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Sommario

Premessa 9
Tina Maraucci, Ilaria Natali, Letizia Vezzosi

Incontri, legami, relazioni. Come un'introduzione 11
Vanna Boffo

PARTE 1
DAL MONDO TURCO-OTTOMANO: PERSONAGGI, TESTI E CONTESTI SOCIO-CULTURALI

Frammenti dei versi di Sait Faik 25
Giampiero Bellingeri

Riflessi di memoria kavafiana nella poesia turca 35
Matthias Kappler

Firenze nei racconti dei viaggiatori ottomani nell'età delle *Tanzimat* 45
Luca Berardi

La letteratura turca e la narrativa storica: leggere Abdülhamid II per legittimare il presente 55
Michelangelo Guida

Lotta e letteratura: il percorso politico e culturale di İsmail Bozkurt 63
Fabio L. Grassi

Tra voce e silenzio: soggettività, scrittura e potere in Latife Tekin e Aslı Erdoğan 73
Tina Maraucci

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Behice Boran (1910-1987): dall'accademia alla militanza politica 81
Fulvio Bertuccelli

Continuità e false rotture. Una rilettura critica dei processi di riconversione dell'attivismo negli anni '80 in Turchia 89
Carlotta De Sanctis

Rileggere il maschio camaleonte. Strutture patriarcali e servizi religiosi nell'era AKP 97
Chiara Maritato

Educatori, intellettuali ed editori italofoni nella Istanbul ottocentesca. Un milieu transnazionale tra Galata e Pera 105
Francesco Pongiluppi

PARTE 2
SAGGI INTERNAZIONALI: GENERE, GENERI, LINGUAGGI

"Ma chi è là, in disparte?" Quattro capitoli sulle origini del *Lied* romantico 115
Patrizio Collini

Unsayable/Unseeable: A Romantic Experiment in the Limits of Language 121
Ioana Bot Bican, Florin Bican

Modulazioni dell'addio. Intorno al terzo romanzo di Camille Mallarmé 129
Diego Salvadori

L'Oriente è rosa, tumultuosamente 135
Annamaria Guadagni

Come si deve comportare una buona moglie: i consigli passati di madre in figlia in un poemetto inglese medio del Codice Ashmole 61 143
Letizia Vezzosi

"Donna geniale e di spirito": Laura Veccia Vaglieri and her *Apologia dell'Islamismo* (1925) 153
Barbara Roggema

La dolorosa percezione dell'esistenza nello spazio poetico di Althea Gyles 161
Arianna Antonielli

Nobuko (1928) di Miyamoto Yuriko: diario di una donna alla ricerca dell'indipendenza 173
Diego Cucinelli

Classy Shoes: On the Symbolism of Footwear in H.C. Andersen's Fairy Tales 181
Anna Wegener

Ich jede Jahr Kinderlere Türkei' da. Interferenze sintattico-grammaticali del turco nel tedesco della prima generazione di immigrati 189
Giovanni Giri

Food Culture and Translation:
A Proposal for an Applied Methodological Framework 199
Isabella Martini

Sessualità e immagine corporea 207
Elisa Guidi, Cristian Di Gesto, Camilla Matera, Amanda Nerini

PARTE 3
SAGGI INTERNAZIONALI: STORIA, POLITICA, CANONI

Ospitare l'altra 217
Angela Tarantino

Gerti. Vita di una austriaca a Firenze 235
Ernestina Pellegrini

Tra memorie e racconto: lo snodo di vite "illegali" 245
Luciana Brandi

Vittime e carnefici: i drammi politici di Harold Pinter 253
Fernando Cioni

Il linguaggio come contestazione: Gastone Novelli e
la funzione dell'artista nella società 261
Teresa Spignoli

L'avanguardia e l'inattualità sintomatica dell'artista disaffiliato 269
Federico Fastelli

La plasticità camaleontica di una solida identità politica:
l'antifascismo di Storm Jameson 279
Ilaria Natali

