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Tracy Floreani

Fifties Ethnicities: The Ethnic Novel and Mass Culture at Midcentury

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When many people imagine the United States in the 1950s, they picture rapidly growing suburbs and identical white families, each with a gruff working father in a gray flannel suit, a smiling apron-clad mother, and 2.5 children sitting in front of a new television set. Yet the 1950s were also the decade of *Brown vs Board of Education* and *West Side Story*, a time when ethnic narratives and civil rights struggles captivated the mainstream, laying the groundwork for the social change movements of the 1960s. That disparity motivates Tracy Floreani to reexamine the decade in *Fifties Ethnicities*, and to follow Leerom Medovoi in questioning the entrenched binary between the rhetoric of “containment” and repression on one side and “postwar radicalism” and rhetorics of liberation on the other. Floreani suggests that, to understand the “paradoxical coexistence” of conformist and resistant cultures in the ‘50s, critics should look at the “space between texts” of different media, texts from both “highbrow” and “middlebrow” cultures, popular texts and forgotten ones.

Reading divergent texts as reference points for one another allows Floreani to begin to sketch a more accurate picture of ethnicity in the 1950s US. She asserts in her conclusion that “Whether comedic or melodramatic, action-filled or quietly lyrical, the films, television shows, and print text [sic] I [discuss] here work collaboratively across medium and subgenre toward a similar, panethnic gesture [...] they take on the essential questions of American identity and who is imagined to be entitled to that identity.” These include questions of authenticity and belonging, visibility and invisibility, all concerned with “cultural citizenship, how that citizenship is pictured in the larger culture, and where ethnicity fits into it” at a time when new understandings of ethnicity and cultural citizenship emerge. Such comparative work, across medium and genre, attempts to contextualize literary texts within a diffuse mass culture, a “shared national context (in which the notion of a unified national identity was fairly consistently promoted).” Floreani contends that, in the 1950s, “participating in national culture became an important enactment of citizenship” and national belonging.

Floreani uses ‘ethnicity,’ rather than ‘race,’ partly because it is such a capacious term, encompassing Jews, Italian Americans, Armenian Americans and other so-called white ethnics along with Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinos, including immigrants and non-immigrants alike. Floreani’s use of the term allows her to compare representations of anyone who is not a US-born white Anglo. Floreani carefully notes how differences in ethnicity and/or race affect characters’ opportunities differently, beginning in her first body chapter, when she compares the Chinese immigrant Wang family of Chin Yang Lee’s *The Flower Drum Song* (1957) with Humbert Humbert, the European *émigré* in Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita* (1955). While this may seem a surprising comparison, between a potboiler novel turned popular musical and a controversial postmodern novel, Floreani focuses on both texts’ engagement with mass culture. In both cases, participation in and consumption of mass culture facilitates cultural citizenship for the characters.

Floreani examines “how novels specifically frame the consumer and gender imperatives within popular configurations of American identity, calling into question the ways in which the privileging of those enactments of citizenship also inherently privileges whiteness,” a whiteness which some ethnic characters can

access more easily than others. This becomes especially obvious in Chapter 3, when Floreani places Gwendolyn Brooks's novel *Maud Martha* (1953) in conversation with the contemporary television series *I Love Lucy*. Comparing Maud Martha's consumer desires and practices with Lucy Ricardo's, and contrasting the two texts' racial representations allows Floreani to demonstrate the subversive potential of literature versus commercial television. While her race keeps Maud Martha from mirroring Lucy's social mobility, Floreani focuses on the wildly divergent depictions of childbirth in the novel and the television show. Lucy gives birth to Little Ricky off-screen while Ricky distracts the audience by capering in witch doctor drag, but Brooks describes Maud Martha's labor in harrowing, visceral detail. Floreani remarks that "Because of the very different decency codes at work within the different narrative industries, this type of graphic exploration and agency remains possible in a small, literary novel."

Following up on her analysis of Desi Arnaz as Ricky Ricardo, a "'spectacle' of ethnicity performed in easily identifiable excess" that also "expand[s] the notion of whiteness," Floreani investigates the inclusion of the ethnic male star within American whiteness by focusing on William Saroyan's novel *Rock Wagram* (1951). *Rock Wagram* follows the career of an Armenian American movie star *née* Arak Vagramian: his alienation from his roots in the Armenian community in Fresno, his pursuit of his WASP wife, etc. Floreani contextualizes the novel in a popular culture that adored ethnic male stars, from Danny Thomas to Dean Martin, exploring intersections between gender and ethnicity. While the media depicted female ethnic stars like Sophia Loren as exotic, ethnic men were often relegated to villainous roles or "strategically tempered with the seemingly emasculating forces of comedy and/or banal domesticity." Floreani's panethnic focus seems unable to account for the differences within the categories she's defined. Although she offers Harry Belafonte as one clear exception to this desexualized ethnic male star image, many others spring to mind. Her description applies to certain white ethnic stars (and Floreani would assert that, in 1950s American popular culture, Latinos and Chicanos like Desi Arnaz and Anthony Quinn were considered white) more accurately than it does a Poitier or even a Sinatra.

In the *Rock Wagram* chapter and in the following one, Floreani uses a Butlerian theory of performativity to analyze ethnicity. In Chapter 5, she compares two narratives of racialized invisibility: Ralph Ellison's novel *Invisible Man* (1952) and Douglas Sirk's film *Imitation of Life* (1959). While Ellison's *Invisible Man* navigates different performances of Blackness, *Imitation's* Sarah Jane, a young mixed-race woman, passes for white in spite of her Black mother (and is portrayed by Susan Kohner, an American actress of German and Mexican heritage). Floreani contends that both characters' performances demonstrate the specific problems of cultural citizenship for Black Americans and the problem of conformity in general. For the *Invisible Man*, "What makes the protagonist visible at any particular moment also renders him invisible because it succinctly obscures his individuality within [...] racializing practice."

Floreani sums up her project when she states that, like Sarah Jane and the *Invisible Man*, "At various moments, Desi Arnaz, Rock Wagram, Lucy Ricardo, Maud Martha, Wang Ta [of *The Flower Drum Song*], Lolita, and Humbert Humbert are all trying to 'pass' for an ideal version of something or someone, be it a willingly assimilationist immigrant, an all-American teen, a 'feminine' woman, an 'Armenian Man.' [Thus] we must consider ethnic identities as both performative and as expressions of the period's new interest in identity and questions of 'authenticity' itself." These questions arise in the encounter between the culture of conformity and the culture of resistance, between individual narratives and mass culture, and become visible in Floreani's comparative analysis. Throughout *Fifties Ethnicities*, Floreani performs fascinating, well-supported close readings of individual texts, but sometimes her comparisons seem forced. However, the broad scope of her project is inspiring, as it encourages us to contextualize literature within mass culture; to understand literature by comparing its effects to those of other media; and to question received histories.