

# H-Net Reviews

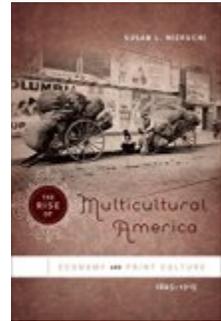
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan L. Mizruchi. *The Rise of Multicultural America: Economy and Print Culture, 1865-1915*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008. 355 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3250-9; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5912-4.

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## In Search of Multicultural America in the Gilded Age

This volume of literary history is a reworking and condensation of a 2005 contribution by Susan L. Mizruchi to the *Cambridge History of American Literature*. [1] Discussions of the works of many authors have been reduced or removed, and some new elements have been added. The *Cambridge* version was undocumented, while the present volume includes forty-one pages of notes. The earlier version of the work is acknowledged on the copyright page.

In her literary history, Mizruchi takes the reader on a comprehensive journey through many of the major prose writings of the Gilded Age, and through some lesser-known works as well. She includes not only fiction but also memoirs, social scientists' works on race relations, and anthropologists' discussions of Native American life and culture. The "print culture" envisioned in the title encompasses also advertising and photography. She does not venture into any foreign-language materials emanating from ethnic groups, even though these are important cultural products of the multicultural society that she wishes to study. Mizruchi's various literary explorations are gathered together into chapters under such topics as race, Native American life, cosmopolitanism, advertising, labor, corporate America, and utopian writings.

Within each chapter, Mizruchi proceeds in a systematic way, author by author, giving us a biographical sketch, a list of the major works, and a more particular analysis of some. Thus, for example, Stephen Crane's *The*

*Red Badge of Courage*, the 1890 novel of the Civil War, is analyzed in various ways; then, at the end of the discussion, in an attempt to introduce something relating to multiculturalism, Mizruchi recounts the one portrayal of a black person in the book—a stereotypical description of a black teamster dancing on a cracker box. In doing so, Mizruchi remarks that the black character is introduced "for the sake of establishing his insignificance" (p. 19).

The usual expected range of authors of the period are given thorough attention: Mark Twain, William Dean Howells, Jack London, Frank Norris, Henry James, Willa Cather, and Helen Hunt Jackson, to name a few. Mizruchi's interpretations and analyses are often stimulating and provocative. At times, however, she attempts cultural interpretations that challenge credulity. For example, at the end of her chapter on race, she introduces two illustrations. One is from an advertisement for a camera in a 1900 magazine, showing a black man standing in front of a tree; the other is a 1901 photograph of a black man lynched from a tree. "The ad," says Mizruchi, "captures the attention of consumers by building subliminally on one of the most vivid and gruesome associations they could have had of black men near trees" (p. 74). An elaborate discussion of black and white contrasts in the photographs borders on the fantastic.

In another analysis of advertising, Mizruchi notes that the serialized version of Jack London's *The Call of the Wild* concludes on the back page of the *Saturday Evening*

*Post* of July 18, 1903. That page also has a clutter of small ads for parrots, water pistols, electric fans, water coolers, and writing paper, among other things. This validates her argument that literature is being transformed by entrepreneurial capitalism. "The literary text can be seen as vitalized by this sea of advertising" (p. 140).

As a general review of the American literature of the period, Mizruchi's book may be useful to many. But there are limits to the book's value as a window into the developing multicultural society of America. Mizruchi seems to see the multicultural society as one primarily formed by increasing divisions on the basis of race, ethnicity, and class, to name the most evident. The boundaries between the segmented cultural elements appear as relatively impermeable and difficult to cross. In the case of race, of course, this is largely true; this era was, after all, the time of the most virulent racism in American history, when segregation was violently imposed on emancipated blacks and when Indians were pressured to remain within their reservations. At the same time, the country saw its most extreme anti-Semitism, and nativism was revived against the hordes of the "new" immigration of Italians, Poles, and others now arriving.

But what is flawed in this view is the conception of "culture" itself as a static entity within which adherents guard the boundaries and constantly defend their values and customs. Cultures should rather be recognized as constantly changing entities, subject to the changing conditions of their adherents across time and place. Ethnic cultures brought from Europe or Asia soon diverge from the cultures left behind, in part from multifarious interactions with the other cultures around them. Further, individuals may partake of various cultures at one time, based on race, ethnicity, occupation, class, religion, or geography, to name some possibilities. Multiculturalism thus needs to be seen as a process, one involving overlapping, changing, and readapting cultures.

In ranging through the more elite literature of the Gilded Age, we are more likely to see writers who relate to the dominant culture and express fear and foreboding toward the masses from other cultures now increasingly inhabiting the city. Mizruchi departs from this view in some instances, most notably in her discussion of Abraham Cahan, much of whose work as a Jewish journalist was devoted to helping his readers adjust to the new multicultural society.

Other authors have seen multiculturalism as involving more than conflict, and have concentrated on the more integrative aspects of the multicultural society, es-

pecially by looking through the lens of popular culture as it became increasingly urban. In a perceptive book in 1980, *City People*, Gunther Barth described the rise of a new urban culture, which pulled minority elements out of their narrower environments into a commonly held culture, without necessarily completely abandoning their ethnicity. Barth acknowledged the fluid and overlapping nature of cultures: "From the chaos [of urban life] emerged the experience of living with the various elements of a new, diverse, culture. This awareness of others produced an urban identity that stamped members of heterogeneous groups generally as city people.... Slowly, something like a common frame of mind emerged out of the actions of thousands of people." [2] Barth's explorations concentrated on certain urban institutions that particularly served the purpose of integrating diverse cultures: the baseball park, the department store, the vaudeville house, the public park, and the mass media (which could spread the urban culture into smaller towns and cities). In each of these, people of many cultural backgrounds could come together to share a new urban culture.

Other scholars have pointed out the role of popular culture in bringing about these cultural changes. In *Translating America: An Immigrant Press Visualizes American Popular Culture, 1895-1918* (2004), Peter Conolly-Smith traced the erosion of a particular ethnic culture, that of German Americans, as they gradually abandoned the many German *vereine* (associations) for the attractions of the stage, film, and mass media press. The German-language press that once trumpeted the superiority of German culture began to cover instead the popular American culture to which their readers became attracted. This slow process of deserting an ethnic culture for a more general American culture was apparent long before the violent attacks on German American life during the First World War. [3]

Much of Mizruchi's discussion depends on the views of writers who were outsiders and had little understanding of what was going on in multicultural America. Probing into the complexities of cultural change and adaptation within cultural groups holds more promise of developing a deeper understanding.

#### Notes

[1]. Susan L. Mizruchi, "Becoming Multicultural: Culture, Economy, and the Novel, 1860-1920," in *Cambridge History of American Literature*, vol. 3, *Prose Writing, 1860-1920*, ed. Sacvan Bercovitch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 413-740.

[2]. Gunther Barth, *City People: The Rise of Modern City Culture in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 23.

[3]. Other works describing this slow erosion of German ethnicity in favor of American popular culture in-

clude Russell A. Kazal, *Becoming Old Stock: The Paradox of German-American Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), focusing on Philadelphia; and Gerhard Wiesinger, *Die deutsche Einwandererkolonie von Holyoke, Massachusetts, 1865-1920* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 1994), focusing on Holyoke.

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