VIA

Voices in Italian Americana

a literary and cultural review

published by
Bordighera Incorporated
ISSN 1048-292X

The Editors of *Voices in Italian Americana* gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the following people and organizations who have thus far contributed to the inception and publication of the journal. An asterisk (*) indicates repeated contributions.

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Volume 27 | Fall 2016 | Number 2

SPECIAL ISSUE: ITALIAN DIASPORA STUDIES

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VIA's Italian Diaspora Studies Issue

The establishment of the Summer Seminar in Italian Diaspora Cultures, Queens College/CUNY under the aegis of the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute and the University of Calabria have worked to move Italian/American Studies into the 21st century by establishing new ways of organizing and studying the impact that Italian immigrants have had, not just in the United States of America (the focus of what has been traditionally referred to as Italian/American studies), but throughout the world where Italian immigrants have set up homes in new lands.

With this issue, Fred Gardaphé, Distinguished Professor of English and Italian American Studies at Queens College, CUNY, and Eleonora Federici, Professor of English and Translation Studies in the University of Naples, L'Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Comparati, contribute to the discourse on Italian Diaspora studies. We have chosen five essays for this venture with the hope of enabling our readers to begin to see what happens when we juxtapose essays on the Italian experience in different parts of the world. What you will find are similarities as well as differences that mark the importance of exposure to a wider range of studies of the Italian migrant cultures. With this issue, we hope to join those who are pushing both Italian and American studies in new directions that result in creating transnational perspectives that transcend the typical mono-cultural readings of single national experiences, and this will be accomplished not through the writings here, but through your readings of what we present.

Early in their careers many Italian/American scholars spent much time studying the different cultures that make up the USA. They studied the African American, Jewish American, Irish American, Asian American, Hispanic American experiences, and wondered, as does Spike Lee's character Mookie in the film *Do the Right Thing*, where were the pictures of their people on the walls of the local institutions. That's when many decided to focus their time and energy on Italian/American studies. Through articles, books, curriculum and program development they did not follow the traditional American studies path, and in doing so defied status quo expectations of what a good American Studies student would produce.

Throughout these studies they learned much, but nothing more important than what they learned about two different nations and what happened when one migrated from one to the other. These were some of the most important lessons ever learned in or out of school, and they prepared them to devote their lives to developing Italian and American studies in the context of American Studies. They did this outside of school with the hopes

that, if they worked hard enough, future generations would be able to do this within their education.

As a precursor to what is happening today with the widespread attacks on working-class citizens who belong to unions, state governments — like Arizona — began going after multicultural studies program. If you take the time to read through the Arizona House of Representatives Bill 2281, you will find that it is rather ambiguous and full of holes that you could drive just about any course of study through, provided you are a clever teacher. The bill makes it illegal to teach ethnic studies as it has been done for the past 20 years. It particularly cites courses that speak to a single ethnic group and those that advocate "ethnic solidarity instead of treatment of students as individuals." It also, rather paranoically, bans teaching that might "advocate overthrow of the government." So much of what happens on account of this bill depends on how much attention is given to curriculum development and execution in the state, and our sense is that this will be very little. But if we are wrong, then we all might be in for a rerun of antics from the 1980s and the early struggles to get multiculturalism inserted into mainstream curricula. It's time for progressive educators to renew their commitment to multicultural understanding.

What we object to most about the Arizona bill is not what it says, but what it implies. One of the first implications is that ethnic solidarity is a bad thing and runs counter to individualism. That's something hard to understand. We are constantly working the tension between individualism and community identities and this bill assumes that it's either one or the other. The principle of ethnic (and class) solidarity is worth fighting for. Good education requires both intra and intercultural education and the thinking behind this bill is the fuel that ignited the current reaction to the Syrian (among others) refugee crisis.

Good education is always about revolution and it will continue to be. Students need to learn about all the cultures that are part of their country; whether it is through textbooks or other resources, we need to be reminded that the USA was founded on the principle of resistance to economic, social, and political tyranny, and this bill suggests a tyranny of culture. Thomas Jefferson reminds us that we need to keep the spirits alive that helped to found this government:

> The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions, that I wish it to be always kept alive. It will often be exercised when wrong, but better so than not to be exercised at all. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the atmosphere. (Thomas Jefferson to Abigail Adams, 1787)

The storm in Arizona is something that we all need to understand as the seeds of a worse storm brewing on the global horizon. Developing transnational studies is a good — and we might argue the only — way to grasp an understanding of the complex cultural weather of today's world.

