

VALERIO MASSIMO DE ANGELIS AND MADDALENA TIRABASSI

Introduction

In February 2018, the mission statement of the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS), a federal agency charged with immigrant affairs, was radically changed, and the words “America’s promise as a nation of immigrants,” promoting “an awareness and understanding of citizenship” along with “ensuring the integrity of our immigration system,” were deleted, to be substituted with the intimation that the immigration policy of the USA must tend towards “adjudicating requests for immigrant benefits” while “protecting Americans” and “securing the homeland.” This stark opposition between “immigrants” and “Americans” tells a lot about the recent and brutal dismantling of what, since the founding of the first English Colonies in North America, has always been one of the central tenets of the American concepts of national identity, citizenship, and civil rights – *i.e.*, the inextricable interconnection between the endless flow of migration waves and the necessity to insert them in a social and political structure inevitably bound to continually redefine both itself and the set of duties and rights upon which belonging to “America” as its citizens is based. This special section aims at exploring the complex and contradictory development of this dynamics, and the ways in which it has been represented, celebrated and criticized by American culture.

The articles selected deal with diverse issues and from very different perspectives. They go from legislation and official politics to autobiography and personal experience, and literary representation. Up to the Obama administration the watershed was 9/11. But, as the essays in this issue well show, the real turning point in migratory policies takes place with Trump: before him the two major parties had found an overall agreement on immigration, seeing both its pros and cons, and trying to govern the migratory flows so that they could be integrated into the fabric

of US society and culture – more often than not in very ambiguous and equivocal ways, up to the point that under President Obama, who in his first Inaugural Address celebrated “our patchwork heritage” and firmly stated that “[w]e are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this earth” (Obama 2009, n. pag.), the removal of illegal immigrants was, as Ayman Al Sharafat shows in his article on “Attitudes of the United States’ Presidents Towards Immigration,” comparatively higher than during both George W. Bush’s two terms and Donald Trump’s first two years of presidency.

As a matter of course, twentieth- and early twenty-first-century US policies on immigration and citizenship have greatly varied according to the different historical situations, and also to the different national/ethnic/religious groups involved. The mythical connection of the granting of US citizenship with having been born on the America soil – the *jus soli* – has been repeatedly questioned and overridden when issues of political convenience suggested the drawing of a boundary between “natives” and newcomers to ensure a check on mobilities that could otherwise be bolstered by the presumed easiness of becoming “American” and thus radically change the ethno/demographic outlook of the nation, potentially undermining a WASP hegemony which has never been really infringed. But the open and loud hostility of the current administration against migrants and their desire to acquire US citizenship is a paradigmatic shift, as it is shown by Trump’s recent racist insults against non-white Congresswomen such as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, Ayanna Pressley, Rashida Tlaib and Ilhan Omar, all invited to “go back home” – and Omar is the only one who was not born in the USA. On the other hand, this shift can also be – at least partially – seen as the logical consequence, brought to its extremes, of a long history of a more or less systematic discrimination, marginalization, and even criminalization of the racialized “others” coming from somewhere else and claiming the right to be accepted as “Americans.”

An example of this strategy can be found in the manifold contradictions, inconsistencies and difficulties Asian immigrants had to face in order to apply for American citizenship and naturalization studied by Stefano Luconi’s in “The Color of Citizenship: Asian Immigrants to the United States and Naturalization between 1870 and 1952,” which focuses on

the period between the adoption of the 1870 Naturalization Act and the congressional approval of the 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act). In so doing the article adopts an approach that scores two major points. First, it shows how the cultural construction of race entered the judicial discourse and courts' pronouncements. Through the analyses of courts' judgments and rulings, the author also gives a good and clear analysis of the ways in which "racial discourse" evolved and encompassed issues like skin color, religion and culture at large. Besides, the article explores the cultural construction of races and the idea that Christianity and certain kinds of cultural backgrounds could be a shortcut for the whitening of non-white migrants, discussing some cases in which on the one hand Asian applicants tried to exploit voids in US naturalization laws and on the other judges and courts felt the need to variously redefine the criteria for the definition of "Asian." The 1870 Naturalization Act granted migrants from Africa and their descendants the right to apply for US citizenship. As a result, while blacks joined whites among the potential beneficiaries of this measure, Asians were excluded from the naturalization process until the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act repealed the "alien ineligibility to citizenship" clause from US immigration legislation. The article thus points out the paradoxes engendered by the equivocal use of race as a pathway to citizenship, and helps understand the ever-changing attitude of the US political and judicial system in dealing with the issues of migration and citizenship.

