

I GOTTA WEAR SHADES: MULTICULTURALISM'S CONTENTS AND DISCONTENTS

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The issues raised by the essays in this volume represent the type of work that has been at the center of my career since the early 1980s. As a veteran of the infamous and antagonistically named 'Culture Wars' period, and as an academic nearing the end of his career, I am happy to see that the spirit of critical contention lives on through new work. Over those years, I have had my share of encounters, some might call them skirmishes, over what should be read, what should be studied, and what should be written about in US American literature courses. Whether it was my advocacy for the inclusion of writings by Italian Americans, or my struggles to include other writers of color, class, and lifestyles into my teaching and to the general teaching of various departments in which I've worked, my position has been strengthened by new developments that have occurred over those years. This volume speaks loudly to me about the changing nature of academia in Italy and how it is coming to terms with the variety of cultures that have always made-up US American culture, but until recently have not been acknowledged by traditional scholars of US American Studies. To invoke a popular song from the band Timbuk 3, "The future's so bright I gotta wear shades." Indeed, shades are especially important for us older folks to ward off the onset of cataract development. And the future of this field is indeed brightened by the contributions here.

As I read through the essays gathered here, I couldn't help but recall the efforts put forth by many of us at my stage of career and life to challenge the interpretative strategies, ethics, and the aesthetic standards that we were taught as universal during our education. Many were the workshops that I took and eventually presented on incorporating more diversity in our classes. When the word multicultural was introduced back then, it seemed not only something new but also something that was

politically radical. Quite often our efforts were dismissed as simplified identity politics, which, according to the foundational New Criticism by which most of us were nursed, was no way to seriously examine literary production in the classroom and in articles and books. Most of my generation of scholars had encountered a predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon canon of literature that we were told was the greatest work that had been produced, and that if we hoped to advance in our fields, we would have to focus our studies on it. We were cautioned that the very notion of an ‘American’ culture depended on students studying the materials that had been deemed important and necessary in the creation of ‘American’ values that would unite citizens in formation and ensure common ground for the successful interaction of those living in a democratic society.

It’s hard to believe that in those days, US American literature was considered secondary to British literature, especially as one advanced from high school through college and graduate studies, and that if you expected to get a job upon graduation, you needed to master that literature with the hopes that you might be able to teach a course or two someday in American Literature. I don’t know how I made it through it all and retained a passionate love for literature, but I do know what happened when I finally got the guts to switch my dissertation proposal from one on Walt Whitman to Italian American writers.¹

The result of that small revolution was nothing less than the career I have enjoyed through the support of such organizations as the Italian American Studies Association (formerly the American Italian Historical Association), the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature in the United States (MELUS), and the Society for Multi-Ethnic Studies of Europe and the Americas (MESEA), which have all helped to develop multicultural approaches to the study of US American literature of the type found here.

¹ A more detailed account of this can be found in my contribution to the forthcoming volume *Beyond Boundaries: The Interplay of Ancient and Modern Literatures, Visual Arts, Cinema and Music in American Culture* edited by Valerio Massimo De Angelis, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh, and Giuseppe Nori (University of Macerata 2021). The volume contains essays developed from presentations at the “Oltre i Confini” conference held at the University of Macerata November 30 to December 2, 2015, in honor of Professor Marina Camboni.

Much of what I would like to say here has been expressed already in yet another forthcoming article of mine, “Art of the State: The Politics of Multiculturalism in American Literary Studies, or Who Hung the Rembrandt on the Multicultural Mural?”² in which I treat this subject in greater depth. Rather than quote from that essay, I thought I’d draw your attention to it and then go on to add my two cents to the discussion framed by Francesco Chianese and Cristina Di Maio in their introductory essay, “Is Multiculturalism Who America is? Investigating the United States ‘Patchwork Heritage,’” which takes as its title a sentence pronounced by Mike Pompeo, the former Secretary of State in the Trump administration. Pompeo, ironically a descendent of Italian immigrants, was certainly voicing “retrotopian rhetoric” characteristic of old White Anglo Saxon Protestant attempts to control the development and advancement of what once was considered to be ‘American’ culture. Similar thinking is what gave us the mistaken notion of “The Melting Pot” metaphor as a means of describing the making US citizens out of immigrants. So how does a son of immigrants reach a position of power and come to say such things? The rush to assimilation, done quite well by Americans of Italian descent, primarily because of skin color, the lack of an understanding of Italian culture because it was not well reflected in his educational experiences as he moved from student, to CIA Director, to Secretary of State, in the process adopting WASP values and the need to police them, led him to believe that Culture was one thing, and multiculturalism a diversion from what was important. These are the words of a way of thinking that is not going gentle into that good night, as reflected by the recent backlash of white power and privilege fostered by the Trump administration. This old way disguised politics as aesthetics, the privileged creating a hegemony of critical standards that went unchallenged for many years, arguing for universal standards by which literature would be judged worthy of canonization. At its

² This article will appear in *Migrant Fictions*, edited by Dorothy Figueira and contains essays that came from presentations made at the “Multicultural Migrant Fictions” Conference, held in April of 2017 at the University of Georgia. This conference was a direct result of that conference held at the University of Macerata noted earlier.

heart, WASP culture was anti-dialectic, paying lip-service to dissenting voices, but as we know, the times were a-changing.

