

Introduction

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Taking inspiration from the 150th anniversary of President Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and the 50th anniversary of the March on Washington, the 22nd International Biennial Conference of Italy's American Studies Association was held in Trieste on September 19-21, 2013. The city's strong ties with the United States—dating back to 1797, when a United States Consulate was first established there, and culminating in the 1947-54 period when Trieste, as a “free territory,” was partly under American administration—made it a fitting location for this event. So also did Trieste's rich and complicated history of national, cultural, ethnic, and religious diversity, still perceptible today in its demographic makeup, architecture, and lifestyle.

Entitled *Discourses of Emancipation and the Boundaries of Freedom*, the conference witnessed a very large international participation, incontrovertible evidence that its general topic and the historic landmarks to which it paid tribute resonated strongly with scholars of widely differing backgrounds. Over the course of three days, plenary and panel speakers discussed issues of personal and national liberty, of social, political, and religious expression, and exchanged views about the ongoing battle to end discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Retracing the United States' past, confronting its present, and pondering on its future, the lectures and papers presented in Trieste provided a wide array of disciplinary approaches, from such fields as literature,

history, linguistics, cultural studies, gender studies, performance studies, political science, law, and psychology.

Revised and grouped in sections on the basis of thematic affinity, the essays collected in this volume constitute a representative selection of the many different points of view and methodologies which informed the stimulating debate about the significance of emancipation and freedom in Trieste two years ago. They explore the connection between physicality and the quest for freedom; the defense of identity in the face of racial or ethnic discrimination; the legacy of failed attempts to achieve freedom and justice; the great tradition and current prominence of nature-related writing as an instrument of interpretation of the American experience; the problematic aspects of American freedom as an exportable ideology; the ways in which emancipation and freedom figure in popular culture; the many different facets and meanings of collective emancipation, personal emancipation, and empowerment.

The use of different scholarly approaches to analyze key categories in United States history and literature in this volume may be considered as an example of *intersectionality*. Coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, the term *intersectionality* originally described a form of analysis that took into account both race and gender. It was subsequently adopted by several humanities scholars to define works in which issues of race, class, gender, nationality, and age intersect and clarify one another (Winker and Degele).

In recent years the concept of *intersectionality* has been discussed and contested because, according to some scholars, its emphasis on certain specific social categories disregarded the question of “Whether *all* identities are intersectional or whether only multiply marginalized subjects have an intersectional identity” (Nash 9). Some scholars have therefore re-defined *intersectionality*, interpreting it as a concept that by reconfiguring domination/subordination dynamics, is capable of generating new forms of empowerment (Cho, Crenshaw, and McCall).

As demonstrated, more or less explicitly, by many of the essays collected in this volume, the concept of *intersectionality* may help us develop a more sophisticated approach to such binary oppositions as emancipation and oppression, agency and subjugation, empowerment and victimization. In particular, it provides us with a fresh perspective on freedom: no longer a fixed or immutable concept but rather a subject of persistent conflict in American history. As Eric Foner has convincingly argued:

If the meaning of freedom has been a battleground throughout our history, so too has been the definition of those entitled to enjoy its blessings . . . Efforts to delimit freedom along one or another axis of social existence have been a persistent feature of our history. More to the point, perhaps, freedom has often been defined by its limits. The master’s freedom rested on the reality of slavery, the vaunted autonomy of men on the subordinate position of women. By the same token, it has been through battles at the boundaries of freedom—the efforts of racial minorities, women, workers, and other groups to secure freedom as they understood it—that the definition of free-

dom has been both deepened and transformed and the concept extended to realms for which it was not originally intended . . . Today, the idea of freedom remains as central as ever to American culture and politics—and as contested. One thing seems certain. The story of American freedom is forever unfinished. Debates over its meaning will undoubtedly continue, and new definitions will emerge to meet the exigencies of the twenty-first-century world, a globalized era in which conversations about freedom and its meaning are likely to involve all mankind.

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