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Identities in Critical Times: Obama's "Patchwork" and "the Melting Pot"

Ideas evolve and de-evolve, and history is turned on end. – Don DeLillo
A new century calls for new stories. – Charles Johnson

How to represent U.S. culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, particularly the ongoing internal debate about identity, race and ethnic relations? "Patchwork America" was the metaphor offered to lecturers and participants by the organizers of the 2009 American Studies Seminar held at the Centro Studi Americani in Rome as an image capable of sparking thematic and epistemological reflections, as well as debate and criticism. The papers gathered in this section originate from that seminar. It was September 2008 when the "patchwork" title was chosen. We were in the heat of the U.S. presidential campaign. Having won the Democratic Party nomination, Barack Obama appeared to be the first African American Democratic candidate who also had a real chance to win the presidency. He was receiving support from the white majority and the young, as well as from the African American and Latin American communities. In his country, and in Europe, there was hope that his election as president would mark a turning point in internal and international politics. Most of all, his candidacy was perceived as a sign of change in interracial and ethnic relations within the U.S., a change which could generate new energies at home and re-orient international relations. When, in his January 2009 inaugural speech, Obama stated that "our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness," I, as one of the seminar organizers, knew that the "patchwork" trope had not only been timely chosen, but could also be a viable metaphor for what was happening in the U.S., although not the only one. It could convey an ideological framework radically different from the "melting pot" and "salad bowl" metaphors that had preceded it. It could at least partially condense the ongoing cultural process. Having the president elect of the United States of America make it his own, we knew it might also anticipate coherent political and legislative action.

We were not the only ones who anticipated change. Interpreting Obama's election as the timely result of a process of creolization taking place in his country and in the whole world, two famous Caribbean writers and theorizers of *creolité*, Édouard Glissant and Patrick Chamoiseau, in an address-letter to the newly elected President, pointed out that his victory marked the complete Americanization (universilization/creolization) of the United States:

> Chacun s'aperçoit que Barack Obama est une illustration fantastique, complète et absolue de ce phénomène de créolisation dont on prend de plus en plus conscience. … L'apparition de ce leader signifie que le monde étasunien est devenu véritablement un monde américain, c'est-à-dire nouveau dans une réelle multiplicité. Le peuple des États-Unis est enfin, symboliquement et bien concrètement, un peuple des Amériques, parmi les autres américains. (19-20) [1]

CRITICAL TIMES AND THE REVISION OF THE AMERICAN MYTH

Ours are critical times. The world seems to be in the throes of epochal change, as if the order given it by sixteenth-century European modernity and the enlightenment, together with the hegemony of the West have had their day. And in no other country have the marks of crisis manifested themselves with such explosive force as in the United States of America, the westernmost incarnation of the 'civilized world', considered the spearhead of progress and modernity. In 2001, the fanatic Muslim terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center and on the Pentagon, as in an 'end-of-the-world' film, hit the United States in its symbolic strongholds, for all the world to see. In a few hours, the U.S. lost its sense of righteousness, together with the safety of its own territory. The 'war on terror' which followed, launched by President George W. Bush, ended up unmasking imperialist economic operations in Iraq and creating disidentification within and outside the nation. In 2008 two more explosive moments seemed to shatter a set course of affairs and a long-established frame of mind: the financial crash, and the election of the first African American man to the presidency. The economic crisis, "the world's worst financial collapse since 1929" (Zakaria xi), undermined the faith in unchecked liberalism, free enterprise and the dominance of the financial over

the productive system. The election of an African-American president – even if faced with a dramatic economic situation and the crisis in the international standing of the United States – placed the question of national identity even more at the center and drew attention to the historical black/white color matrix on which the republic had been built, as well as to the ideological and legislative systematization of racial and ethnic relations after "the most important phenomenon of the last four decades: the reopening of immigration to the United States," which not only brought in a new influx of immigrants – Asians and Mexicans being the most numerous – but also created a state of flux in race relations (Sugrue 94, 95).

The sense of an ongoing crisis is articulately expressed by Barack Obama himself, who, in *The Audacity of Hope* (2006), admits that

> we don't even seem to possess a shared language with which to discuss our ideals, much less the tools to arrive at some rough consensus about how, as a nation, we might work together to bring those ideals about. … the reality of American life has strayed from its myths. (8)

Even in the field of American Studies in the United States, a sense of crisis was, and still is, palpable. It was articulately expressed by Robyn Weigman in the last issue of *RSA Journal*, where she summarized the tenets of a "New Americanism," which, she writes, calls for a shift "from the powerfully iconic object of 'America' to its more mortal figure of the 'U.S.'." Challenging the superposition of the U.S. and the American hemisphere, "New Americanism" establishes a critique of "U.S. imperialism," "refuses identification with both the exceptionalist state and its formalization in American Studies programs" (Weigman 54), and "redefines culture and cultural practices in multilingual and postcolonial formulation: all in order to think about transnational identities and the forms of cultural production, political practice, and everyday life that cannot be adequately discerned from within the territorial or cultural logic of the nation" (Weigman 55).