George W. Bush "introduced a number of concepts that would become hallmarks of the post-9/11 rhetoric," and, by "employing terms such as 'American,' 'citizen' and patriot," he "outlined an ideal spectrum of social and political identity," states Alice Balestrino. Her reading of Amy Waldman's *The Submission* takes us to the turning point of the debate, with a novel that, she argues, "questions the sharp discrimination between the three groups" amplified by the terrorists' attack, "by depicting a fictional backdrop against which US social cohesion – nominally encouraged but, in fact, undermined by the post-9/11 rhetoric of 'us vs. them'" and media patriotism – "is torn apart, leading to a split in the comprehension of the notion of safety itself." The rhetorical distinction between "American," "citizen" and "patriot" indeed opens a way to a realignment of the criteria

of national identification that creates a hierarchy of positions, so that belonging to the “United States” is not anymore a matter of legal status but of personal adhesion to a system of values – and, besides, one’s location along the spectrum of different levels of national allegiance is subject to a constant and obsessively securitarian scrutiny, that can lead to social ostracism. Another paradox comes in: the search for absolute security produces its exact opposite – the loss of any sense of safety for a wide range of individuals and ethnic or religious groups, especially those of recent “Americanization,” who are thus displaced from the former spatial mobility and precariousness of migration (which they hoped to have exchanged for the stability promised by the new country) to a renewed social and cultural instability enforced by the logic of the “clash of civilizations.”

In “Attitudes of the United States Presidents Toward Immigration” Ayman Al Sharafat examines how the redefinition of these notions has been reflected in and triggered by the three Presidents’ policies towards immigration during the period from 2001 to 2018. He shows that while US immigration entry policies under the Lyndon B. Johnson administration and after became a hallmark of ideological openness, designating the United States as the unquestioned leader of a freer and fairer world order, in the aftermath of 9/11 both the domestic and the international security scenarios changed, affecting the immigration debate. Increased security threats gradually pushed the discussion on migration towards issues of national security, mainly in the form of increased entry restrictions. Donald Trump’s approach to immigration maintains the tone of urgency introduced with 9/11. By analyzing a number of presidential documents, Al Sharafat is able to demonstrate that while Bush and Obama, albeit from different parties, shared a similar attitude toward immigration, appreciating its benefits notwithstanding the security issues, Trump has unashamedly exploited the fears of the public opinion regarding any possible “alien” threat to overturn the previous general consensus about the United States being fundamentally a nation of migrants – and this, we might add, is also part of the widespread phenomenon of the rise and consolidation of populist and nationalist movements throughout the Western world (and beyond).

How much the ongoing debate on migration and citizenship in the USA resonates with what is just now happening in Italy is made clearly

evident in Lindsey Kingston's "Healing the Scars of Forced Migration: An Italian-American Story," which not only combines and compares the historical emigration from Italy to the current immigration flows, but also examines past and present migration policies in the USA and Italy. This multiple perspective is achieved through an original approach, with the author going back and forth between her personal experience and historical events. In addition, immigration laws are seen for once from a third-generation immigrant perspective. In this research-informed essay, the author also connects her Italian American heritage (and the political processes by which Italians "became" white and American) to current migration issues within the United States and Italy. She argues that migration comes with consequences, good and bad, such as the loss of home as much as the gaining of a new one. "By telling stories from our own families, and by recognizing the complicated and sometimes ugly histories from countries such as the United States and Italy", she contends, "we can begin to re-humanize migrants in our political discussions," and also to create a much wider comparative horizon that may go far beyond the scope of scholarly research, and reach to different individual and collective experiences of migration, to be compared not only "from the outside," through the observer's gaze, but also "from the inside," thanks to the exchange of personal stories of migration – something that should be systematically done both in Italy and the USA, and elsewhere.

The complexity of the issues involving migrant identities in search of some sort of recognition of their distinct "Americanness" is addressed in Lin Ling's article on *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, Mojha Kahf's bestseller published in 2006, which explores the representation of diasporic Muslim identities in a coming-of-age narrative. Li Ling examines how religious diasporic hybrid identity is mobilized within the female protagonist Khadra Shamy, including the ways she struggles to negotiate her identity across different cultural terrains and gendered, racialized, intergenerational configurations. It attempts to show how these literary representations construct – and help conceptualize – the ways we understand diasporic Muslims in the USA. The individual experiences as narrated in the novel illuminate a series of essential socio-political questions facing the community as a religious minority in a secular context. The study addresses these questions through the representation of cultural hybridity in the

literary narrative within the framework of postcolonial theory, and shed new lights within the so called diasporic “cultural clashes between Islamic and American social mores and norms, inter-generational conflicts between first-generation Muslim immigrants and subsequent generations, race relations among Muslims with differing cultural origins and theoretical allegiances, and the varying interpretations of Islamic codes among the community.” The use of the veil, the way the protagonist wears or rejects it, epitomizes this multiplicity.

It is this same multiplicity – of issues, of methodologies, of perspectives, of the geo-cultural locations of their authors – which characterizes the five articles as a whole. We hope that their different approaches may shed some new light on the current debate about the interconnections involving the processes of global mobilities and the changing status of US citizenship, and on the contradictions all this is engendering.

Works Cited

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