Rethinking our Labels

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If when talking about our identity we also approach the notion of whiteness and all that it pertains,

we find ourselves on a most slippery slope. This is not to say that we should not broach such subject matter.

On the contrary, being of southern European origins, we know that historically we have not

always been considered white, and as a result, those of the great migration who hailed from below the “Linea Spezia” were in fact placed into a non- white category for a period of time. Hence, our obligation to negotiate said slippery slope seems thus inevitable; it is an obligation for both the scholar and the community leader.

The risk of such a discussion is to fall into a trap of flat, superficial analysis and thereby not consider the complexities of neither ethnicity nor “whiteness” as we know both concepts today; as a result, one may not recognize the multi-strata characteristic of any “white” ethnic group and therefore present an incomplete portrait of the group at hand. In order to avoid this, we must force ourselves to let go of some of our traditional historic-thematic perspectives that rein still among certain dominant culturalists, or within what are now nicely bleached, “white” ethnic communities.

We need to open up conversations regarding all aspects of our communities. A European ethnic group’s essentialist identification with “whiteness” may indeed prove counter-productive. Such identification may suffocate, indeed eliminate, the possibility of diverse characterizations of one’s ethnicity. Especially if internal, such ethnicity would figure as an homogenous group of people who identify with mainstream (read, WASP), when, instead, we know very well that intra-ethnic tensions do indeed exist precisely because these groups prove not homogenous, and various occasions have provoked animated, internal dialogue in recent years.

Further still, identification with WASPdom may very well lead to an exclusively “celebratory packaging of the past [which] often forgets ... histories of oppression and intimidation,” as one critic stated (Anagnostou 2009, 11). Such tensions were and continue to be evident in a number of European ethnicities. We see this in the various two-flagged, double-national hymned celebratory galas and other such events that, if not negotiated accordingly, may cause said ethnicity to stagnate; for it is by now common acceptance that ethnicity does indeed evolve to some degree from one generation to the next. If we do not recognize as much, then the consequence is that hegemonic past myths persist, and ethnic divisions — internal and external — arise.

What I am discussing here is self-management of one’s ethnicity, as I have already done elsewhere (Tamburri 1991, 2014). As we know, the southern European has the option — indeed, the privilege — to identify as an Italian in one situation and as an American (read, white) in another. This is, in fact, the privilege of the “white ethnic,” which is also the conundrum of those who engage in any sort of ethnic discourse, be that discourse academic or more broadly public. The combination of and/ or the shifting to and fro between “Italian” and “American” have, on occasion, excluded from its identification some arbitrarily undesirable historic components that may actually continue to co-buttress said ethnicity — something that is characteristic of a certain component of the Italian community in the States.

In eschewing said past histories, we can readily get caught up in a situation of diachronic amnesia for which any lack of knowledge of our ancestors’ trials and tribulations during the proverbial four-decade period of 1880-1924 adumbrates such past challenges.

As a consequence, we may fall into a state of synchronicity for which current phenomena rein and all connections to the past are lost precisely because, as a result of socio-economic progress and all that it may signify to those “moving on up,” we erroneously adopt the assumption that southern European immigrants and their progeny have assimilated into mainstream America. What we have witnessed elsewhere, instead, is that such assumptions often prove false.

What we also know from some scholars is that “ethnicity is a process of inter-reference between two or more cultural traditions” (Fischer, 195) — i.e., different ethnic cultures — and, I would add, between two or more generations of the same ethnic group. The consequence of such amnesia may, in fact, be an inability to recognize affinities between the above-mentioned trials and tribulations of our ancestors and our migrant ethnics today, all of which may result in a willy- nilly insensitivity

toward current day immigration to the United States. What we thus need to do is to dismantle those long-held notions of “whiteness” and its power to aggregate various groups into one vast cluster of, in our case, seemingly assimilated southern Europeans.

We need to destabilize “white ethnicity as a bounded category” with the specific goal of “affirm[ing] commonalities and confirm[ing] differences” in order to promote, in the end, “a network of scholarly entanglements instead of isolated nodes of inquiry” (Anagnostou 2013, 122). “Whiteness” surely remains within the conversation of ethnic discourse, but it undergoes, along the way, a series of interrogations and analyses that eventually underscore its malleability of signification.

Works Cited

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