Within this changed cultural perspective, identity defined in terms of exclusive belonging to a single race and ethnicity, gender, and nation is decentered in order to make space for its re-interrogation from a transnational perspective and through interracial relations. It is no surprise, then, that along

the same lines, another critical thinker, historian David A. Hollinger, claims for a rejection of the "ethno-racial pentagon" used to artificially pigeonhole Americans into five racial and ethnic "blocs" (*Postethnic America* 24-25), which became a fourfold racial division with the national census of 2000 that categorized citizens into Hispanic, non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic black and Asian (Putnam 146). To contrast this pigeonholing, and the socially constructed schemes of race and ethnicity which freeze into ethnic-racial essentialism the interracial and interethnic mixing occurring in the nation, he calls for the demise of all legislation based on racial and ethnic distinction, and for a society formed by people who choose their affiliations or are affiliated to different groups in various degrees and with varying "intensity and duration defined *by material or imagined consanguinity*" (*Postethnic America* 162, my emphasis).

Besides conspicuously exposing the fragility of the country and dramatically questioning its winning political, economic, and cultural models, the attacks of 9/11 also disclosed, and this was possibly more clear to the citizens of the United States, the plain fact that real people were killed, persons coming from all walks of life, doing all sorts of jobs and from diverse racial, ethnic, and linguistic communities: the Twin Towers were not only a symbol of capitalist America but also a concentrated sample of its multiethnic society, a contemporary version of the Tower of Babel. The shock of recognition unleashed by this experience contributed to its being lived as a turning point, a moment of crisis which forever disrupted the existing order of things. Writers themselves told about the blank, the void, the missing ground of certain identity and past history, which for a moment made it possible to either radically change or tighten the hold on well-rooted certainties and stories. Don DeLillo, for one, in his 2001 essay, "In the Ruins of the Future," more than in his novel *The Falling Man* (2007), gave voice to a widespread shock and rage, as well as to the feeling that the WTC attacks had redirected the arrow of historical time backwards, forcing a nation projected into the future to yield "to medieval expedience, to the old slow furies of cut-throat religion," changing "the way we think and act." If Don DeLillo felt dispossessed by what he called "the counter-narrative" forced on the nation by the terrorist attacks, another writer, Sherman Alexie, saw in the chance event of being involved in a terrorist attack the possibility to start anew, to redress one's life. The Spokane Indian woman in the short story "Can I Get a Witness?", having survived the attack of a well-to-do Muslim bomber, for a

while contemplates the possibility of taking the chance to disappear, to walk away from her unbearable family and start a new life (Alexie 93-94). With the crisis, American myths were both questioned and re-invoked. Here again, the critical attitude of the "New Americanists" is revealing of a more widespread mood. For, while they criticize the only apparently paradoxically converging universalist and exceptionalist myths that nourished the growth and expansion of the United States, they are not rejecting American myths *per se*. On the contrary, they criticize the hegemonic classes for the way they appropriated myths to render the present the way it is. And, to save myth, they are turning to it and to imagination as "a poetics of the possible," to use Paul Ricoeur's words (qtd. in Kearney 72). Both Weigman and Hollinger call for the creative act of imagination to move beyond the critical edge and bring about or consolidate change. In her concluding remarks, Weigman calls for an "imaginary of the field" of American Studies to transform it and produce an "internationalized American Studies that finds itself not one." (65). Even Glissant and Chamoiseau invite Obama to promote "une politique dans and par laquelle le Tout-monde se cherche autant qu'il se trouve, s'invente autant qu'il s'imagine." [2]

Once more, it was Barack Obama who most forcefully used the idea of possibility in his campaign, built on the mantra "yes, we can," which re-affirmed a faith in the capacity to reimagine oneself, and the nation, finally fulfilling "the American dream," by extending it not only to African Americans, but to all immigrant groups who live in the United States, for "America is big enough to accommodate all their dreams" (Obama, *The Audacity of Hope* 269).

Russian semiologist Jury Lotman theorizes that transformations in a society can take the form of a continuous process or a sudden change, where they may be perceived as an explosion, though these two modes usually coexist (17-23). With the United States, we might say that the explosive moments of the twenty-first century have become the enlightening moments, redirecting attention to the changes going on both within the national society, and in the larger international world. One outcome of those changes has been "New Americanism," which eventually gave rise to the International Association of American Studies (IASA). With its emphasis shifting from a national to a transnational perspective on the literature and the culture of the United States, it casts aside "(the United States of) America" as the joint construction of European myth-makers and national history, symbolic of western imperialism, to highlight both the nation's relative

role in a composite world, as well as the racial, ethnic, cultural, and transnational connections of U.S. citizens.

CRISIS: THE BEGINNING OF THE LAST TWO CENTURIES

We are ten years into the twenty-first century and, to adopt sociologist Zygmunt Bauman's metaphor, we are living in a "liquid" modernity. At the beginning of the 'modernist' twentieth century – more or less until the nineteen twenties – when the metaphor of the "melting pot" was in vogue, gender, racial, and ethnic relations also seemed to be in a state of flux. Common to the beginning of both centuries is a sense of crisis, of a *krinein*, a radical disruption of values and mores. Then, as now, it was felt that human relations were changing radically.