The political struggles that led to racial studies gave birth to ethnic studies, creating the initial wave of multicultural thinking. Yes, it was those political acts based on identity issues that preceded changes in critical approaches, leading to the ‘Culture Wars’ of the 1980s, and have now opened the door for such ideas as Cancel Culture that seems to be the rage in the US. The irony of those proposing the erasure of minority cultures is that their acts are nothing more than ‘civilized’ ways of doing what was done to the indigenous cultures that once stood in the way of such imperialist notions as “Manifest Destiny,” that led to the celebration of victories through naming streets, towns and even states after the very peoples and cultures they were trying to erase as they paved a great white way throughout the country. Held in place by personal and institutionally supported racism, minority cultures were mined and mimed by minstrel shows, rock and roll, and myriad of cultural thefts that came to be known as American culture. In the end, those signs of their sins would be read by the survivors of their attempts to whitewash the various cultures that make up the US A. and recast as signals for necessary retribution and reparations. Such is the way of life in a democratic society and those who have lived long enough in one could see it coming and welcome its arrival. Multiculturalism, as we see it now, means nothing more than many cultures, and that’s the reality of where we are today. What we do with each of those cultures depends on a combination of cultural acts, political, social and moral, that are deemed acceptable by the changing body of what makes up the majority. With those acts will come new ways of thinking, that will create new responsibilities for artists, critics, consumers and institutions. The essays in this volume give us an indication of possible directions those acts and responsibilities might take.

Framed neatly by the editors, the essays here, begin the work of moving the discourse along by considering such ideas as the triangulation of race, ethnicity and disability in the essay by Elisa Bordin, a solid contribution that shines multiculturalistic light on the important role that the abnormalities play in cultural discourse and how that discourse changes when the focus shifts onto the likes of adjoined twins in history,

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or any of the other “freaks,” that have occupied America’s attention over the years. Bordin’s insight into the way deviancy reinforces normative ideas requires us to consider the policing function that freaks have played in the hands of the powerful as we advance our ways and means of dealing with the many cultures that make up the United States of America. Anna Marta Marini’s thoughtful examination of the television series *Gentefied* helps us to see urban development as another form of colonization that changes urban neighborhoods and the people who move there, inviting the use of the powerful tools created by postcolonial criticism to make sense of these cultural experiences. Marco Moschetti’s encyclopedic survey of Chicago’s urban planning and execution of racist policies created a sense of racial geography that helps us understand just how the unhealthy segregation of Chicago’s neighborhood came to be and how early groups such as the Italian Americans slipped out of its grasp under the cover of whiteness. Victoria Tomasulo’s study of Kym Ragusa’s memoir shows us that just gaining a sense of multiculturalism does little to resolve the dilemmas it reveals. It takes more than recognition of racism to eradicate it, but it’s a start, and multiculturalism is more complex than a simple cultural quilt woven with separate but equal patches of different cultures. As the many cultures that make up the United States interact, they create even newer hybrid cultures that will bring with them their own cultural products requiring new ways of consumption and critical response. Giacomo Traina’s essay on reverse exoduses of Vietnamese Americans brings us the new problem of what to do with the cultural products of those who return to their ancestral homes and utilize those experiences in their art. In the process, their writings reveal intergenerational traumas that quite often go unprocessed as generations move from immigrant to acceptance as US Americans, certainly the case of Secretary Pompeo. In sum, these essays, advanced by the editors’ introduction, continue to challenge notions of multiculturalism and why it matters now more than ever.

We need to rethink the meanings of multiculturalism in US American Studies so that the result is the creation of an inter-ethnic/racial and class solidarity rather than fragmentation, so that we recognize the continued centrality of racism in American culture, and to understand how perceived differences are formed, acted and reacted to

in today's world. This issue of *JAm It!* bodes well for the future of cultural scholarship that connects the academy to the streets, for if there is one thing I've learned over my career, it's that cultural change requires the conviction of critics not only to understand the creation of institutional injustices, but to use their minds and words to right those wrongs.

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