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Tatiani G. RAPATZIKOU and Ludmila MARTANOVSKI (Eds.)

***ETHNICITY AND GENDER DEBATES: CROSS-  
READINGS OF AMERICAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE  
IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM***

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The present collection of essays was preceded by *National and Transnational Challenges to the American Imaginary* (2018), edited by Adina Ciugureanu, Eduard Vlad and Nicoleta Stanca. Both volumes are part of the English Literature & Culture series of Peter Lang Publishing and the result of the 2016 International Conference, jointly organized by the European Association for American Studies and the Romanian Association for American Studies at the Ovidius University of Constanța, Romania. Both editors, Tatiani G. Rapatzikou from Greece and Ludmila Martanovschi from Romania, are Associate Professors in American Studies. Their central aim is to provide a set of fresh readings on past and present cultural politics associated with ethnicity and gender.

What informs this selection of essays are some of the recent public debates associated with the Black Lives Matter protests, the Me Too movement, the USA-Mexico border regulations, and the economic and political relations of the USA with several European and Asian countries. Moreover, 2016 was the year when the second mandate of the first African American president ended, when Hillary Clinton was the first woman to run for President of the United States and when Melania Trump became the first First Lady of the USA born and raised in a country where English is not an official language.

From a historical viewpoint, the volume covers subjects specific to various significant moments from the nineteenth, the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, which gives a sense of perspective to the main themes. The fact that some of the source texts and part of the contributors come from outside the

American borders indicates an increased interest in the relationship between the American culture and other cultures, and how they respond to each other. The editors brought together essays by literary, cultural, political and arts scholars from China, France, Greece, Germany, Spain, Romania, USA and Taiwan.

The three sections, focused on race, immigration and gender respectively, offer glimpses into how thinking patterns may shift because of specific socio-political changes reflected in literature and the arts. The four or five articles that each section contains offer a different outlook on the main topic and reflect the capacity of using multiple secondary texts and other sources in order to put forward a thesis linked to it.

In “Race Matters: Past and Present Challenges” the five researchers are concerned with issues related to African American or American Indian Studies and show how race may be reinterpreted from other points of view: medicine, film, law, class and age.

The section starts with an article by Carmen Birkle, who rereads Frances Harper’s *Iola Leroy or Shadows Uplifted* (1892) taking into consideration the critical condition of the medical profession for African Americans after the Civil War, when racial prejudice was still high and irrationally perpetuated with arguments based on scientific knowledge, when African ancestry was much more tolerable for female nurses than for male doctors, and when miscegenation was still a legally prohibited practice. Harper’s memorable novel is described as a testimony to the reality of biological miscegenation: the medical discourse and context transform it into a legitimate aspect of American culture. In the second essay, Lea Stephan approaches the relationship between health care services and race to demonstrate the existence of racial inequality in the US health care system. Drawing on past and present legislation, statistical data and interviews of congress people involved in the health care reform over the past decades, she explains how the Obama administration, although well-intended, missed some of the structural consequences of its health care strategy, which affected some of the poorest communities of African Americans. In the third article, Ileana Jitaru explores the relationship between race, literature and film by comparing Solomon Northup’s memoir *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) and its 2013 film adaptation by director Steve McQueen. She relies on Roland Barthes’s semiotic codes and Christian Metz’s film language to analyze the ways in which a first-person narrator and an objective camera narrator may bring more truth and legitimacy to historical representations of slavery. Raluca Andreescu studies Joyce Carol Oates’s *The Sacrifice* (2015) to explain how media sensationalism and biased reporting may complicate circumstances such as sexual violence, family disintegration and a faltering legal system, with a negative impact on certain black communities. It also highlights that Oates’s novel illustrates how

people may lose trust in institutions that are supposed to defend their rights and how suspicion accumulates because of recurrent injustice done to vulnerable individuals and communities. In the last article of this section, Aitor Ibarrola-Armendariz proposes a new outlook on Sherman Alexie's *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (2007). Although the novel has received mixed reviews, including criticism for being inadequate for a young adult readership (too much violence and bad behaviour), the researcher defends it by including it in a tradition of similar works that have raised awareness regarding the condition of Native American teenagers.