In Europe, in the first years of the twentieth century, women were among the most vocal advocates for change. They fought for full human status, not only for suffrage. They forcefully rebelled against legalized social subalternity, economic dependence, and illiteracy. They felt an ever-accelerating rhythm in the changes taking place within their own selves and, outside the self, in society and the nation, and indeed the rest of the world. It is not surprising, then, that in Europe it was a white feminist and socialist writer, Virginia Woolf, who first named this change. "About the year 1910," she wrote, "[a]ll human relations have shifted – those between masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children. And when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature" (96-97). The affinity of plea, that in the nineteenth century had seen U.S. women defend the rights of colored men, had created a common lexical and semantic field which, spreading among British suffragettes, caused the feminist and the African American discourses to resonate across the Atlantic. So much so that, wanting to move women's fight for self-determination beyond suffragism into human rights, Dora Marsden, in 1911 London, named the first feminist journal, *The Freewoman* and from its pages called for "[t]he evolution of Freewomen from Bondwomen," which would bring "a change so revolutionary that by its side, a political and social revolution, like that of France a century ago, or the Industrial Revolution in England" would appear "of secondary importance" (Marsden 3). Every single

woman needed to free herself from the inner and external shackles that made her dependent on a man and, taking "her place as a master," claim for herself the right to own, rather than to be, property. Even Marsden's definition of the feminist movement as an "effort to find the place among the Masters" radically redesigned the final objective of women's political activity, which was to be not so much enfranchisement, as individual power based on the two pillars of spiritual growth and economic independence.

In the U.S., besides women, it was the New Negro movement that called into question the white male social and economic order and claimed full human status for colored people as well. With W.E.B. Du Bois, it challenged the "color line" that "hemmed" blacks in (16, 166) and that, after the Emancipation Proclamation, continued to keep them segregated everywhere in the nation, reduced to second-class status and, in the southern states, made them the object of personal attack and persecution. The New Negro movement, born at the beginning of the twentieth century, was, like suffragism, part of a transnational and transcontinental network, which gave it strength, scope, and a manifest postcolonial stance.

It was exactly in November 1910 that the need for radical change found an incarnation in *The Crisis*, the journal of the NAACP, edited by W.E.B. Du Bois. The journal, the first editorial stated:

> is to set forth those facts and arguments which show the danger of race prejudice, particularly as manifested to-day toward colored people. It takes its name from the fact that the editors believe that this is a critical time in the history of the advancement of men. … The policy of THE CRISIS will be simple and well defined: … it will record important happenings and movements in the world which bear on the great problem of inter-racial relations, and especially those which affect the Negro-American. … Finally, its editorial page will stand for the rights of men, irrespective of color or race, for the highest ideals of American democracy, and for reasonable but earnest and persistent attempt to gain these rights and realize these ideals. (10-11)

The journal brought to general attention the fact that the black-white color line, with its associated institutionalized hierarchies of power and money and its unequal allotment of material, geographical, and social spaces, had to be disrupted if people of color were to enjoy full human and political rights. Like women, African Americans refused to be relegated to racially

delimited physical, economic, and mental spaces. But the journal recognized that the "evil of race prejudice" extended to immigrant minorities as well. The very first issue reported that " [t]wo Italians were lynched in Florida." Ending this piece of tragic news, the writer commented with sour irony that: "The inalienable right of every free American citizen to be lynched without tiresome investigation and penalties is one which the families of the lately deceased doubtless deeply appreciate" (Du Bois, "Editorial" 11).

The lynching of two Italians was the sign that they – whether newcomers or already naturalized – were perceived and therefore treated as blacks. Italian immigrants in the New World, however, were part of another mass phenomenon which had been contributing major changes to the human, social, and cultural cityscapes. Immigrant workers from various southern and eastern European nations flowed steadily into the country until World War I brought immigration to a forceful stop. [3] These immigrants, among the poorer of the earth, revived the foundational dream of liberty, equality, and happiness which they also expressed in their socialist and anarchist vocabulary. They questioned the exclusive rights of the white Anglo-Saxon descendants of the first colonizers. While they provided a much needed underpaid work force, they were difficult to assimilate for, marginalized by poverty and ethnic discrimination, they recreated a living community in the new country.

CRITICISM BETWEEN STORY & HISTORY

In "Arrangement in Black and White," a story first published in 1927, Dorothy Parker poignantly addresses racial discrimination. Through a perfect use of dramatic narration and dialogue, racial and racist stereotypes, repetition and superlatives, this witty, ironic New York writer builds a plastic and dynamic little episode out of a white woman's opinionated response to an African American musician's achievement. From its inception the story involves us in the speed and swirl of action. Wearing "pink velvet poppies twined round the assisted gold of her hair," a woman traverses a crowded room in which a friend is holding a party. She runs to meet her unnamed (and ungendered) host and anxiously asks to be introduced to the guest of honor, the African American musician Walter Williams, not forgetting

to compliment her host for the generous introduction of the black man to white people. Her words dominate the dialogue, here and there interrupted by the scanty answers given by her host to her questions and comments. The musician himself is hardly given the opportunity to interact and start a real conversation. The wife of a Virginian – whose absence, we are led to suppose, testifies to his refusal to honor the black man – the woman considers her mere presence at the party a sign of her open-mindedness. Her language betrays her racial prejudices and stereotyping throughout the story. But it is what she thinks of the artist himself that betrays her patronizing attitude:

> "Now this Walter Williams," … "I think a man like that's a real artist. I do. I think he deserves an awful lot of credit. Goodness, I'm so crazy about music or anything, I don't care what color he is. I honestly think if a person's an artist, nobody ought to have any feeling at all about meeting them." (20)

Parker's musician could easily be an incarnation of the African American Harlemite, "the New Negro" celebrated by Alain Locke who, having conquered a new sense of self, has "a more positive self respect and self-reliance" in his 1925 essay. With his music and his art he is already shaping contemporary national culture, and the woman "with the pink velvet poppies" candidly admits this much when she tells the musician she is "simply crazy about that 'Water Boy' thing" he sings. [4] Though she cannot resist the fascination and novelty of the man's songs, thus unwittingly testifying to the personal and national relevance of African American cultural production, the woman is unable to overcome her racial prejudice, revealing how entrenched the color line is in her mind and world view.