Between the "American Dream of Success" and
the "Jewish Idea of Respectability":
The Case of *Marjorie Morningstar*'s Path to Responsibility 287
Simona Porro

Brevi evasioni dal racconto del sé:
L'università di Rebibbia di Goliarda Sapienza 293
Giovanna Lo Monaco

Victorian Women's Travel Journals and the "Other".
A Corpus Linguistics Analysis 301
Christina Samson

Representations of Native Americans in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*
(1780-1800): Discourse Practices of Exclusion 309
Elisabetta Cecconi

Gli studi amazigh tra ponti, barriere e divisioni dell'Africa. Resilienza e prospettive contemporanee 317
Anna Maria Di Tolla

Alcune riflessioni sulla percezione occidentale del Tibet 327
Aleksandra Wenta

Autori 335

Representations of Native Americans in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (1780-1800): Discourse Practices of Exclusion

Elisabetta Cecconi

1. Introduction

In his essay on the origins and nature of American nationalism, Trautsch (2016) deconstructs the traditional view of American nationalism as exceptional by highlighting the extent to which the American nation-formation was essentially the result of a demarcation process marked by exclusionary practices. For a long time, historians had insisted on the moral superiority of American nationalism in comparison with other European nations. By drawing a distinction between civic and ethnic nationalisms, they considered America as the "purest form" of the civic-political type of nation, where nationality is in principle open and voluntaristic and – unlike the ethnic natural type – can be acquired by individual will.

In recent years the notion of an inherently peaceful and inclusive American nationalism has come under attack on the assumption that the very act of defining a "we-group" requires the imagination of "them". In this sense, all nationalisms involve both inclusionary and exclusionary practices which serve to mark the boundaries of national identity and establish ideologically-biased power relationships (see Saraçgil 2013). America was no exception to this. In the course of the Revolution and in the years of the Early Republic, Euro-Americans, despite their lack of common history and single culture, were able to construct a national community by assuming sameness and solidarity amongst themselves at the same time marking their differentiation from Afro-Americans and Na-

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tive Americans, who were consequently excluded from the emergent nation. The exclusion process had clear racial roots: it was based on the belief of the ethnic superiority of the American Anglo-Saxon branch of the Caucasian race over the indigenous people and was discursively encoded in terms of civilization vs savagery (Trautsch 2016, 300). Through this polarization it was possible for American settlers to expand and set the spatial bounds of the American nation by legitimizing the dispossession of American Indians from their lands.

In light of the necessity to reconsider American nationalism as a more complex and contested process, my paper examines discursive representations of Native Americans in the press of the Early Republic. The aim is to identify the nomination and predication strategies through which the relationship between Euro-Americans and Indigenous Americans is encoded in discourse in terms of in-group vs out-group and how this contributes to the legal justification of exclusion and dispossession practices against American Indians.

In eighteenth-century America the role of newspapers was crucial in constructing and shaping a sense of national community (Leder 1966). For the purpose of my analysis, I have selected the *Pennsylvania Gazette* (*PG*) for the period from 1780 to 1800 with a special focus on letters written by officers, inhabitants and authorities. The choice of a Pennsylvania newspaper for mapping exclusionary practices is dictated by the fact that although Pennsylvania was one of the first places where Europeans came into contact with Native Americans and for a time was a sanctuary of Native American tribes, the continuous wars at the frontiers exacerbated the relationship between the two groups leading to the creation of two separate and diametrically opposed racial categories: white vs "Indians", permanently estranged from each other.

The results of the analysis reveal the predominance of the "hostile Indian" script which is meant to arouse public concern about the vulnerable conditions of the American citizens at the frontiers represented as innocent victims of murders and depredations. Even so, a distinction has to be drawn between representations of American Indians in letters written by Americans living at the borders and those written by Americans from other parts of the country including authorities who were trying to establish peace through treaties rather than through war. In the latter set of letters, a more compassionate attitude emerges towards the extermination of Native Americans, which however does not ultimately alter the sense of ethnical and cultural inferiority attached to them.