In the middle section, "Immigration Revisited," each contributor focuses on a case study (film or literature) to discuss aspects such as the limiting conditions of American inclusiveness, the discriminatory connotations of the encounter with the host country and the often traumatic impact of migration.

The first article is a commentary by Noelia Gregorio-Fernández on Robert Rodriguez's film *Machete* (2010), in which the immigration across the USA-Mexican border is depicted in detail. According to the researcher, this particular cinematic production moves beyond Chicana and Hollywood representations of the Latinos through a hyper-realistic visual aesthetics. She emphasizes how violence affects only the southern side of the border and that Latino ethnicity should rather be conceived from a more inclusive transcultural view. In the next essay, Angeliki Tseti analyzes Aleksandar Hemon's *The Lazarus Project* (2008), a photo-textual narrative that reflects the traumatic expatriation of two Eastern Europeans, one at the beginning of the twentieth century, the other towards the end of it. Tseti shows how the parallel and the interweaving of the two migrant destinies, the two forms of art and the two historical epochs contribute to the multidimensionality of the American cultural and ethnic structures. Pi-hua Ni studies *The Third Son*, a novel by Julie Wu, which covers the violent and traumatic historiography of Taiwan, previously left unchronicled. Published in 2013, the book is described as a "cornerstone for the emerging Taiwanese American literature" and "a landmark in twenty-first-century diasporic American literature," and situated in the larger field of American Asian cultural identity. Jiachen Zhang writes about Gish Jen's *Typical American* and the image of Chinese American gender identity in the context of immigration. The focus is placed on masculinity – influenced by food consumption, racial and feminine pressure – and on complex modes of remasculinization of immigrants in contrast with stereotypes of American cultural values. In the last article included here, Iuliana Vizan approaches *I Hotel* (2010) by Karen Tei Yamashita, by paying attention to essential events of the civil rights movement in Chinatown, San Francisco. She points out how the novel comments on immigration and ethnicity through fiction, philosophy, folklore and graphic art, revealing levels of discrimination and resistance, political and intellectual engagement.

The last section of the book, “Gender Focus: New Perspectives,” contains articles on subject matters associated with feminism and femininity that cover more than a century and deal with the arts, literature, legislation or contemporary music. Although masculinity is left out of this section, it is present in the previous two, which deal extensively with the topic in conjunction with other factors.

In the first article, art historian Marianne B. Woods demonstrates that American women artists between the late Victorian period and the Second World War were involved in numerous artistic large-scale projects for both homes and public buildings, in contrast with the perception that these were executed only by men. She gives examples of women muralists such as Mary Cassatt, Mary McMonnies and Hildreth Meière, who subsequently influenced younger women artists in the American Midwest. Barbara Nelson reviews the little known autobiography *Mon Mari, Le Roi Carol* (1950) by Zizi Lambrino, wife of King Carol II of Romania, as part of a larger project interested in the portrayal of the New Woman as a transnational phenomenon of the twentieth century. Her study combines interwar political history and mass media manipulation with new approaches to Eastern Europe. In the next paper, Elisabeth Boulot draws on essays, legal documents, newspaper articles, government archives and other sources to investigate the struggle for gender equality in the 21<sup>st</sup> century USA. The chapter is centered on the measures taken by the Obama administration to close the pay gap for women and on the role of social media in shaping new feminist agendas, adapted to better address the younger generations’ needs. Last but not least, Constantine Chatzipapatheodoridis explores Lana Del Rey’s music albums and public persona to prove that her dramatized performance of Hollywood sadcore has been influenced by the traditions of camp and melodrama, and has reshaped the American imaginary to make it ready for consumption in new contexts. The critic explains how Del Rey’s work promotes the pursuit of happiness as an American ideal, simultaneously revealing its contradictions through a melancholic atmosphere, grim accents and nostalgic lyrics.

On the whole, one may argue that most of these articles constitute noteworthy additions to each of the topics they tackle and provide convincing and potentially fruitful angles that should stimulate further explorations. Overall, this essay collection suggests that 2016 was a political moment that unveiled certain modifications regarding the concepts of race, immigration and gender, significantly influential in repositioning American culture on the international arena. The year 2020, when the volume was published, meant an increase in the visibility of American (cultural) politics across the globe and in the international

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connectedness via online platforms that have become more collaborative and reached larger audiences.

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