

by analogy of the biblical story of Joseph and his coat of many colors to analyze America's multicultural past.

Most readers are likely to assess the merits and shortcomings of this book in terms of the content of Eoyang's ideas. This is fine, but it does miss an important point. In presenting his work, the author is following a strategy familiar to traditional Chinese scholars of trying out ideas in hopes of eliciting thoughtful responses, whether confirmatory or in disagreement. He is not stating nicely prepackaged thoughts for passive consumption but rather trying to actively engage the reader. Eoyang's writing succeeds in doing this, in part because it is dynamic, varied, and, to borrow his words from another context, "it has the feel of good conversation." His writing also succeeds because it poses tough questions and comes across as honest, straightforward, and not doctrinaire.

Eoyang's strategy is not without a downside. Many of his ideas are implicitly related, but they are not presented as a coherent body. In addition, his strategy certainly increases the chances that even sympathetic readers will disagree with some ideas and that they will find parts of the book more meaningful than others.

Eoyang's basic writing strategy is related to a perspective that underlies many of his ideas. This perspective is the need to reexamine things from more than one point of view and to understand the benefits of such a process. It is an often-touted but deceptively difficult and easily-ignored perspective that has particular relevance for the American ethnic experience.

Russell Endo
University of Colorado

Fred L. Gardaphe. *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative.* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1996). 241 pp., \$16.95 paper.

This indispensable interpretation of Italian American narrative literature can fruitfully be used in many ethnic and cultural programs. It is a study distinguished by familiarity with vernacular Italian American culture, as well as consciousness of the losses as well as gains in education in the dominant WASP culture. Trying to reconcile the difference between what Antonio Gramsci called the organic intellectual and the assimilated intellectual, Gardaphe has adopted "a culture-specific criticism that is sensitive to both Italian and American cultures."

The author "grew up in a little Italy in which not even the contagiously sick were left alone. . . . The only books that entered my home were those we smuggled in from public institutions." Nevertheless he became a book reader. At the end of a college and graduate school

education limited to “American” writers, Gardaphe wrote a doctoral dissertation proving there was an Italian American literature beyond mafia stories. In this book that evolved from the dissertation, his aim is to lessen the ignorance of those his grandfather called “merdicans,” as well to lessen the ignorance “of those the merdicans used to call guineas and wops.”

Following Vico, Gardaphe’s premise is that Anglo-American literature has reached its “period of decadence,” whose “exhaustion” needs the vitality of literature of ethnic outsiders. He tracks the stages of the three generations that it has taken for Italian/American literature to become wine: the early mythic mode wherein immigrants idealized figures usually grandparents; rebellion against both Italian and American cultures that produced a “hybrid Italian American culture;” assimilation and its discontents marked by the recovery “or reinvention” of ethnicity; and contemporary “breaking and entering the canon.” He notes the collision between the oral traditions of peasants who arrived in the United States and the WASP culture’s hegemonic uses of literacy, the chasm between the two cultures felt by first immigrants (“in Italy there used to be more miracles”), and the postmodern strategies of Italian/American authors who use WASP protagonists to convey Italian values, a strategy Gardaphe brilliantly recognizes as the strategy of our peasant forebears for millennia, “creating a masquerade” so that *Italianita* can enter the mainstream without detection.

In the epilogue, Gardaphe considers emerging writers, often women, whose literature marks a break from preceding Italian/American writers. Formed by passionate first-hand encounter with Italy, as well as breadth of knowledge, this may be the *Italianita* that can ground rootless fourth and fifth generation Italian/Americans, as well as offer the possibility of transformation of American culture. Newer writers have a knowledge of prehistory and world history that makes them aware that their Italian/American experience is but the ragged end of an ancient Italian tapestry whose major strands are prehistoric migrations from Africa, neolithic migrations from west Asia, and migrations from and to that region of the Asian peninsula latterly called Europe. Migrations of Italian/Americans to the United States at the end of the 19th century occurred just at the point when the dominant WASP culture was fencing boundaries of white WASP hegemony presenting a dilemma for Italian/Americans: upward assimilation to white WASP culture or identification with other “peoples of color” and resistance.

Perhaps the gift of newer Italian/American writers to a multicultural America will be the *Italianita* of peasants, and others, whose values are *justice, equality, and transformation*. Transformation may have to await everyone’s realization that we are all peoples of colors ultimately of Africa, that African migrations to all continents after 50,000 B.C.E. left everyone on earth with these values, an inheritance con-

veyed in the oral tradition as well as our genes--what Antonio Gramsci called the *buon senso* of all peoples.

Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum
Berkeley, California

Herman Gray. *Watching Race: Television and the Struggle for "Blackness."* (University of Minnesota Press, 1995). 224 pp., \$34.95.

Professor Herman Gray offers a fascinating, highly analytical, and well-researched account of race (and gender) mirrored in the prism of televised images. Focusing mostly on the decade of the 1980s, in an almost razzle-dazzle and didactic fashion he explores the deep sociological and political manifestations of televised racial imagery and its effects on the well-being of American society.

Gray's book is a "televisual" combination of Toni Morrison's discourse on race imagery in *Playing in the Dark* (Harvard, 1992) and Cornel West's socio-political treatise in *Race Matters* (Vintage, 1994). His 10 chapters don't always seamlessly flow, as if initially written for different audiences, but each is bridged with an overall rationale brilliantly stated in the Introduction. Framed "largely within the time-span that begins with the election of Ronald Reagan as President (1980) and ending with the airing of the last episode of *The Cosby Show*, which took place during the Los Angeles riots on April 30, 1992," the author interprets the televised images of race in the aftermath of the Civil Rights Movement, which led up to the Republican backlash against The Great Society.

Watching Race thankfully includes gay/lesbian concerns. But this needed perspective in ethnic studies falls glaringly short in Chapter 8 regarding *A Different World*, the author's favorite TV show (along with *Frank's Place* and *Roc*, with *In Living Color* his least favorite.) For all its so-called "imaginatively use(d) (of) the dominant conventions of the genre to saturate its televisual world with blackness . . ." (p103), Gray fails to point out how *A Different World* overlooked opportunities to address black gay/lesbian issues. Perhaps understandable from the show's creators' viewpoint given the recent demise of *Ellen*, still, Gray's critical analysis is glaringly omitted. So were controversies about black student-athletes vis-a-vis the athletic enterprise, which sociologist Harry Edwards has long made a national issue. Gray does address black athlete recruitment in *Frank's Place*, and black homosexuality in *Roc* and *In Living Color*, but won't the milieu of the Historically Black Colleges make inter-