2. Dataset and Theoretical Framework

Numbers of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* are available on the *Newspapers.com* archive[1]. Data were sorted both by time period – from 1780 to 1800 – and by keywords. In particular, I searched for the following descriptors for Native Americans: *Indians, savages* and *natives* and analysed their occurrences in context. The results obtained featured 900 occurrences of *Indian(s)* both as noun and as pre-

[1] <https://www.newspapers.com/> (02/2024).

modifying adjective (especially in the cluster: *Indian corn* 105, *Indian tribes* 38, *Indian War* 28, *Indian nations* 17), 20 occurrences of *savages* and only 3 instances of *natives* mostly in the cluster *Indian natives*. Naming policy is a powerful ideological tool which provides valuable information as to the ideology of the namer. In this regard, the quantitative distribution of the three descriptors reveals the correspondents' attempt to downplay the status of American Indians as natives of the country so as to deprive them of any right on the land. The predominant term is the oversimplified *Indians* which is strategically maintained throughout the centuries since Columbus's time in order to preserve and perpetuate his conceptualization of the natives, "los indios", as an indefinite Other mainly understood in terms of their ethnical difference from Europeans.

In order to carry out a qualitative analysis of how discriminatory practices are actualized in late eighteenth-century American news discourse, I shall focus on the use of referential and predicational strategies as outlined by Reisigl and Wodak (2001). Referential strategies indicate how one constructs and represents social actors, for example in-group and out-group. This can be done by using membership categorization devices, including reference by tropes, biological, naturalizing and depersonalizing metaphors and metonymies as well as by synecdoches. Predicational strategies, on the other hand, indicate what traits, qualities, characteristics and features are attributed to the social actors. With respect to this, special attention is given to adjectives both in predicative and attributive position, to process types to which social actors are typically associated, to comparison, similes and metaphors as well as to more or less implicit allusions and presuppositions/implications. The combination of reference and predication strategies – with their focus on prejudiced negative or seemingly positive traits – is at the very basis of the argumentation carried out in the press in favor or against the stigmatization of American Indians and sheds light on the discursive practices which prevailed in the construction of American nationalism. In the course of the analysis, I shall also consider the intensity or mitigation with which discriminating expressions are articulated in discourse. As Reisgl and Wodak claim both intensifying and mitigating strategies "play an important role in the discursive presentation inasmuch as they operate upon it by sharpening it or toning it down" (2001, 45).

3. Analysis of Letters from the *Pennsylvania Gazette*

The major script which emerges from a series of letters written by officers/inhabitants at the frontiers is that of the "hostile and troublesome Indian". The negative representation of the Other is enhanced by the ideological polarization between the cruel and barbarous generalized "Indians" and the peaceful and innocent "citizens" of the US, as we can see in the following examples:

(1) The Indians had been invading our frontiers and had killed many hundred innocent men, women and children… the meekness of Christianity will justify the government in taking effectual measures to prevent the murder of its peaceable citizens; and the arrangements to be made […] will be en-

> tirely adequate to the full conviction of the hostile Indians, that they have abundantly more to hope from the mercy than to expect from the weakness of the US. (*PG*, 11 January 1792)

(2) The Indians have been very troublesome this spring and of late have invaded the country of Jefferson and almost every day committing depredations there. Our spirited generous hearted friend, Colonel William Christian and Captain Keller have already fallen a sacrifice to their barbarity. (*PG*, 31 May 1786)

North American Indians are pervasively encoded as do-er of negatively connoted processes of aggression and barbarous violence whose reiteration is expressed through perfect and progressive verb forms ("had been invading", "had killed", "have invaded", "committing") and through time adverbs ("of late", "almost every day"). While Indigenous Americans are represented as responsible for continuous criminal acts of invasion, murder and depredations, Americans are encoded as done-to, i.e. as innocent victims of inhumane and unmotivated hostility. In example (1) the reference to "innocent men, women and children" exploits the family metaphor in order to exacerbate the barbarity of the Indian deeds over the sacredness of the Christian home. The mentioning of the high number of victims – many hundred – also has a strong persuasive potential. By eliciting feelings of resentment for the amount of abuses suffered by their fellow countrymen at the frontiers, the correspondent intends to spread a sense of national emergency and ultimately gather consensus over the American military response to the attacks of the enemies.

