
Peter Carravetta, *After Identity: Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture*
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Reviewed by Carla Francellini

Peter Carravetta's inspiring volume, *After Identity. Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture* (Bordighera Press, 2017), consists of a collection of seven essays, published in different venues in the last two decades, whose focus on the fascinating topic of identity in Italian American culture and literature is new and more relevant than ever. The notion of identity has long been at the core of the theoretical discussion in Italian American studies, a field that has grown into a full-fledged academic discipline in the past quarter of a century, thanks to the expertise of dedicated scholars from different disciplines such as demography, folklore, semiotics, cultural history, gender and race studies, literary criticism, political analysis, cinema, poetics, music and sports. Carravetta – a poet himself and a lucid scholar, most famous for his studies on post-modernism – places significant emphasis on the need for methodologies and ideas from diverse fields to converge in the research centered on the process of building an identity.

In his enlightening preface, he states, in fact, that among the aims of his collection “there is the attempt at a critical reconfiguration of the rhetoric of identity” together with the endeavour “to construct a conceptual map” which could “characterize Italian American culture in terms of newer, multilayered and broader categories” (“Preface”, x). As Carravetta states in different *loci* of his book, it is definitely high time we went beyond the limits imposed by a school of thought which aimed only at obtaining a public – and possibly academic – acknowledgement of the value of the field of Italian American studies. It's also necessary to go beyond the fight against prejudices and stereotypes, still deeply rooted in the approach of many critics and scholars, in order to gain a new and more fruitful future perspective.

Carravetta's methodological choices become very clear to the reader when he declares to “opt for a critique of the margins and of interrelations across identity markers”, interpreting the Italian American experience “as eminently suited to serve as a herm at the interstice where conflicting rhetorics of class, power, aggression and cultural distortion can be analyzed in their constitutive even if at times not so reassuring elements” (xii-xiii). As for the first option, the Italian American critic insists on the opportunity of situating the critical act in a *locus* where it can see both sides of any given question without advancing any claim towards totality or comprehensiveness. Boundaries, limits, disciplines are obviously involved in a larger discourse on a critique focusing on the margins, to the point that

Carravetta devises a topology (sketched in the *Conclusion*) to explore and chart sites of negotiation and power as manifested in the experience of transit and crossing, in the entering and exiting from situations which are eminently political.

It's truly worth noting how "being at the margin," in a "borderline" situation turns out to be a most "fruitful locus from which to scan and analyze our shiftless contemporary society" (207). In the wake of Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze, Franco Rella, Giorgio Agamben, and Julia Kristeva – in Carravetta's words, the "high circles" of critical and philosophical reflection – the Italian American critic insists on the privileged positions connected with the ontological status of being/living "in-between," or of "belonging-to-no-one" (207). Having to express such a status through literature generates, therefore, perplexity and doubt, even before we deal with the issue of ethnically or nationally marked literature.

In his sparkling methodological introduction, Carravetta places at the very center of his critical and theoretical discourse the need to go back to the dramatic experience of migration, which is the ineludible event from which everything unfolds not only in Italian American literature but also in the so-called *mainstream* American literature. A great lesson to learn from Carravetta's book is that Italian American studies should go back to the crucial issue of migration, "revisiting and recontextualizing [it] for the 21st century" since migration is obviously the "enabling trope of all Americans, hyphenated or not," haunted – in different ways and modes – by the "perturbation that pricks at the reassurances of rootedness and unitary identity" (xiii). Thus, ultimately, migration is "at the very core of all three master discourses, that of America, that of Italy/Europe, and most pointedly that of [...] Italian America" (xiii).

Key terms/concepts, guiding the reader through the fascinating maze of Carravetta's many discourses, are powerful and strongly evocative words, expressions, and formulas such as *belonging*, *membership*, *polycentric consciousness*, *mediascapes*, *forms of translation*, *hybridity*, *strategic marginality*, *inventions of the past* and *the defusing of nationalistic mythologies*. Chasing identity – which is also one of the meanings implicit in the title of the book – becomes, therefore, a truly challenging adventure in the wake of Melville's mythic chase, as Carravetta's *white whale* of identity turns out to be "a construct of multiple elements, all critically slippery, all historically contingent and multipronged, and perhaps constituting, deploying a post-modern moniker, a plurality of discourses in constant conflict and exchange. Identity has no contours; it is fluid, amoebic, viscous" (xii).