One of the first signs that the US Government was not going to tolerate difference (besides the efforts to eradicate the presence of the Native Americans) came in the 1780s through what has been called Shays' Rebellion. This insurrection of farmers against the merchant classes and their attempts to achieve economic equity has been rarely emphasized in mainstream American studies, but it is worth a re-examination of this event to understand the precedents that have created the basis for recent actions taken by state and the federal government to quell the attempts of working-class people to assert their rights and protect their livelihoods.

Shays was a soldier in the Revolutionary War who organized Massachusetts farmers to rebel against the US Government in order to stop the foreclosures of property that were taking place as the economy struggled with post-war inflation and the deflation of American currency. Farmers began to borrow money in order to survive the subsequent economic crisis that hit the country after the war. Unable to meet the demands of their loans, many lost their land and found themselves in debtor prisons. Today we may no longer have debtor prisons, but we have retained the prison of debt that has affected working-class Americans in ways similar to this post-Revolutionary War period. Shays' rebellion targeted the judicial system that supported the merchants and brought about retaliation by the state's militia. It was the beginnings of a first civil war.

This was a lot like what we see happening today as the government uses an economic crisis to enact legislation that drains the power of the people to react to what Naomi Klein has labeled as "shock doctrine," in her 2007 book on what she calls "disaster capitalism."[1] Klein surveyed the last 30 years of USA history and observed that democratic governments perpetrated anti-democratic acts as a guise to push through unfavorable reforms that benefit the upper classes formed by free market capitalism. We would argue that a similar type of shock therapy has been applied to American studies over the same years — the result of reactionary political acts that affected both social and cultural activities and studies. A simple transnational approach comparing the formations of the US and Italy nation formation can inform our thinking about problems we face today.

The result of Shays' rebellion was the establishment of the US constitution, in which reference to labor or work appears only once. In Italy, where the working class has a more established and solid base from which to counter threats from those wishing to diminish their power, we have learned that while it might be easy to laugh at some of its corrupt leaders, no one is laughing at Italian labor. Workers have respect, if not power, granted to them by the Italian Constitution. A big difference between Italy and the US

[1] *The Shock Doctrine* (New York: Picador, 2007).

is that Italy was constructed on a fundamental belief in the importance of labor. Italy is founded on work. In fact, labor is the eighth word of its constitution. The first sentence of the constitution reads: "Italy is a Democratic Republic founded on labor." In comparison, the word "labor" appears three times in the entire US Constitution, all in paragraph three of the fourth Article, and here in reference to the responsibility of the worker to fulfill a contract of labor even if he flees the state, and the right of the employer to have that worker retuned to fulfill the contract:

> 3: No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up on Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.

Interesting is the difference, and one not identified by pundits and journalists reporting on recent congressional actions such as the oral reading of the Constitution that occurred in the Congress in 2011.[2] While we are not experts in Constitutional interpretation, we do think that this simple comparison between Italy and the United States raises an important issue that the people who work and the people who study work in the US need to address. Failure to do so would be fatal for the working classes of the US and the world.

Now is the time when cultural understanding among nations is needed more than ever, and it is time for educators to develop multicultural understanding done through transnational studies that move beyond US centric boundaries and develop alternative perspectives on the role the US has played in world politics and culture.

We need to rethink the meanings of multiculturalism in American studies so that the result is the creation of an inter-ethnic/racial and class solidarity rather than fragmentation, that we recognize the continued centrality of racism in American culture in our efforts to realize a truly transnational American Studies. And so, in light of recent anti-Democratic acts in American politics, disguised as attempts to save the economy, we suggest we take a good look at just how transnational approaches to single disciplinary studies, such as comparing the way work is presented in two different national documents, can lead us into new thinking. This will lead to better ways of understanding how perceived differences are formed, acted, and reacted to in today's world, and in the Internet age, global consciousness has gone from being a luxury to a need, especially as the US moves ever closer to becoming the very fascist nation it once fought against.