While intensifying strategies are used to represent the actions and behaviour of the "Indians", mitigation is strategically applied to encode the actions of the American Government. In example (1) the euphemistic expression "taking effectual measures to prevent the murder" downplays the negative associations of the American offensive by transforming it into a legitimate and necessary act of defence for preservation of the Americans' life and property. A similar sense of national solidarity against the Other is elicited in example (2) through the possessive determiner "our" referred to a valuable and generous member of the American army who had fallen victim of the "barbarity of the Indians". The noun pertaining to the area of primitivization is functional in the construction of the generalized "Indians" as uncivilized Other with no legal right of occupancy. Intensification in negative other-presentation also characterises example (3) below:

(3) Sir, the Savages are daily committing new marks of cruelties on the inhabitants of the State (shocking to humanity); the other day they tortured a prisoner as long as they could contrive to give pain to human nature, and then left the unfortunate victim with a stake drove through the bowels. (*PG*, 12 December 1787)

In his letter to the General, the officer refers to American Indians as "savages" and constructs the entire narrative around the opposition between hu-

man nature/humanity (attributed to the Americans) and savagery (attributed to the "Indians"). Savagery is manifested in the cruel practice of torture applied by the "Indians" to the "inhabitants of the State", i.e. Americans who are fully entitled to own and live in the space they occupy. The American Indian's prisoner, encoded as "unfortunate victim", is visually represented in the moment of death by torture ("with a stake drove through the bowels"). The gory details are meant to instill a mixture of horror and hatred toward the cruel practices of de-humanized, "primitive Indians".

Another common script exploited by war supporters is that of the "unreliable Indian" who disobeys the terms of the treaties with the American government. In the attempt to prove that war and suppression were the only definitive response to the American Indian aggression, correspondents from the west opt for the use of de-humanizing descriptors ("bears" and "wolfs") and negatively connoted predicates ("treachery", "perfidy", "falsehood") in order to prove the treachery and savagery have always been distinctive features of the "Indian race":

(4) Extract of a Letter from a gentleman in the Western Country […]. The history of all the Indian wars […] are seen as Indian treachery, perfidy and falsehood; fear alone can refrain their conduct or reduce them to reason. Why then should Congress raise their hopes on the success of treaties from which nothing permanent can be expected? Who ever thought of trusting bears and wolfs one yard before the length of their chain? (*PG*, 11 January 1786)

The combination of de-humanizing framework and treachery trope is also found in the next letter from a gentleman in Kentucky:

(5) The general government by this time, I should think, might be convinced of the folly and absurdity of Indian treaties. They only serve to tie up our hands, whilst our enemies, under pretence of not being able to restrain a few lawless and vagrant tribes, are allowed to let loose upon us all the horrors of the most savage, cruel war that ever was submitted to by any people on earth, who had courage and ability to defend themselves. (*PG*, 28 July 1790)

While Americans are framed as honest citizens who are respectful of the terms of the treaty, Native Americans are cast in the paradigm of the "untrustworthy savage" who pretends and dissimulates to carry out their warlike plans.

