

**Werner Sollors. *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) 294 pp., \$24.95.**

Sollors writes a provocative assessment of ethnic literature within American culture. He substantiates the premise that ethnic literature is American literature and is historically and ideologically grounded in the established American immigrant pattern. Sollors develops a theoretical base for understanding immigrant/ethnic literature from its Puritan beginnings to the multiethnic reflection of American contemporary society. Rather than being outside the American tradition, immigrant writings are "not only expressions of mediation between cultures but also [act] as handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness." He says that immigrant writers express their dualistic role as inheriting characteristics from their ancestors (descent) and adopting cultural characteristics of the new world (consent). His examination of American literary tradition reveals how American and ethnic literature embody a common consent/descent based heritage through what Sollors explains as typologies, the use of Christic symbols to explain anticipation and fulfillment and ethnogenesis, new creations developed out of collective and individual effort.

In this manner, Sollors critiques second generation ethnic literary texts. He views consent and descent as a cyclical but potentially creative process when authors not only mediate between their ethnic heritage and Americanization, but move beyond consent/descent constraints. The Pilgrim and American Indian motifs are analyzed historically establishing the American Christic context, while Jewish and black authors focus on the personal ethnic dilemma, i.e., being caught between traditional culture and their new found American identity. The personal and psychic pull between tradition and identity, consent and descent, while oppositional choices are used to transcend the barriers of ethnicity into an American wholeness and unity.

Gertrude Stein, for example, in *The Making of Americans: The Hersland Family* effectively breaks the consent/descent cycle by not only mediating her text but structurally inverting her text through language and form to become a creative force moving beyond ethnicity. Rather than being situated as "the divided self," Sollors illustrates the creative transformation of American literature which views descent and consent as a syncretic process and through which mediation becomes invisible. Neither history nor culture are static processes. Consequently, ethnic literature reflects not only mediation through language but ethnicity as well and becomes an integral aspect of American culture. Similarly consent and descent are ongoing processes in American literature which defy generational and static time.

Sollors, not being confined to historical, linear, thought (generational) or descriptive analysis (Americanization, consent), is attempting a

universal approach in his analysis of American/ethnic literature which seeks to dispel the “myth of ethnicity” or inherent difference to American ideology and culture due to descent and tradition. Nevertheless, his broadly based analysis functions to erode ethnic diversity and tends to flatten historical experiences.

In this neo-conservative political climate, where social economists like Charles Murray and Nathan Glazer seek to dispel group dynamics in favor of individual merit, such a universal literary approach tends to coincide with an historical ideological base congruent with the immigrant analogy and assimilationist model. In broad generalized terms, the black, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Native American, and Chicano, are seen as individuals with similar immigrant experiences, similar patterns of consent and descent, and similar immigrant histories within the broader American context. The danger in this approach becomes evident when third world cultures are likened to white ethnic immigrant experiences to the extent that culture and history are devoid of meaning. America has treated its colored ethnic peoples differently from its white ethnics. Such differences are erased when their literature is blended together without thought to cultural, historical, and gender differences. It would be difficult to assess, for example, the issues of race, class, and gender in Toni Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* using Sollors’ typologies and consent/descent base analysis without understanding black culture and Afroamerican history.

The diverse histories experienced by people of color and their literary writings is glossed over, and although consent/descent is an important and useful concept as a tool to analyze second generation ethnic literature, other means must be applied. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and John D. Houston’s *Farewell to Manzanar* for example, is illustrative of a woman caught in the consent/descent dilemma, yet one must address the historical circumstances, American racism, and the psychological impact unjust incarceration had upon Jeanne’s young life.

The intersection of race, class, and gender issues is an imperative focus for any credible analysis of people of color and their literature. Sex/gender issues are wholly missing in Sollors’ analysis which is devoid of colored ethnic women’s voices and where women are stereotyped and mediated by a male vision. Let us not move too quickly beyond ethnicity until we have had time to adequately address race, class, and gender for colored ethnic peoples whose histories are still being recovered.

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