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## Re-Viewing Identity

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Peter Carravetta's *After Identity: Migration, Critique, and Italian American Culture*, is a magnificently rare book in the way in which its empirical and statistical research is informed by a robust, theoretical and philosophical framework. I believe that this, among other factors, is what, for several decades now, has united us, as thinkers of the "after" — that is to say, of the "after" of immigration. And so here the cultural, the political and the personal come together: Peter Carravetta, the immigrant from Calabria, and I, the exile from Cuba, birth place of Italo Calvino (author of *Invisible Cities*, among other wonderful books of the rational imagination). "Irene is a name for a city in the distance, and if you approach, it changes," writes Calvino in *Invisible Cities*. He continues: "For those who pass it without entering, the city is one thing; it is another for those who are trapped by it and never leave" (125). But of course, what does it mean to be trapped by it? To one who is "victimized" by economic hardship, he/she is "trapped" by poverty; for one who is subject to dictatorial control (as in the 2017 case of the North Korean soldier who escaped to South Korea through the DMZ border), that person is "trapped" by political power. "There is a city where you arrive for the first time, and there is a city you leave never to return," writes Calvino, very much describing the cartographies of the immigrant/exile. Each city, says Calvino, "deserves a different name; perhaps I have already spoken of Irene under other names; perhaps I have spoken only of Irene" (125). In other words, perhaps there is only one Irene, which is all the Irenes in the world; and our experience of the worlds we leave and the worlds we enter is just that, our experience. This "arbitrariness" and semiotic view, no doubt influenced by the post-structuralist currents of the time, as attractive as it existentially may seem to be, has one major flaw, and that is, that it makes the self-other relation irrelevant. But as any immigrant can attest to, nothing is further from the case. For no one feels his/her otherness as deeply as the immigrant who arrives in a new land. Not at all given to the privilege of solipsism, the immigrant is often not "allowed" to be him or herself. Carravetta writes:

To all effects . . . the immigrant can be read as the *uncanny other*, an unsettling reminder of how either we used to be, at some point in our past, or what we can become if through some act of violence, or by edict or legislation by government ["illegal immigrants"], or corporate abuse (or God, always a safe choice to justify anything),<sup>1</sup> the tables are turned, and find

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<sup>1</sup>More on God later.

ourselves, literally, not metaphorically, "out there," better, in the street.  
(*After Identity* 22–23)

Thus, it is not simply that world X is "my" world, but rather that X is a world that I inhabit with others, who in turn imagine me as either being either similar to them or radically "Other": worthy or unworthy of citizenship. "The migrant reminds us of the shadow, the dark otherness we all conceal so well and society glosses over with reassuring panaceas or exorcises by criminalizing or demonizing these different 'others,'" writes Carravetta in *After Identity* (23); which brings us to the question of identity. Viewed for the first time problematically by sociology and political science, anthropology had already dealt with the question of identity through its study of kinship relations, while for philosophy, ontology has always been conceived on the basis of identity and difference, contingency and necessity, origin and *telos*.

At the most elemental level, the immigrant's ontological status, as it were, corresponds to each of these three categories in very explicit ways. And I underscore "explicit" here because the non-immigrant, which does not exist (or exists only as a construction), presents him or herself as the normative *Same* who determines the other's otherness. Example: The White Anglo-Saxon Protestant for whom the Irish, the Italian, the Mexican, the Native American is an outsider, as Carravetta says "out there." Never mind the fact that he/she lives in stolen land, that his/her identity as the *Same* is constituted by his/her relation with others in the world. None of that is significant. Predicated on this kind of thinking, is the notion of necessity (cultural predestination), "authentic" national origins, and a sense of cultural predestination, or manifest destiny. I got here first, and God put me here because I am special. Carravetta writes:

We must be aware of the fact that philosophical, psychological and political solutions to the question of rootedness, which has historically yielded claims to primacy and privileges of all sorts, slide quickly into identity issues (of self, of nation, of class) and spawn self-fulfilling prophecies and often bizarre social habits. Indeed the discourse of roots and genealogies has time and again proved to be arbitrary, insidious, and exclusivist. (33)

