

USA: Identities, Cultures, and Politics in National, Transnational and Global Perspectives

A.I.S.N.A. Associazione Italiana di Studi Nord-Americani
Proceedings of the 19th Biennial International Conference
Macerata, October 4-6, 2007

Edited by Marina Camboni, Valerio Massimo De Angelis,
Daniele Fiorentino, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh

eum

Isbn 978-88-6056-230-2
Prima edizione: dicembre 2009
©2009 eum edizioni università di macerata
Centro Direzionale, via Carducci 63/a – 62100 Macerata
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<http://eum.unimc.it>

Stampa:
Tipografia S. Giuseppe srl
Via Vecchietti, 51 - 62010 Pollenza
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Questo volume è pubblicato con il contributo dell'Università di Macerata e della Banca delle Marche

Editing and copy-editing: Lisa Kramer Taruschio

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Introduction

As the title clearly states, the main subject of our workshop is the languages (and cultures) of America—languages and cultures in the plural, as opposed to the fiction of *one* American language and *one* American culture, a fiction that nonetheless exerts its indisputable power on both the national and the global scene. But we should first of all define what we are talking about when we talk about the entity called “America.” What does this term refer to? Certainly not to the whole continent, and not even to North America, which includes also Canada and Mexico. And if we shift from geography to history, and take “America” as meaning the USA, what about the centuries before the Declaration of Independence, when something called the United States had not yet been conceived? In the Italian academy, we have sidestepped the obstacle by using the label “Anglo-American language and culture” (in the singular), therefore excluding any expression not in the English language. But are non-English language cultural expressions not (or un-) American? This *cul de sac* aptly shows the difficulty—or even the futility—of attempting to draw the borders of our discipline.

Perhaps our discipline (or disciplines) is/are as Babel-like as the soundscape of any major US/American/Anglo-American town today. And not only today. The multilingual—and transnational—dimension of what we call American culture has actually been operative from the very beginning, since the Pilgrim Fathers asked the Massachusetts Indians for help and received, to their utmost surprise, an answer in English from a Patuxet Indian, Tisquantum, better known as Squanto, who had been kidnapped and brought to Europe years before. The earliest linguistic and cultural encounters between English colonists and Native Americans are marked not only by misunderstandings and open conflicts, but also by a deep interbreeding that at mid-17th century gave birth to dozens of towns of “praying Indians,” converted to the Christian faith by the “apostle” John Eliot, who in turn had become fluent in the Indian tongues, and had published a translation of the Bible into the Natick language.

Gradually, as we all know, the English language and the Anglo-American culture became the language and culture of an empire, and attempts were made to hide or thoroughly erase all deviant (non-/un-American) linguistic and cultural expressions. The “melting pot” project is only one of many attempts made at the turn of the twentieth century to homogenize American diversity precisely at a time when the multilingualism and also transnationalism of the American scene was in full, spectacular bloom, a time when a plethora of newspapers and books written in Italian, German, Russian, Yiddish, and so on, were mirroring the reality of a vast non-English-speaking and not-yet-American population. We have already arrived, in our century, at a junction where entire American states are virtually bi-lingual—“virtually,” because many Spanish speakers are not yet proficient in English; but they soon will be, or their sons and daughters will be. On a lesser scale, many other non-English languages are gaining more or less culturally legitimate ground, contributing to the ongoing construction of this New Babel that is America. And the experiences of dislocation, the sense of being lost and clueless in a chaotic world, the nightmarish perspective of losing one’s identity without yet acquiring a replacement for it, the evident hostility of “native speakers” towards the “barbarians from the other side” (or from the *under*-side, if we are talking about African Americans)—in effect everything that the authors studied in this workshop highlight as the distinctively negative features of living in the “New Babel”—also foreshadow the not-too-distant future of the whole Western world. But such are the often contradictory characteristics of the exhilarating feeling of empowerment and the awareness of a newer, deeper and more complex way of seeing and saying things that one may adopt nowadays to capture (or even create) the reality of contemporary life, in whatever language and from whatever positioning may seem most fit.