And yet, while the woman occupies the center of the story, it is the host that I believe deserves particular attention for, just as the woman incarnates the hopeless, inveterate racist, the host, who has organized the party to honor the black musician, is clearly not the "Negrotarian," the white race uplifter tartly defined by Zora Neal Hurston (Hemenway 22-23). [5] Rather, s/he seems to be an incarnation of Locke's new white American "mind," one that is reckoning "with a fundamentally changed Negro" (Locke 51). S/he seems to be the person who expresses "entirely new mutual attitudes" (Locke 51), and who is willing to cooperate to bring about the social change that must accompany cultural change. The black musician and the white host stand for

"the enlightened minorities of both race groups" (Locke 51). They are the avant-garde, the *élites* Locke believed were ready to bring radical change to American society at large and to interracial relationships. Through dialogue and interchange at the artistic level, he assumed, the two races could, in time, influence American national culture and bring wider change.

And yet, though looking forward to the transformative force of the avant-gardes, Alain Locke was aware that the crisis had to bring about change or risk failure:

> This is indeed a critical stage of race relationships because of the likelihood, if the new temper is not understood, of engendering sharp group antagonism and a second crop of more calculated prejudice. In some quarters, it has already done so. (Locke 52)

Dorothy Parker also shows she was not deluded into believing that there would be real change in interracial relations in the United States. While satirizing the racist white woman, she gives no density either to the host or to the black musician, thus mirroring in their limited verbal participation in the story's racial dialogue, the social weight and political power they – and the racial avant-gardes they represent – could muster in the society of her time. Thus, the woman with pink poppies well represents the critical situation and the unreliability of the white hegemonic class, even of the more open-minded whites.

Hugo Münstenberg, a Harvard psychologist born in Danzig – known to modernist literature scholars as one of Gertrude Stein's teachers at Radcliffe (Bridgman 20-23) – in his 1914 preface to a book first published in German, tellingly entitled *The Americans*, after stating that in America one could sense "the wonderful rhythm of forward movement" (Münstenberg v), listed the many changes that in the first fifteen years of the century, in his opinion, had marked a distinct forward movement and were a turning point for the country:

> The working man has learned his strength, and the merger man his weakness. At the same time, his Puritanism from which the most characteristic elements of American civilization had grown up receded with unexpected suddenness. The new wealth and the new freedom, the rapid expansion of technical comfort, the gigantic immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe with its warmer sensuality, all work together to bring us an America of excessive worldliness.

> … The kino, the auto and the tango are the symbols of the day … above all, while the old leadership of wealth and puritanic restraint is disappearing, a new cultural leadership is slowly developing its strength. (Münstenberg vi).

Even a staunch representative of the white Anglo-Saxon establishment, the Boston Brahmin poet Amy Lowell, in her 1917 *Tendencies in Modern American Poetry*, foresaw an American culture and literature influenced by "other, alien, peoples and fusing exotic modes of thought with their Anglo-Saxon inheritance." And, representing the "fluid state of the social fabric," she stated: "This is indeed the melting pot, and its fumes affect the surrounding company as well as the ingredients in the crucible" (Lowell 7, 4).

Lowell's metaphor of the melting pot, of the merging of ethnicities and cultures into a new American whole united by consent, while echoing a widespread ideological language of the time, is a pacified vision of the great social and cultural transformation that was going on at the time. [6] However, not everybody was unaware that the assimilationist version of the melting pot image took for granted the disappearance of all ethnic differences into the Anglo-Saxon American pot, not everybody was convinced that complete assimilation was the best solution, both for immigrant minorities and for American society.

Another contemporary of Parker and Locke, and a sharp critic of white Anglo-Saxon American nationalist supremacy, philosopher Horace M. Kallen, exposed the implications of the metaphor in his groundbreaking essay "Democracy Versus the Melting-Pot" (1915). When the founding fathers signed the Declaration of Independence, he writes, they knew that the doctrine "contradicted conditions, that many of the signatories owned other men and bought and sold them, that many were eminent by birth, many by wealth, and only a few by merit" but they did not regard them as incompatible with their declaration for it was for them "an instrument in a political and economic conflict, a weapon of offense and defense" (Kallen 190).

A Jewish immigrant from Europe and a Harvard graduate, Kallen had first-hand experience that to become an American meant adopting white Anglo-Saxon American aristocracy as a model, for "by virtue of being heir of the oldest rooted economic settlement and spiritual tradition of the white man in America," it condensed "the measure and the standard of Americanism that the newcomer" was "to attain" (Kallen 192).

While in his essay he only mentioned in passing the white/black color and class hierarchy, Kallen was well aware that the United States had been, to quote David A. Hollinger, "long accustomed to a sharp black-white color line" ("Obama, Blackness"1), and he knew that white racism "had assigned itself the same capacity traditionally assigned to one drop of black blood: the capacity to define equally whatever it touched, no matter how the affected entity was constituted and what its life circumstances might have been," applying to all non-white Anglo-Saxons "the one hate rule" (Hollinger, "The One Drop Rule" 20).