Obviously, Carravetta's *critique* of identity, unlike most approaches to the issue, transcends the journalistic chatter that leaves everything as is, only to be consumed in the realm of debatable *doxa*. And here for me, as a philosopher, resides the importance of *After Identity*. Migration, as Carravetta argues, "can provide us with a philosophical notion from which — or with respect to which — we can continue to demolish the Great Metaphysical Absolutes of the Pre-Moderns which still linger in Post-Enlightenment times . . ." (33). For if it is not true, which it isn't, as Bruno

Latour, claims, that “we were never modern,” the one thing that is certain is that we have never been anything else but immigrants, travelers, and exiles — we have always been *nomads*, border crossers, traversed by differences, internal and external.

Yet, how are we to deal with today’s political climate, so intent on returning to a Pre-Modern world, of border walls, and essentialist, nationalist ideologies? Is there something about our humanity and our human communities in all their diversity that can save us? I believe there is, and my answer, is very similar to Carravetta’s. The Chicana critic and philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa proposed the *mestiza* as a model of *difference* for future generations, and here Carravetta similarly is positing the migrant as such a model. But as Nietzsche might have put it, for that one thing is needful, and that is a different *cosmological model* — one that allows for difference and contingency, and that challenges what Carravetta calls in his book, “the obsessive preoccupation with Origins and Primacy and Election” (33). I take my cue here, from the Brazilian anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who has worked on Amerindians cultures of the Amazon, and the ways in which they negotiate their understanding of the nature/culture divide by way of their cosmologies. This, he calls *cosmological perspectivism* (2015 191–294); and we as Westerners (no less than Amerindians), more often than not, have viewed the world, albeit unconsciously, from the perspective of cosmological models we have inherited. One in particular, however, is responsible for a lot of the damage we have inflicted on others as well as on ourselves. And as I promised, here I will deal with God.

The rhetorical force of our cosmological model, and our image of thought of the cosmos, is such that it has contaminated our scientific, rational models of the universe. The most popular, being “The Bing Bang Theory,” which is even the title of a television sit-com. Proposed by Belgian astronomer and Catholic priest, Georges Lemaître, in 1927, the Big Bang theory, postulates that the universe came into existence from a “primeval atom” or “Cosmic Egg” (13.8 billion years ago). I mention the fact that Lemaître was a priest, because despite his rejection of the theological implications of the theory, especially after Edwin Hubble’s telescope observations of the expansion of the universe, one cannot ignore the fact that since Pope Pius XII in 1952, such a historization of the universe has been collapsed unto the popular religious notion of *Genesis*. And yet, for most of the universe’s history, both life and consciousness have been absent. Any such reality, then, “anterior to the emergence of the human species — or even anterior to every recognized form of life on earth,” is what Quentin Meillassoux calls “ancestral” in *After Finitude* (10). Moreover, it is this notion of ancestrality, or pre-human *being* that puts into question what Meillassoux terms “correlationism,” or the notion that that there is a necessary correlation between being (or existence) and thinking (or consciousness). For Meillassoux, the traditional model of origins, of which

the Big Bang is an instance, subsumes the notion that things *are* because they *had* to be. This, clearly, makes humans ontologically privileged beings. We are superior to cats, rocks, and tooth brushes because God (or the Universe) deemed it so by giving us the power to think. But what if the world just is, contingently so. After all, it is not altogether understood by astrophysics, why it is that at a certain point in time, in the struggle of matter and antimatter, matter somehow “won” the day by an infinitesimal imbalance of “one part in a billion” (Basini, Morselli, and Ricci 13).<sup>2</sup> So then, what if we replace the cosmological picture of the universe, and remove God from the picture — in other words, if we remove the Judeo-Christian, Aristotelian notion of an Unmoved Mover, from our cosmological perspective? What then? In answer to such a possibility in *L'Inexistence divine* Meillassoux argues:

