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Ghettoliterature

The literatures of ethnic, oppressed, and marginal groups have a special place in the American national canon and consciousness. On the most abstract level they repeat the struggle of self-authentication which characterized the emergence of an American literature; they are telescoped instances, within their historic or ethnic slots, of the American literary odyssey. It stands to reason that the ethnic variant of that struggle found no place in the national canon or consciousness while the American literary self-image was still in the making and while 'Americanization' was still a decent word. Since 1945, first gently, then mightily after Vietnam, the once invisible literary ghettos have come into full view. "Zion" and "Soul" have become "Mainstreet", and WASPs were, until the recent election, in decline.

The emergence of ghettoliteratures is mirrored in the expanding semantics of the term. Ghetto referred initially to the Jewish section of cities, then to urban settlements of all ethnic groups. Some of these turned into social traps, which added negative political weight to the term. But recently, the ghetto was rediscovered as an alternative 'culture of poverty', a folk reservation in a brave, new, alienated world.

Ghettoliterature refers to an equally wide body of writing (including the oral traditions) of groups which have come *out* of the ghetto. Writers whose ethnic identity lay low behind radical or political shields in the thirties are today being rediscovered as 'ethnics'. From shame and oppression to pride and celebration, the story of ethnic writing runs.

The new literary ethnicity marks the decline of the ideology of 'Americanization' and ironically, proves the long-range success, not of the social, but of the cultural melting pot. For a full-blown ethnic literature and its market are possible only after the basic survival of the groups in question through several generations and their emergence into literacy were assured. Concurrently, ethnic assertion becomes possible when America is no longer as "American" as it used to be: in proportion as ethnic groups have become 'Americanized', America has become 'ethnicized'. Though it is still a powerful class marker, ethnicity is now a class weapon instead of a stigma. The recent vogue of ethnicity is an indication of the partial success of these groups in redefining the national self-image. Ethnicity herself has in the process become as American as apple pie, of which all groups, even the most deracinated, now want a slice.

The three articles which follow in abbreviated form are part of a book (due to appear in 1982)¹ which grew out of a cooperative interest in these processes. It covers ghettoliterature in its largest possible sense: literature about ghettos, for ghettos, and, lately, out of the ghetto experience. The first article focuses on literature written about ghettos from an outside point of view: the descent into the abyss, the discovery of the underground, the titillation of crime and sexuality, and the appeal of the folk – in short, the literary history of the bourgeoisie going slumming. The second charts the emergence of Jewish-American literary activity against the odds of such romantic interest in 'how the other half lives' and against the conflicts of cultural, social, and aesthetic loyalty. The third presents the rediscovered novel of a third-generation Slovak writer, himself fully assimilated, who describes the dialectic between American work experience and ethnic culture in the growth over three generations of a hyphenate American consciousness. The book will also include articles on Blacks, Puerto Ricans, Chinese, Chicanos, and Poles.

¹ Berndt Ostendorf, Hrsg., *Ghettoliteratur: Zur Literatur ethnischer, unterdrückter und marginaler Gruppen in den USA* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).