Kallen acutely detected this capacity of white Anglo-Saxon America "to define equally whatever it touched" as it extended racist criteria to the European immigrant groups that had been flocking to the United States at the turn of the twentieth century. White Anglo-Saxon Americans not only imposed their own story and their culture on newcomers, forcing them to assimilate in order to be included in the republic – he writes – they also used the color line to build economic and racial social layers, which he represented as "a series of stripes or layers of varying sizes moving east to west" (Kallen 192). He perceived a dualist principle applied in American society, a principle which he interpreted as being primarily ethnic and not economic, rooted in the white Anglo-Saxon rejection of difference, but also on color gradation, which stratified immigrant groups by class along an ethnic and color line, in which the Italians tended "to fall with the Negroes into the 'pick and shovel brigade'" (Kallen 194).

To conclude, at the beginning of the twentieth century, both the promoters of the New Negro movement and Kallen, as spokesperson for the new immigrant groups, called for an integration based not on assimilation but on a national acceptance of racial and ethnic differences and a recognition of their overall economic and cultural contribution to the nation.

Both Du Bois and Kallen, however, had themselves fallen into the trap of essentializing color and ethnicity. They seemed not to be aware that in appropriating scientific discourse, racism and racist practices had essentialized racial and ethnic differences to establish economic hierarchies and social discrimination. [7] As has been repeatedly affirmed by contemporary scholarship, race "is not an essence but an inscription, a signifier of instituted difference" (Lott 1522), a recognition the foremost contemporary African American scholar and critic, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has applied as a new conceptual and critical basis for the rebirth of African American studies. [8]

"Postethnic" or "Patchwork"?: Crisis and Self-Representation in the Twenty-First Century

In 2008 David A. Hollinger saw the election of the first African American President as a turning point in American race relations. In Obama's candidacy he detected a "challenge to identity politics" ("Obama, the Instability of Color Lines" 1033), that would only deepen after his election. In a book first published in 1995, he had already appealed for a "postethnic perspective" which, he believed, "resists the grounding of knowledge and moral values in blood and history." Disassociating himself from a multiculturalist perspective, which in his view limited itself to respecting "inherited boundaries," he favored a "cosmopolitan" perspective, deemed capable of founding "multiple identities." Locating the "potential for creating new cultural contributions" in the "dynamic and changing character of many groups," he underpinned the fluidity of United States society affecting individual and collective identities, uprooting them from a solid race-ethnicity-gender essentialism (Hollinger, "The One Drop Rule" 3-4). In addition he projected a 'multiple identity' solution to the ethnic and cultural heterogeneity of the millennial generation, one far more varied than at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Hollinger's successful coinage of the single, compound word "postethnic" privileges the mixing of identities, the blending process that he sees taking place in the U.S. through interracial and interethnic mixing, which seems to him "to denote the possible future."

> I prefer the term "postethnic" to "postracial." The former recognizes that at issue is all identity by natal community, including as experienced by, or ascribed to, population groups to whom the problematic term "race" is rarely applied. … to be postethnic is not to be anti-ethnic, or even colorblind, but to reject the idea that descent is destiny.(Hollinger, "The Instability of Color Lines" 1033-34)

Within Hollinger's theoretical framework, the prospective, and actual, election of Barack Obama as president of the United States has become a "postethnic phenomenon" (Hollinger "Obama, Blackness" 1), [9] confirming change in the racial ideology of white society. As a sign, it substantiates the fact that the "movement for recognition of 'mixed race' identity" has "made

headway," though, he admits, "most governments, private agencies, educational institutions, and advocacy organizations that classify and count people by ethnoracial categories at all continue to perpetuate hypodescent racialization when they talk about African Americans" (Hollinger, "The One Drop Rule" 18).

If Alain Locke, in 1925, theorized the encounter and dialogue between the white and the black races but, essentializing them and interiorizing the miscegenation taboo, maintained a separation between the two communities, Hollinger looks beyond the color line to hybridity and sees in Obama's mixed race (and in his appeal to the white electorate) a sign of instability not only in the meaning of blackness, but in all ethnic coloring in America.

Just as Locke and Du Bois grounded their appeals for a radical change within the white community on the argument that, since economic, professional, and cultural achievement not only created differences within the African American community, but were the markers of black social and class mobility within the larger national society, so, paralleling in the twenty-first century Locke's futuristic reading of African American cultural and economic achievements, Hollinger reads racism in terms of class economic and educational opportunities and achievements. To transform a change that is happening at the social level into an acquisition for the nation, he argues, all legislation that produced "the one drop rule" for African Americans, and racialized all immigrant groups, must be repealed. Optimistically, he reads the economic emergence of minority groups like the Koreans and the Chinese, as well as the middle-class status of immigrant Africans, as a sign that class, not race, is the source of racial and ethnic discrimination. And, though he praises Horace Kallen's work "for the pluralist-cosmopolitan tension found in multiculturalism" (Hollinger, *Postethnic America* 11), Hollinger rejects his idea that economic and cultural achievement is not sufficient to break racial and ethnic boundaries, that fear of 'difference' is not rational, and is ingrained in hegemonic groups, which in the United States are dominantly white.

Nevertheless, Barack Obama shies away from Hollinger's optimistic imagining of a color-blind or postethnic future. Middle class as he is, educated in the best institutions though he is, mixed race as he is, he has lived in his own flesh "the one drop rule" of white discrimination, and his dreams are possibly more realistic than Hollinger's. When in his inaugural speech he stated, "that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness" – though

he looks forward to a time when the "lines of tribe" will dissolve – by using the patchwork trope, Obama appears more cautious than Hollinger. He still represents national society as composed of separate groups or identities, though all contributing to an overall single design, for "this nation is more than the sum of its parts" (Obama, "Speech on Race" 2).