Politics, moreover, seems to play a significant role in defining identity. Moving from the assumption that any idea of identity in what the Italian American scholar defines "a heterological social reality betrays from the start a political stance, and the assumptions it rests upon", Carravetta's research, in fact, concludes that "ethnic identity is found to be constituted by a cluster of different and not always coherent (sub)identities, some of which have little to do with nations and languages and much with politics and power" (xii).

If the title of the book, *After Identity*, means to foreground an attempt to draw up some maps of identity, chasing it in those literary texts presented in the second part of the book, it also hints at a clear attempt to go beyond identity as a “monolithic presence” in recent scholarship, leaving behind its holistic, centering, neatly defined semiotic, since, as Carravetta states, “each horn of the dilemma is itself a palimpsest rolled into a maneuverable token for immanent validation but with little transcendent or trans-cultural usefulness” (xii).

The subtitle, *Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture*, indicates the three areas of investigation of the book, even though it soon becomes very clear to the reader that the question of interpretation looms large as well. Critique is, in fact, in Carravetta’s words “also metacritique, an unceasing conscious retooling and refashioning of the means and methods of inquiry, crucial insofar as topics such as migration, identity and cultural politics constantly challenge any assertion or conclusion” (xi). The Italian American critic’s approach draws on different theories of varied provenance, from hermeneutics proper to literary analysis, sociology, anthropology in the attempt to go beyond a notion of identity and insisting on “an embedded and tearing duality that is time and place bound and, as such, subject to specific dynamics that emerge, assert themselves, and then must change in some guise as newer or alternative and broader palimpsests are set in motion” (xii).

The volume consists of two sections, in the first of which, “Theoretical and Historical Contexts,” Carravetta analyzes the historical, cultural and theoretical contexts within which identity is forged moving from the relevant historical and social question of migration and its undeniably leading role in shaping cultural identities or specific communities in the United States. Through the three essays included in this section – “Con/Texts Before the Journeys: Migration, Narration, and Historical Identities,” “Dabblers, Small Fry, Canon Fodder: Problems and Perspectives in Italian American Literary History,” and “The Silence of the Subalterns: Contact, Conflict, Consolidation during the First Wave (1880s-1913)” – Carravetta confronts the reader with an analysis of the dramatic experience of migration as a whole, moving from the detailed historical and theoretical description of the experience itself, within which the topic of identity emerges and requires being dealt with. In the very first chapters of the book, the reader is confronted with one of Carravetta’s most interesting assumptions – running, in fact, through the different essays – when he highlights that “not enough reflection has been focused on the question of how someone – especially if an artist, or a writer, or a public persona – can identify as being *both*, an American *and* an Italian” (xii). A perfect example of this is provided in chapter six in the analysis of Maria Gillan’s poetics, which Carravetta defines as “a paradoxical poetic” that keeps conjugating – “wedding” in the critic’s words – “the old and the new”, putting side by side “the traditional and the radical” as well as “the simple and the complex,” in the poet’s perception that there exists a “possibility of making contraries co-exist” (179).

In the second part of his volume – “Geography of Identity through Literature” – Carravetta includes a truly piquant chapter entitled “Places, Processes, Perspectives in Italian American Poetry and Poetics,” which is almost an introduction to the following essays where he analyzes some aspects of

the poetics of Pasquale Verdicchio, Jay Parini, Claudia Menza, Kathryn Nocerino, Anthony Valerio, Maria Mazziotti Gillan, Robert Viscusi. Moving from Gay Talese's provocative article, "Where Are the Italian-American Novelists," published in 1993 on the *New York Times*, Carravetta provokes the reader with another enticing question: "Where are the Italian American Poets?" Carravetta, therefore, reminds us, with his elegant and clear style, of the fundamental role of the poets in giving shape to the language of a society, making sure that its words, and their power to generate interest and innovation, "do not degenerate into automatic ready-made phrases, endlessly repeatable until they lose their range, richness, their predisposition to be more than univocal messages or, worse, signals" (145). A risk which is becoming more and more evident in our globalized world, where poets are given the role of attacking "long-encrusted locutions" or "everyday words or word-clusters," a task which makes them automatically avant-gardists. The point is, in fact, the "Word" – "the Noun, the *lexis*, Greek *onoma*" – that needs to be shocked out of its torpor and recharged with "political, symbolic, visual, enigmatic allusions" (145). These essays are a fascinating example of Carravetta's lucid methodological approach to a literary critique aiming at chasing the ghost of identity through the verses and the paragraphs of such engaging texts as Maria Gillan's poem, "The Crow" and Robert Viscusi's "Oration upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus" (1992). Carravetta engages the poetics of Maria Gillan – in a groundbreaking essay entitled "Naming Identity in the Poetry of Maria Mazziotti Gillan" – and of Robert Viscusi – "The Historical Poetics of Robert Viscusi" – while in his "Valerio and the Refashioning of an American Idol" he deals with Valerio's work on Rudolph Valentino.

