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*FROM ESSENTIALISM TO CHOICE:
American Cultural Identities
and Their Literary Representations*

Editors

Agnieszka Łobodziec and Blossom N. Fondo



Uniwersytet Zielonogórski

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Humana
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INTRODUCTION

The reconsideration of culture and identity within the last three decades is very applicable to an analysis of varied modes of identity formation within the American context. Identity is no longer associated with unquestioned particularity relative to an individual sense of belonging to a specific nation, ethnic group, geographical location, religious organization, political party, and essentially defined features of other entities. It is deemed rather to be a continued process of cultural changeability and fluidity. Here, culture is understood as “the semantic space, the field of signs and practices, in which human beings construct and represent themselves and others, and hence their societies and histories. [...] Culture always contains within polyvalent, potentially contestable messages, images and action. It is, in short, a historically situated, historically unfolding ensemble of signifiers-in-action, signifiers at once material and symbolic, social and aesthetic” (Camaroff & Camaroff 1992: 27).

Toni Morrison formulated the term “Foreigner’s Home,” which expresses a certain condition of place established by migrations of peoples from one geographical and cultural space to another. Historically, America has been a major voluntary and involuntary migration destination. In an interview at *America Festival* in France in September 2012, Toni Morrison stated, “Everybody in America has come from some place else, except Native Americans. And immigrants who came because they were pursued, or because they wanted riches, or because they were bought, sold, told ‘Either you go to jail or you go to America,’ as they did in England. Everybody was from some place else. Thrown out or exiles. So the idea of home for Americans is fraught with yearning. It’s a romantic place. It’s a kind of utopia, just out of reach. So it’s less a place than a mental state that you acquire when you are in a place where you are safe and nobody is after you, and people will help you.”

Multiple identities have arisen and are still rising from this cultural and socio-political context. Some of these culturally constructed identities have been conceptualized under various rubrics such as hyphenated identity, hybrid identity, racial identity, gendered identity, and fluid identity. The American context also produces to good measure so-called playful identities that may have dual meanings: encompassing a deconstruc-

tionist concept of play indicative of “the instability, the permanent unsettlement, the lack of any final resolution” (Hall 1990: 228) or entailing amusement. Playful identities, therefore, may engender postures that ultimately cause identity crisis or/and guarantee privilege and recognition, the latter frequently resulting from individual choice.

The volume presents perceptive interpretations of the literary representations of culturally constructed American identities. The questions considered are: How do the writers’ narratives challenge essentialist categories of race, gender, sex, and nation? What attitudes do the characters develop in relation to these categories? How do the writers envision the future development of American identities? What sorts of identities do their characters represent? What roles do space, ethnicity, politics, and social status play in the characters’ (re)definition of their identity? What factors and circumstances encourage or impel the characters to reconsider themselves? What role do racial consciousness and gender consciousness play in the characters’ development of identity? What choices do they make? How are post-colonialist, deconstructionist, psychoanalytical, and feminist approaches applicable in the analyses of literary representations of identity formation? What is the relationship between the sense of identity of individual writers and their attitudes towards their own literary practice?

In response to the questions above, **Gerardo Del Guercio** discusses the question of hybridity as a narrative strategy in Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* to create the self of the heroine Claudia which enables her heroic survival in a hostile cultural environment. **Yapo Ettien** investigates the African-American feminine self-assertion in opposition to racialized aesthetic standards that lead to the stigmatization of blackness not only in the inter-racial but also in intra-racial contexts portrayed in Toni Morrison’s *God Help the Child*. **Iwona Filipczak** places the identity formation of selected characters in Bharati Mukherjee’s *Jasmine*, “Orbiting” and *Desirable Daughters* within the framework of voluntarist model of identity, evidencing performative nature of the characters’ identity. **Blossom N. Fondo** explores the evolution of African American female identity in Terry McMillan’s *Getting to Happy* and how the woman reinvents the female self from a perspective other than race. **Terri Griffith and Nicholas Alexander Hayes** carry out a structuralist analysis of the literary representation of disputable American gendered and sexual identities through juxtaposing female and male characters in James Baldwin’s *Giovanni’s Room* as binary oppositions. In her discussion of Dorothy Allison’s *Bastard out of Carolina*, **Anneliese Heinisch** explores the white poor character’s self-affirmation through nonconformist behavioral and attitudinal patterns in challenge of derogatory stereotypes and social marginalization that the so-called “white trash” is believed to be essentially destined to. **Tammie Jenkins** exposes the manner in which the characters in Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed* choose to redefine in their individual ways the essentialist categories of race, gender, and class. **Paulina Korzeniewska-Nowakowska**

evidences the determining nature of sports and outdoor activities in the formation of ethnic, national and gendered identities of the selected characters from Jack London's "A Royal Sport" from *The Cruise of the Snark*, "On the Makaloa Mat" and "The Mexican." **Agnieszka Łobodziec** employs the theory of the stages of racial identity development in her exploration of the Polish American character's attempt to define his sense of belonging in a racially stratified realm of American northern city depicted in James Baldwin's *Another Country*.

Agnieszka Łobodziec & Blossom N. Fondo
Editors