Obama's patchwork metaphor is the twenty-first century version of the Republican forefathers' *E Pluribus Unum*, and conveys his changed perspective in the representation of the relation between the many and the one. Evoking a 'patchwork' quilt, the trope represents the internal relations which the single pieces of cloth, with their different colors and patterns, establish with the whole. The overall design transforms the potential randomness and chaos, the cacophony and dissonance of the fragments into a compositional whole. Time is also morphed into space, for "patchwork" spatializes relations. In this way it hides the stratifications which time has imposed over the compositional racial and ethnic units, but takes into account the distribution within the city and the nation of spaces, peoples, cultures and languages, highlighting social compositeness and complexity together with a "racialized geography, polity, and economy, whose contours are deeply rooted in the twentieth century, where the distinctions of black and white are still not only relevant but often decisive" (Sugrue 97). [10] Since each piece is equal to all the others and contributes equally to creating the overall design, the patchwork metaphor also signals a will to overcome color hierarchies.

The entire program of Obama's inaugural ceremony can be considered not only an illustration of what he meant when he used the "patchwork" trope in his inaugural speech but also a sign that the president himself wanted to design a new American pattern of peaceful interracial and interethnic relations. [11] The artists and performers asked to contribute to the ceremony had to send the nation a message of compositeness and unity. During the ceremony, the San Francisco Boys Chorus and the San Francisco Girls Chorus sang the Musical Prelude; African American singer Aretha Franklin sang "My Country Tis of Thee;" a classical quartet, which assembled Chinese American cellist Yo-Yo Ma, New York clarinetist Anthony McGill, Argentinean pianist Gabriela Montero and Israeli-American violin virtuoso Itzhak Perlman, performed "Air and Simple Gifts" composed and arranged by American composer John Williams. African American poet Elizabeth Alexander,

following the president's speech, read "Praise Song for the Day," a poem she had composed for the inauguration and whose last stanza, after an invocation of love as a cohesive element, declares an awareness that the nation is on the cusp, at the turning point of potentially positive change:

> In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,
> any thing can be made, any sentence begun.
> On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,
>
> praise song for walking forward in that light.

There is an implication in the "patchwork" trope which must be subsumed but is hidden away in the pacified national version of "E Pluribus Unum" that characterized Obama's inauguration ceremony. It is its potential representation of the transnational connections of the whole. For each part, each piece of the patchwork entertains a relation not only with the other pieces with which it combines to form a single design, but also with the larger piece of cloth from which it was taken. Depending on how one interprets it, that other whole can be seen as either absent or present in the new pattern. In a bluntly nationalist and isolationist version, there is a blank, a void, a silence surrounding each piece and the whole. In a transnational perspective – like that of the New Americanists – emphasis falls on the larger picture and on the links and texture connecting each individual, each group, and the entire country to the world, contributing to a larger and different pattern that is no longer exclusively national. From this perspective, the pattern or overall design becomes even more complex, as we can perceive each piece entering a triple relationship: with the other pieces present in the patchwork, with the cloth from which it is taken, and with the larger pattern or design all pieces and all materials necessarily contribute to.

Still, and notwithstanding its ideological implications which are manifestly different from the melting pot metaphor, the patchwork trope also has symbolic and representational limits, for it can imply the consolidation of the separateness of the pieces, continuing to essentialize them. The metaphor is unable to represent change, the ferment, the chaotic interacting of parts in contact, the continuous shifting of patterns and

transformations on which Hollinger focuses. However, it captures well the present shaped by political and administrative legislation, a society made of distinct and separate group identities.

Obama himself is well aware of the representational limits of the metaphor. In *The Audacity of Hope*, he acknowledges that "across America, a constant cross-pollination is occurring, a not entirely orderly but generally peaceful collision among people and cultures." He also states that "identities are scrambling, and then cohering in new ways," (51) yet he refuses to hold "facile expectations" about the future or a postethnic society that might be close at hand. He provides a warning for those who believe that he is the very incarnation of a post-racial or color-blind society:

> To say that we are one people is not to suggest that race no longer matters – that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems minorities face in this country today are largely self inflicted. . . . I know what it's like to have people tell me I can't do something because of my color, and I know the bitter swill of swallowed-back anger. … To think clearly about race, then, *requires us to see the world on a split screen – to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is* (232-233, emphasis added).

The patchwork metaphor corresponds, then, to what one can see in one part of the split screen. It stands for his "looking squarely" at America as it is today. The "split screen" simile provides a snapshot of a nation in transition, seeing changes taking place while at the same time acknowledging that, on the other part of the screen, the "color line" is still at work, as are racial and ethnic stereotypes. As a trope, the patchwork metaphor highlights the rigidities in contemporary society that counteract the dynamism of change.

Like Alain Locke and Du Bois, but without essentializing race, Obama believes that dialogue between the two races across the color line must be resumed and continued, and this, without forgetting that the "unfinished business of the civil rights movement" (*The Audacity of Hope* 243) must be completed, and that "the claims of the new immigrants. . . won't fit neatly into the black-and-white paradigm" (259). To him it is clear that economic and class mobility are not sufficient to bring about real change, that the nation must go through a radical collective transformation guided by culture and

education. But, to achieve this change one must dream new dreams, endow myths with the ability to imagine new stories capable of being transformed into active, socially transformative acts.

