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DEMOCRACY AND DIFFERENCE:  
THE US IN MULTIDISCIPLINARY  
AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVES

PAPERS FROM THE 21ST AISNA CONFERENCE

Edited by Giovanna Covi and Lisa Marchi

Dipartimento di Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Filologici

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*Giovanna Covi and Lisa Marchi*

## INTRODUCTION

### DIFFERENCING DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATIZING DIFFERENCES

This volume is concerned with the ways in which democracy and difference can be employed as useful theoretical tools for investigating the evolution of American Studies and understanding the changes and crises investing our present-day globalized societies. The collection brings together contributions by scholars who have engaged the transnational and interdisciplinary reflection proposed by the 21<sup>st</sup> International Biennial AISNA Conference *Democracy and Difference: The US in Multidisciplinary and Comparative Perspectives*, held in October 2011 at the University of Trento. The conference promoted a cultural conversation on the challenging conjugation of two key-concepts—*democracy* and *difference*—and involved Italian, US, European, Arab, and Asian scholars, writers, and musicians, along with students and the larger public; the conversation was carried on in English and Spanish to underline the fact that US multiculturalism is also multilingual. Participants explored the concepts in relation to US cultural history as well as to the present globalized world, by raising questions about power, recognition, redistribution, and postcoloniality, as well as about ethnicity and race, gender and sexuality, and ecology.

Attention was devoted to the global tendency towards democratization, combined with the rise of identity politics, increasingly paralleled on the one hand by renewed reflections upon the foundations of democracy itself, and on the other by complex representations of identity grounded on the articulation of difference. The wider questions framing this discussion included: How are conceptions of democracy and difference changing under the influence of these forces and in the midst of multiple global crises such as wars and starvation, climate change, and financial instability? What can American Studies and its affiliated areas of inquiry do to provide methods and questions that facilitate consideration of crucial issues and engage contemporary change across disciplines, boundaries, languages, and cultures?

The contributions to this collection elaborate these crucial concerns and address a wide range of topics: democracy and dissent, civil and social rights, cultural domination, humor and satire, pleasure, power/powerlessness, inclusion/exclusion, mis/representation, the Caribbean, Latin America, identity politics, digital technologies, visuality, photography, graphic narrative, sitcoms, jazz, travel and migration, the Mediterranean, ecology, and eco-criticism. They do so from different locations outside the USA—namely from Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa—and from a range of constituencies within multicultural US society. They also do so by engaging the Humanities (specifically, literature, linguistics, history, music, the visual arts) and the Social Sciences (namely, law, political science, sociology), and by embracing theoretical perspectives drawn from Ethnic, African American, Gender and Sexuality, Cultural, Postcolonial, Visual, and New Technology Studies.

By integrating a variety of approaches, themes, and locations, this volume offers a platform for critical engagement with American Studies—with the US, as well as with “America” and the Americas, Europe and the Americas, the North and the South, and the trans-Atlantic and the intra-Pacific—and brings to the fore the interdisciplinary, intercultural, and transnational nature of this rich and complex field of study. Stressing local and global dimensions on the one hand and interior and international perspectives on the other, the volume examines democracy and difference in various social, cultural, and institutional contexts, as well as takes into account expressions and interpretations of possible connections among multicultural societies. Each contribution to this collection promotes in its own distinctive way redefinitions of American Studies and globalization that not only cast new light on the way we practice American Studies and on the radical transformations that this field is undergoing, but most importantly reconsider democracies in various multicultural contexts from intercultural and transnational points of view, thus enhancing our understanding about present-day globalized societies and the interrelated changes we are witnessing. The primary aim of this collection is therefore to combine multidisciplinary and comparative approaches to map the distinct yet interconnected geographies of the present and to engage democracies enriched by difference and differences nourished by democracy—i.e., to provoke a fruitful conjugation of the differencing of democracy with the democratization of differences.

The contributions interact and dialogue among each other both within and across the boundaries of workshop sessions in which they were presented, and point the way towards new conversations. We invite readers to consult the conference program available on this webpage and situate each contribution that appears here in alphabetical order by Author’s name, within the workshop panel that hosted and nourished its original articulation. To further appreciate the tone set by the forum of discussion offered by *Democracy and Difference: The US in Multidisciplinary and Comparative Perspectives*, we also encourage readers to focus their attention on this webpage to the abstracts of the key-note lectures by David Leiwei Li (University of Oregon), Nouri Gana (University of California at Los Angeles), Alessandro Portelli (Università di Roma La Sapienza), Marina Camboni (Università di Macerata), Emilia Perassi (Università Statale di Milano), Leela Gandhi (University of Chicago), R. Radhakrishnan (University of California at Irvine), François Weil (École des hautes études en sciences sociales), Ugo Mattei (Università di Torino), Franco Stelzer (writer and teacher), Maurizio Dini Ciacci (Conservatorio di Venezia), Isabella Turso (pianist), Stefania Neonato (pianist), Kim Nalley (University of California at Berkeley and vocalist), Tammy Hall (pianist), Robert Reid-Pharr (City University of New York), Sergio Fabbrini (Libera Università degli Studi Sociali). Together with the essays collected in this volume, the abstracts address and re-imagine the overall theme of the conference moving both within and beyond the boundaries set by the concepts *democracy* and *difference*, which initiated this conversation.

We trust that readers within and outside American Studies will be able to savor these most fruitful exchanges, which regard pregnant concerns about the present and are articulated with full consciousness of the complex history that links four continents.

GIOVANNA COVI AND LISA MARCHI