented in *Gentefied*. In examining the entanglements between race relations and an ever-accelerating capitalism, her contribution acknowledges the latter's intrusion into spaces originally inhabited by poorer ethnic communities. Therefore, Marini's article assesses the violent impact that gentrification has not only on the financial situation, but also on the family and gender relations of the Morales family, thus shedding light on a factor which has had crucial importance for the dynamics between WASP Americans and hyphenated ones: capitalism.

Shifting the focus of the analysis from the West Coast to the Midwest, Marco Moschetti's contribution taps into the reflection about the imbrication of social mobility and racial urban geography. His article, which is a historical investigation of the social housing policies in Chicago after WWII, explores the ways in which multicultural categories intersect with class and are (un)able to foster a harmonious relationship in the inhabited space of the neighborhood. Moschetti delves into the connections between whiteness, social status and urban geographies, and focuses on the specific case of the Italian American community. He draws on the extensive scholarship on the subject and reads the latter's 'white flight' in the Chicago context as a further mark of assimilation to the American dominant culture.

Moschetti's contribution resonates significantly with a literary text such as Kym Ragusa's memoir *The Skin Between Us* (2006). Victoria Tomasulo's exploration of the book focuses on the elements keeping the African American and Italian American communities separate, rather than encouraging inter-ethnic dialogue. By analyzing the various neighborhoods in which the memoir is set (East and West Harlem, the Bronx and suburban New Jersey), and referencing John Gennari's key study on the interactions

between Italian Americans and African Americans (2017), Tomasulo reflects on the dual upbringing of the author as a daughter of an African American mother and an Italian American father. She underlines the role that gender dynamics, in addition to racial ones, have had in Ragusa's self-identification. She further problematizes colorblind discourses of multiculturalism, by underscoring how racial difference complicates ethnic identification. Her analysis focuses on racial tensions based on the disparity between the configuration of African American and Italian American neighborhoods in New York City.

Finally, Giacomo Traina's contribution resonates at once with Tomasulo's diasporic conceptualization of identity and the transnational dimension of Bordin's investigation, exploring the connections between the United States and the motherland from the viewpoint of Vietnamese American writers such as Aimee Phan, Lan Cao, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and Ocean Vuong. In Traina's view, for such American-born writers of Vietnamese ancestry, the return is translated as the paradoxical "reverse exodus" to Vietnam as a homecoming to a land where one has never been. Traina examines the most recent development of that literary trope, and the contradictions introduced to its treatment by the recent postwar reconciliation between the United States and Vietnam, carrying out a reflection about its function as a narrative device.

This issue is enriched by Fred Gardaphé's afterword, which provides a retrospective comment on the questions raised in the articles, from the perspective of a scholar who has been working on ethnicity and multicultural interactions in American literature and culture for several decades. Gardaphé's contribution to this issue, such as his other past and forthcoming writing on the topic, provides illuminating insight on both the multicultural category in American Studies and the crucial role of the latter in the development of Italian American Studies. His viewpoint resonates with the contributions collected in this issue, due to the strong presence of contributions pertaining to the field of Italian American Studies. This is only partially due to the guest editors' involvement in this field: in fact, it is more the result of both the intellectual energy of American Studies in Italy, which is well encapsulated in this graduate journal, and the current configuration of the field of Italian American Studies, which keeps

exploring uncharted territories in order to establish a fruitful intellectual dialogue with other fields of academic inquiry. Italian American Studies has in fact been receiving a growing surge of attention in Italian academia in recent years, with most major national American Studies journals intensifying their scholarship on the topic and contributing to a "reorientation of the critical gaze," as stated by Valerio Massimo De Angelis, coordinator of the Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani (CISIA) at the University of Macerata (2018, 225). *Ácoma* introduced in 2017 its first issue entirely devoted to Italian American culture since the foundation of the journal, edited by Bordin and Roberto Cagliero. Such intellectual debate was expanded and enhanced by thematic sessions devoted to the Italian American cultural and theoretical scene on *RSA Journal* (2010-11; 2019). Publications by leading scholars in the field, such as Fred Gardaphé and Anthony Julian Tamburri (2015), have been disseminated in Italy as well through the John D. Calandra Institute for Italian American Studies, which has been foundational and invaluable in organizing events and projects in conjunction with Italian institutions such as the University of Naples L'Orientale, the Roma Tre University and the University of Calabria, alongside the role played by the Italian American Studies Association under the current presidency of Alan Gravano. Inspired by such a flurry of intellectual activity, we invited Bordin and Gardaphé, whom we thank, to open and close our issue: their contributions represent the drive within the Italian American Studies field to multiply the interactions and broaden the conversation with the larger fields of American and Diaspora Studies.