Another discourse strategy exploited to justify practices of exclusion and extermination is that of representing American Indians as "allies of the British". In this way internal and external enemies of the nation merge into one single hostile force which has to be defeated once and for all in order to guarantee the preservation of America. The equation between "Indians" and British was meant to persuade the nation at large of the necessity to stop negotiations and join a national war against the enemy at the frontiers. The correspondents enhance the validity of their claims about a British-Indian conspiracy through intensifying expressions such as "perfectly convinced", "of course", "certainly" and the use of the modal "must":

(6) I am perfectly convinced that the Indians are supported by the British in the war against us, indeed Captain Powell [of the British army] told me that all the intentions of the Indians were known to them and that the Indians were their allies and of course they must support them. (*PG*, 15 August 1792)

(7) Whether the British government has an eye on the territory ceded I shall not say […] but certainly it has an eye to the Indian trade and on this account supports the savages […] It is not a war, therefore, with Indians merely; it is a war with the British king, under cover. (*PG*, 8 February 1792)

Although the script of the "hostile and treacherous Indian" is pervasive in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, it is not the only one to be voiced. Some counter-discourses emerge in relation to the debate over the American Indian wars which reveal a more critical insight into the relationship between Indigenous Americans and Americans and at times a more compassionate attitude towards a "vanishing race" (Sayre 2017, 276). The correspondents articulate their counter-discourse by encoding Native Americans, not only as "Indians", but also through the origonym "natives" which implies some kind of acknowledgement of their right to occupancy as first inhabitants. This also presupposes a partial confutation of the trope of the "primitive Indian" who has no more rights to the land than animals do (ivi). Even so, the more tolerant attitude of the correspondent does not ultimately dent the view of the moral and cultural superiority of the Euro-Americans over Native Americans who remain outside the blessing of Western civilization:

(8) Do these natives possess a territory that we have an indubitable right to claim? […] It is prudent to set a tribe of warring Indians in motion, merely to obtain their lands which must at present be a disadvantage to us to settle and cultivate? It is said that the Indians have destroyed many families at our frontiers but are we sure that our settlers have not provoked the Indians to commit depredations? (*PG*, 11 January 1792)

(9) Have the Indians then no other right to the soil than the Buffalo who has run over it? Where did Mr B. learn the doctrine that a right to the soil is acquired by agricultural occupancy? The Indians are denominated "beasts of prey" and we are encouraged to penetrate the forests where they haunt and extirpate their race. Good God, is this our temper towards the unfortunate people? Sentiments like these have in former times rendered man a savage to man. (*PG*, 8 February 1792)

(10) As we are more powerful and more enlightened than they are, there is responsibility of national character that we should treat them with kindness and even liberality […] our modes of population have been more destructive to the Indian Natives than the conduct of the Conquerors in Mexico and Peru. The evidence of this is the utter extirpation of nearly all of the Indians in most populous parts of the Nation. (*PG*, 7 January 1795)

4. Conclusion

Letters printed in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* from 1780 to 1800 contribute to the construction of American nationalism through discourse practices of exclusion which are traceable in the framing of Native Americans as hostile and treacherous Other. Nomination and predication strategies are used to exacerbate people's perception of American Indians as a persistent threat to the expansion of the American nation and to the spreading of its cultural values and beliefs. Intensification is common in letters written by people from Western countries where the categories of primitivisation ("savages") and de-humanization ("beasts", "wolfs") are prioritized. In order to boost the perception of the conflict and gather more consensus over drastic military actions, Native Americans are also portrayed as allies of the British and as such all the more dangerous for the growth of the nation. The newspaper, however, also gives voice to more moderate positions which acknowledge the status of Native Americans as first inhabitants ("natives") and as human beings, although "unfortunate" since unacquainted with progress and civilization ("unfortunate people"). It is precisely this emphasis on their uncivilized condition which ultimately characterises all discourses about Native Americans (Coward 1999). From this perspective, even the compassionate attitude emerging from some of the correspondents' remarks about a "vanishing race" is not immune from the assumption of the cultural and moral superiority of white Euro-Americans and from the acknowledgement of their legitimate exclusion of the American Indians from the nation-formation.

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