A New Century Calls for New Stories

"Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise." Toni Morrison's Nobel Prize speech, begun as a traditional fairy or folk tale, ends as a meditation. Her old blind woman, the daughter of slaves, lives "in a small house outside of town." Noted and honored for her wisdom, she is usually sought after and consulted for important matters and prophecy. In the story Morris tells us, the old woman is visited by two young people who would like to disprove her clairvoyance and expose her as a fraud. To do so, they ask her if the bird they have in their hands is dead or alive. Since she cannot see, she is not in the position to know whether the two are lying and have no bird or, if they have a bird, whether it is dead or alive. This is where the drama of the story begins, with the request for an answer that will prove their suspicions, giving the woman away and depriving her of all value and of an important social role. After a long silence the woman, in a soft but stern voice, tells them: "I don't know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands."

The woman, Morrison tells us, in this way rejects the power game the two want to play to turn their attention toward the bird and their responsibility for it and its life. For Morrison, the bird is "language and the woman … a practiced writer." And it is of language – for her "the measure of our lives" – and the role of the writer that the story tells us. Language is both dead and alive.

How does language live in Morrison's story? It lives "in its ability to limn the actual, imagined and possible lives of its speakers, readers, writers." "It lives when it reaches toward the ineffable." It lives in "meditation," when it shows us "how to see without pictures." Finally, the language-bird is what each of us has in our hands, she tells us. It is in our power to make it live or die. Following on the steps of the best American tradition, Morrison directs the readers' attention toward that "civil disobedience" required of everyone who assumes full personal responsibility for the far-reaching results of language use.

Retelling the myth of the Tower of Babel within her story, Morrison signals how much more alive and responsible is the person who has more than one language to "limn" one's life and imagination. In the biblical myth, Paradise could be reached only if a single language were used. For Morrison, however, it was "a little hasty if no one could take the time to understand other languages, other views, other narratives…. Had they done so, the heaven they imagined might have been found at their feet. Is is complicated, demanding, yes, but a view of heaven as life; not as post-life." Projected onto American society, and for that matter on all contemporary multi-ethnic societies, her re-vision of the myth opens up to the value each language must have for an individual as well as for a society which builds itself on difference and complexity, refusing to absorb, assimilate or hide all otherness into the one and single legalized language/culture.

What about narrative (and the role of the narrator/writer)? "Narrative is radical, creating us at the very moment it is being created." Coherently, Morrison's narrative creates the bird, the writer, the story. The bird lives in the story and in what we make of it. But what do we make of Morrison's narrative? How do we interpret the woman? She is old and black and, of course, she incarnates the marginalization of the blacks in American society. Yet, she is more than that, for through her all forms of social 'minoritarization' and marginalization are signified.

Being wise and blind, she is also a contemporary incarnation of African American and European mythic and literary visionaries: of a griot as well as of Tiresias, the blind man who could foresee the future; of Oedipus, in search of truth and revelation; of Homer, the narrator of our founding myths. In this, she is the full potential, the source of power, of vision and of dream which is present in every person. Most of all, she is the writer and storyteller, whose stories all communities need to imagine themselves.

She is also a new incarnation of many other literary young and old women. They are still there in our imagination. She is our Hester Prynne, now old and black. She is Virginia Woolf's little old Mrs. Brown riding the train of modernity. She is the incarnation of our times.

If words like "patchwork" and "postethnic" tell us of the power of naming transformation in that live-bird which a society is, the stories writers like Morrison tell us, blending genres, myths and characters, address the power of imagination, eliciting the active contribution of everybody in imagining change and continuing life.

And it is in this line that, in the United States, another old black woman fills the narrative space of an explicitly national self-representation. She is the protagonist of the story Barack Obama told us on the night of his election. The woman is both a fictive character in an allegory, and a real person. She is Ann Nixon Cooper, the 106-year-old lady from Atlanta who, in Obama's speech, became the incarnation of change, of the potential for change which, inscribed in the constitution, continues to nourish ever new retellings of the American Dream. Her life story is certainly the story of the person who went from slavery and segregation, through the civil rights' and women's liberation upheavals to the polls and to vote for the just elected Obama. But she also condenses U.S. history of the last hundred years, with its wars, the Kennedy years and the scientific achievements that took Americans to the surface of the Moon in a cold-war competition with the U.S.S.R., and then, with the fall of the Berlin wall, on to the final caving in on itself of the Soviet empire, an event which placed into liberal America's hands the magic wand of world power. She is the most recent incarnation of the American myth, a Statue of Liberty no longer white and young, but full of wisdom after all those years and all those fights. Her story gives the president elect hope. Makes it possible for him to reclaim the American Dream, to represent America as the land of opportunity for all, the land that will make "out of Many, One." In his story, the one representing national identity is woman, and definitely colored. But the American history she summarizes, though filtered through her African American experience, weaves the stories of whites and blacks, and of all other immigrants in a complex narrative.