An illuminating reading of the role of the poet – and of poetry – in a society is offered by the essay on Maria Gillan, where Carravetta, among other aspects, aims to explore the so-called politics of naming in the belief that "[t]o name something actually existing corresponds not to merely mentioning a word-that-refers-to something the first time", but also to bring something into existence from "the void or nullity of non-Being" (146). Naming something is, therefore, bringing it to light, creating it, inventing it, and this has a lot to do with identity. While researching on the reasons why a writer needs to express his/her identity through poetry, Carravetta shows how in Gillan's poems the naming becomes a crucial issue, moving from the assumption that in her lyrical texts "the loci of memory make up a sort of series or suites on specific interlocutors, such as the daughter, the mother, the husband" (179). This sequence, in fact, ends up establishing "a cluster of themes, and circumscrib[ing] a poetic journal, a phenomenology of feelings, of the feelings of a woman who ushers a new typology, a more complex picture of the Italian American woman, and the Italian American woman poet at that" (180). Carravetta's great attention to women's poetry in his volume focuses on the most compelling themes of their righteous claim for a voice, which started in the 1980s with the groundbreaking anthology by Helen Barolini, *The Dream Book* (1985), and continued through the decades with other works such as Mary Jo Bona's *The Voices We Carry* (1994). Carravetta draws the reader into Gillan's poetics by quoting some verses from the poem "The Crow" (67-69), a manifesto of women's claim for a voice in the past decades: "We are driven women,/and we'll never escape/ the voices we carry within us."

Everything in this collection by Carravetta proves to be allusive, metaphorical, and multi-layered. An impressive geographical metaphor looms on the whole book from its cover image, “L’Allegoria della Geografia” painted by Italian exile, Constantino Brumidi, in the Capitol in 1858. The image seems to suggest that even pictorial representations of social history can be studied as theoretical palimpsests. In the painting, in fact, a woman representing geography is situated between a map featuring the New World on her right and a globe to her left, and is looking at the map to verify what is attested by the globe. This gesture recalls the early sixteenth-century iconography, when Italian explorations of the New World, led by Amerigo Vespucci, Giovanni Verrazzano, and their likes, were drawing new coastlines, soon making old globes unusable for navigation purposes. Besides evoking the “by then over three-century-old myth of the origin of his adopted country,” the picture contains a clear reference to the time and place in which Brumidi was painting: on the left of the image, an angel holds a steam locomotive, soon to become the glory of transportation and commerce in the United States, linking coast to coast (ix).

Supported by a vast and updated bibliography, Carravetta’s volume establishes once more in its conclusion – “For a Topological Critique of Italian American Culture” – the importance of going back to a critique of the *topos* as “the common-place embedded in a culture, the site of occurrence of a recurring exchange” in order to establish a more contemporary version of a critique of “what people say” over and over within certain “communities of speakers” (223). Some common themes (*topoi*), “though over time degenerated and congealed into cliché,” represent the terrain “from which to invent or sketch ... a field of inquiry, before analysis can commence” (224). A topological critic, in fact, being a critic “of the margin” and “from the margin,” would pay great attention to the inherent non homogeneity of any category of identity and especially to those exclusions and elisions aiming at presenting as homogenous a collective culture, hybrid, composite and syncretic by its own nature.

As Carravetta concludes, “there are other unexplored pathways ... to rethink identity” and a fundamental one is “the common-place reality that comes into view each time, as locals (in *our* time and place), we meet a ‘migrant’ (an ‘other,’ a foreigner, a stranger) or, as migrants (travelers), we meet ‘locals’ (in their space or world)... At such interstices – crossroads ... or chance encounters – we can display the full richness of our many identities in light of an exchange that is both individually empowering and illuminating and socio-politically democratic, positive, and peaceful” (241).