[2]See Jennifer Steinhauer, "Constitution Has Its Day (More or Less) in House," *New York Times* 6 Jan. 2011: A15. http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/07/us/politics/07constitution.html?_r=0

From the Italian and European perspectives, it is important to think about what we mean by Italian identity and culture, and whether there is only one notion of "Italianness." In an age of globalization and migration, with flows of migrants into the European Union, and especially into Italy, which is the southern gateway to Europe, we need to rethink the same idea of nationality and what it means to belong to a place. People coming to Italy from different parts of the world mainly for economical and political reasons change its culture, whether we like it or not. Politicians can create walls but they will not stop this movement of people toward Europe and Italy, which unfortunately is still a place not ready to integrate migrants and help them to have a new life within the fabric of Italian society. In an era when we should open our minds to the new, we close them, reiterating prejudices and stereotypes. Probably they have forgotten that Italy was a country of migration too, just as they have forgotten their colonial history and practically erased any trace of it.

Now Italy has become a country of immigration and this makes a great change in our understanding of what it means to feel and think Italian; the fear of the "other" creates a closed idea of nationality while Italian culture and everyday-life is nonetheless changing before our eyes. From a literary point of view, Italian literature is acquiring new accents thanks to authors born and bred in foreign countries (the same Italian language is changing and is enriched by the influences of other languages). From a social and political point of view Italians witness the new immigrant struggles in adjusting to the pressures of immigration and see in their daily lives the difficulties of living in a multicultural environment, while from a cultural point of view we recognize the multiple cultures now enriching their lives, be it tasting new food in restaurants or going to festivals and cultural events organized by people from other countries that are recreating a sense of community in our land. All this should make us reflect about Italy's own history of migration and to what happened to our ancestors who brought their language, culture, values, and lifestyle abroad. We remember them only when we have national elections for which their votes become important; but they are part of us, of our history and culture; they are the continuation of Italian culture transplanted in other soils and hybridized with the new ground. Literatures, films, cultural events, and even the advertising of Italian products become signs of a representation of Italianness born outside the motherland but that maintain a strong emotional link with it. As Italians, it is important to look outside national borders and recognize the traces of Italian culture in other countries. Italians have migrated to many places and they have given life to an enlarged and multicultural/multilingual notion of *Italianità* and, in order to understand ourselves, we should look for these traces and recognize them as part of our own history and culture.

This special issue of *VIA* brings together the works of scholars who have investigated Italian migrant cultures in a few of the places throughout the world where Italian immigrants have settled with the idea of showing that

what we have traditionally done in Italian/American studies is just one way of seeing the large-scale migrations of Italians throughout the world. It is a first step in rendering more visible the legacy of Italian culture outside the national borders and to recognize a tradition of writers of Italian descent. Moreover, it is a first step in the analysis of the same idea of *Italianità* and its representations not only in literature and the arts but also in popular culture.

In this issue, Eleonora Federici and Andrea Bernardelli examine how the design and execution of the promotion of Italian products reveal the differences between what is Italian and what is Italian/American, and how the US producers seek to blur that distinction in the hopes of seeing connections to and authenticity that will help sell their products. The essay unveils the importance of representation connected to Italian culture and its products.

Alessandra DeMarco's study of the verbal and visual representations of Italian identity found in the social and commercial websites of New Zealand sheds light on an Italian diaspora that rarely gets attention in ethnic world studies. Through DeMarco's scholarship we can see familiar and unfamiliar aspects of *Italianità*.

Nick Ceramella surveys literature created by Italian/American women. While many readers might already be familiar with the works that Ceramella covers, what he offers beyond the Italian male perspective is a sense of the importance these writers have on the Italian reader in terms of rethinking the role of women in a culture that has, more often than not, privileged male production.

Eva Pelayo-Sañudo's essay on the works of the Italian/Argentine writer Syria Poletti extends the geographical reach of Ceramella's essay into South America and employs an aesthetics that reaches beyond the usual sociocultural presentation of immigrant writers to explore the light that Poletti's work sheds on our understandings of gender, migration, age, and disabilities in relation to the migrant experience.

Licia Canton's essay, more personal in approach, reviews the work of women writers of Italian/Canadian literature and expands the notion of the Italian/American writers north of the US border. By exploring the works in terms of identity, Canton highlights the similarities and differences these women writers have to their counterparts in other parts of the world.

We believe there is much to be discovered and taken into consideration. This special issue may be regarded as a starting point in the recovery of literatures and signs of authors of Italian descent. It is the editors' hope that the reading of these essays will bring new ways of seeing the Italian migrant experience and new ways of thinking about the Italian diaspora as literary and cultural studies move in this new and exciting direction.

Eleonora Federici and Fred Gardaphé
Università di Napoli, L'Orientale and *Queens College/CUNY*

Essays