In turn, we tried to further this conversation by connecting engaging contributions that delve into the depiction of communities defined by their different ethnic backgrounds. In fact, all the articles collected in the issues significantly mobilize what Laura Ruberto defines as "the edges of ethnicity," urging scholarly research to recognize "the fluid nature and marginalized aspects of an ethnic identity as well as consider … how ethnic identity works within mainstream modes of production" and "dominant ideological articulations" (Ruberto 2019, 118). Ruberto's theoretical stance thus invites a disentanglement of the "patchwork heritage" in favor of an investigation that highlights, rather than hiding, specific ethnic signs—for instance, those which

Gardaphé defines as 'Italian signs' (1992)—emerging as recurrent elements that resist and complicate assimilation. The ongoing discussion on mobility and citizenship in the wider field of American Studies in Italy (see, for instance, *RSA Journal* 30, 2019) shows the urgency of opening new pathways facilitating the encounter of ethnic identities in the broader context of American culture: with this issue, we aim to add some relevant elements to this lively debate. Yet, what seems to be reiterated by the contributions in this issue, and from our own meditation on the subject, is that the impossibility of actualizing the most hopeful aspects of multiculturalism replicates the unattainability of the American Dream. Indeed, it still appears as a utopian and deceiving self-narrative, as epitomized in F. S. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, which is explicitly referenced in Victoria Tomasulo's article and serves as a backdrop for the other contributions as well.

This issue of *JAm It!* is for us a step in an intellectual journey and the result of a mutual exchange which has, at times, even taken the shape of a collision. Our first discussions around this topic date back to 2019, on the occasion of the panel "When the Subaltern Speaks: Lost Voices in America, Lost Voices of America," presented at the MLA Symposium in Lisbon. The papers we delivered were looking at ways to navigate the difficult task of negotiating an ethnic identity in the United States, from a literary perspective distinctly evoking Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's postcolonial perspective. Our lively discussions laid the groundwork for our panel proposal to the 2020 EAAS conference (which was postponed to 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic and took place online in early May), titled "Mapping Heterotopias in Multicultural America." In that context, we decided to adopt a different approach and explore the ways in which Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia" intersects different cultural, ethnic and racial experiences in the United States. During these two experiences we considered a number of challenging questions, to some of which we have yet to find satisfactory answers. Moreover, as sometimes happens with journeys, our intellectual paths have at times parted, just to reunite at unexpected further junctions. In this third step, we did not aspire to formulating comprehensive or conclusive statements about how multiculturalism should be reconceptualized in the 21st century. Our primary interest laid rather in looking at what young Americanists, across different disciplines and with

different approaches, would add to the conversation about the evolution of such a category *vis-à-vis* its most recent reconfigurations in the American cultural landscape.

In concluding this introduction, we would like to thank all the early-career scholars who answered our call and submitted their contributions, despite the extraordinary circumstances which we have all been experiencing over the past year. Producing valuable academic work can be an everyday challenge given our precarious lives, in a Butlerian and also in a financial sense, but doing so in a global health crisis has an added value to it that we want to celebrate here. We would also like to thank all the reviewers that generously accepted to provide valuable feedback to the contributors in this issue and significantly helped them improve their work in meaningful ways. In addition, we thank all our colleagues who contributed to improve this issue with discussions and suggestions, many of whom have been mentioned already somewhere in this introduction, and the innumerous ones who we have not managed to mention. Last but not least, we want to thank the editorial board of *JAm It!* for giving us the opportunity to edit this issue. In particular, we thank Stefano Morello and Marco Petrelli, who continually assisted us during this first experience as journal editors, under such unprecedented global conditions.

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