Obama's story is one of change and achievement, which gives him hope for further change. But, as he states, "better isn't good enough" (*The Audacity of Hope* 233). He must be aware that behind Anne Nixon Cooper hovers, like a phantom, an older, bitter, black lady, who is not alone and is not victorious. Next to her is a revengeful white old man, "a gray-haired gentleman … who bowed to the evil of slavery because its abolition threatened untold ill to all; who stood at last, in the evening of life, a blighted, ruined form, with hate in his eyes" (Du Bois, *The Soul of Black Folks* 27). In W.E. Du Bois's *The Soul of Black Folks*, they are the inheritors of the Civil War and the failure of reconstruction, typifying those days to "coming ages." The female figure "is a form hovering dark and mother-like, her awful face black with the mists of centuries" (27). She is the allegorical incarnation of the ex-slave woman, the woman who had nursed the master's children, worked in his fields and his

home, who even "at his behest had laid herself low to his lust" (27). In Du Bois's story, the white man and the black woman are not relegated to the past. Indeed, having "no man clasped the hands of these two passing figures of the present-past," they keep hating one another: "hating they went to their long home, and *hating, their children's children live to-day*" (27, emphasis added).

To overcome the long-lasting effects of race hatred, to make it possible for the past to finally be laid to peacefully rest, Du Bois created his New Negro movement, so that blacks with a full sense of self and heritage could claim their rightful place in American society and culture, so that dialogue between the two races could be resumed and discrimination ended. Again, to overcome this past Obama told the story of change, the story with a black woman impersonating the last hundred years of United States history. To overcome this past, Toni Morrison created the blind old woman, who redirects our attention no longer to history – past and present – no longer to group and collective identity, but to the role each one can play, and must play, to bring about change. If the writer is the seer, she is also the one who tells stories to make everybody else see and act coherently with what s/he has seen, breaking up with the performative repetition of stereotypes, of power and victimization, with the logic of belief and thoughtlessness which makes for unquestioning selves who accept what they are offered as truth. For it is only in the space between reality as it is given to us and reality as we imagine and want it that change can happen.

Morrison's Tower of Babel, the multilingual version of Obama's patchwork trope, offers a different representation of what were the Twin Towers of U.S. capitalist power. Both are images of an existing potential, an indication of a reversal of attitudes: toward the self and toward the others, the strangers, for they are nothing but "versions of ourselves" (Morrison *Strangers*, last page).

And yet, those two figures Du Bois imagined are still around. Still fighting for hegemony, money, violence, annihilation and exclusion, for survival and emergence from the long-lasting effects of slavery and/or ethnic discrimination. Otherwise, how can we interpret the closing of ranks in the conservative Republicans and Tea-Partyists, who are now spreading slander and preposterous stories about Barack Obama?

"Patchwork" America is still sown with colored thread. As Valerie Smith maintains, "Race may be a myth, but it is the source of some of our deepest wounds." So much so that the "desire to forget, move on, or transcend only dooms us to traumatic returns" (1532-33).

Will rabid Republicans rewind the time clock and force African Americans, Native and Spanish Americans, and other racial and ethnic minorities back into essentialism and victimization, into group and class antagonism? Or will the ongoing process of the coexistence and mixing of identities proceed, as Morrison showed us in her story, i.e., by reviving a cohesive, community building version of the U.S. individualist credo, giving value to each person without asking him/her to align with a single stock-identity, be it racial or ethnic, sexual or national? As Richard Johnson, taking a Whitmanian stance, writes:

> In the 21st century, we need new and better stories, new concepts, and new vocabularies and grammar based not on the past but on the dangerous exciting, and unexplored present, with the understanding that each is, at best, a provisional reading of reality, a single phenomenological profile that one day is likely to be revised, if not completely overturned. These will be narratives that do not claim to be absolute truth, but instead more humbly present themselves as a very tentative thesis that must be tested every day in the depth of our own experience and by all the reliable evidence we have available, as limited as that might be. . . . These will be narratives of individuals, not groups. And is this not exactly what Martin Luther King Jr. dreamed of when he hoped a day would come when men and women were judged not by the color of their skin, but instead by their individual deeds and actions, and the content of their character? (Johnson 8)

Notes

[1] "Everyone perceives that Barack Obama is a fantastic, complete, and absolute illustration of this phenomenon of creolization, of which we are becoming more and more aware. … The appearance of this leader means that the world of the United States has become a truly American world, new in its real multiplicity. The people of the United States have finally become, symbolically and concretely, a people of the Americas, one among the other Americans," my translation.

[2] "a politics in and through which the 'Tout-monde' (Whole-world) looks for itself as it finds itself and invents itself as it imagines itself," 33, my translation. See also the video on the same theme.

[3] After the war, the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 slowed southern European immigration to almost a trickle and brought Asian immigration to a halt.

[4] The title of the original black prison song composed by the Romanian immigrant Jacques Wolf was "The Water Boy." In the twenties it became "Water Boy" in the jazz arrangement by Avery Robinson, which made it popular. The song was also sung by Paul Robeson.

[5] "Negrotarian" stands for "Negro" and "humanitarian" and was apparently a coinage of Zora Neal Hurston in the twenties.

[6] For an articulate analysis of the "melting pot" trope and its uses at the beginning of the twentieth century in the context of ethnic relations, see Sollors' *Beyond Ethnicity*, particularly Chapter 3.

[7] On the essentialist stance in Du Bois, see the illuminating essay by Anthony Appiah.

[8] The editor of a number of anthologies, influential critical books like *The Signifying Monkey* (1988), and of memoirs, he is at present working on the much discussed PBS series *African American Lives*.

[9] See the two essays published in 2008 and listed in the attached bibliography.

[10] For a more detailed analysis see Sugrue, Chapter 3.

[11] For further details see *The 56th Presidential Inauguration* program.

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