God did not create thought, and nothing in the world was thinking before there was thought; God did not create suffering or pleasure found in vital activity, and nothing suffered or enjoyed in the world before the advent of life. This indicates in the most striking fashion that if we think advent in its truth, it is an advent *ex nihilo*, and thus *without any reason at all, and for that very reason* it is without limit. In revealing the contingency of laws, reason itself teaches that becoming is ultimately without reason. (225)<sup>3</sup>

What, however, you may ask, does all this have to do with the subject at hand — what does Meillassoux's *After Finitude* have to do with Carravetta's *After Identity*, a book on migration and its impact of Italian-American culture? Quite honestly: everything. For the answer lies in Carravetta's discussion of the “Great Metaphysical Absolutes” (33). As long as religious, national, racial, and ethnic identities are affixed to ontologies of origin and necessity, we will continue to oppress and exclude others who are unlike us. To replace a cosmology of ontological necessity with one of ontological contingency is to recognize that we are what we are because we were contingently born into a certain religion, in a certain country that speaks a certain language, at a particular moment in history, of parents of this or that racial genome, that our very “identity” could have been very different,

<sup>2</sup>The matter/antimatter asymmetrical *difference* (e.g. proton/antiproton; electron/positron, etc) recalls the *apriori*, unresolved antinomies of Kantian metaphysics. Where difference ceases to be (as in the wholesale “big freeze” of the universe to absolute zero), there is nothing (and paradoxically 1=0).

<sup>3</sup>In *A Universe from Nothing: Why There is Something Rather Than Nothing* (2012), cosmologist Lawrence M. Krauss, argues against the theological notion of the Big Bang, and for a non-teleological contingent view of what Meillassoux calls “advent” or “surgissement.” Since Galileo we know that science, and particularly cosmology, cannot be separated from the way we conceive of human and non-human worlds on Earth. Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* is a quick reminder.

and that our very existence, is as Meillassoux suggests, a *factiality* “without reason.” But it does not stop here: a cultural re-evaluation of metaphysical values also implies that we accept process and becoming, that we think in Deleuzean/Anzaldúan fashion, in terms of movement and multiplicity rather than Being and Sameness. And to that end, Carravetta writes:

*We are always on the move — socially, existentially, educationally.* In terms of class, and in view of the places we live in and communities we deal with, our perspective and our reading of the world and the societies within it, are constantly shifting and requiring recalibrations of all sorts. . . . Key critical condition to be considered in this topological critique is that of *métissage*, cross-breeding or miscegenation, inspired in part by studies on Mexico and the Indian subcontinent. . . . (230)

Now, in terms of what this means for a re-thinking of Italian-American identity, “if the truth be told, one never identifies with *all* Italians, or *all* Americans for that matter, or *all* of the aspects of the chimera *at once*” writes Carravetta (233). This reminds me of Henri Bergson’s distinction between “quantitative” and “qualitative multiplicity” in *Time and Free Will*, for it is with qualities and singularities that we affectively connect (regardless of the number of Facebook “friends” we have). Carravetta writes:

Italian history is replete with exclusions, the forgotten, the “worthless,” just as it is chuck-full of great inventors, navigators, saints, artists and entrepreneurs when it comes time to boast and unfurl proudly the national colors, as on Columbus Day parades. *But the historical facts, the data so to speak, lead to the theoretical conclusion that “Italians” (as “nationals” from any country), are all at bottom, hybrids, creoles, mestizos to some degree.* (233)

So perhaps we can all say with Nietzsche, *that at bottom we are all the cultures in history* (steeped in blood and greatness). Carravetta concludes *After Identity* by asking us that we be “predisposed to a world made up of different ‘others,’ those for whom *we* are the other, and those who agree on sharing a common humanity, and the same planet, before we even decide to identify ourselves” (242). And beyond human finitude is the comforting notion that the *becoming* of contingency is one without limit. Therefore, as Carravetta suggests, why limit ourselves?

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