

ON RETHINKING 1968 NOW: MOVEMENTS, PRACTICES, FORMS

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At the Washington, D.C. History Conference at the University of the District of Columbia, held in November 2019, the sports writer Bijan Bayne presented a paper entitled “1969-2019: 50th Anniversary of the Year D.C. Became the Sports Capital of the World.” During the ensuing Q&A session, an interesting contrast emerged from the audience. On one side of the room, a seventy-something long-haired white man, coming from one of the fanciest neighborhoods of the city, told the speaker: “Thank you for reminding me of all these sports events. I’ve been remembering only the tear gases and anti-war protests of that year.” He was “one of those activists,” he said. On the other side of the conference room, a slightly younger African-American man suddenly asked to speak. “I would like to reply,” he stated fiercely. “I do have different memories of 1969. In fact, the only thing I do remember is my mother and my father going to one of the games mentioned.” The assertiveness of the second man, a historian himself, made one of the authors of this introduction jump out of her seat. His intervention sounded like a sort of position statement, claiming the collective memory of more than half of the city population: the black one. Indeed, the peace movement against the war in Vietnam rallying in Washington, D.C. in 1969 was mainly a “white affair,” both at the first Moratorium parade on October 15 and at the one organized by the New Mobe on November 15 (Hall 2005). Fifty years later, a quick look at the speakers and the attendants gathered at the “Waging Peace in Vietnam” symposium—organized at George Washington University by the Vietnam Peace Commemoration Committee for the 50th anniversary of 1969 protests—easily confirms this.

Let us conclude this brief tale with a final comment on the speaker’s presentation. Bayne stressed the relevance of the baseball, basketball and football games taking place in 1969 in Washington, D.C. and celebrated at national level because they helped move the attention of the media away from the aftermath of the massive riots of the year before. The games cast a refreshing light on the city at the national level, and this was not of minor importance for the politics of Washington, D.C. at the time. Indeed, the local perception and the national one have often been conflictual in forging the identity of the city. Exemplary in this sense is the fact that the speaker, an African American himself, did not mention at all the national resonance of the anti-Vietnam War protests of 1969.

Washington, D.C. has, of course, a unique history in the United States. However, this opening anecdote helps us to understand what “rethinking the sixties” could mean

nowadays, especially with regard to two fields of inquiry we believe are still particularly relevant for further research on that historical period: memory studies and local studies, which often are interconnected. As far as memory studies are concerned, historiography has already successfully dealt with the once prevailing memories of the former 1960s activists, putting their subjective points of view in dialogue with a broad range of sources and voices. A critical analysis of the mainstream media and institutional narratives has been acknowledged too (Bothmer 2010). Nevertheless, how did the traumatic events of the sixties affect the memories and the identities of the communities later developed around the places, the icons and the witnesses of that period's upheavals and fractures? Why does the individual and collective consciousness of the sixties still take on a politicized valence, as our anecdote seems to tell us?

Historical analysis is not the only approach to answer these questions, obviously. The text analysis approach and the sociological approach—the latter coming from social-movement studies—offer effective tools to unlock such dynamics of groups, memories and identities. For this purpose, a local inquiry has a double value. First, it allows scholars to take advantage of the great number of valuable oral history projects carried out in the United States since the late 1970s.¹ Second, the local focus has some of the most effective leverage to get the contemporary public engaged in providing further grass-roots sources and current memories.

Finally, local history is useful to “rethink” the sixties not only because of this field’s methodological approach. A local perspective enhances two distinctive features of the “long 1960s” social movements in the United States: their geographical capillarity and their great diversity. Both factors gain further relevance within the American three-level institutional framework that was the context in which the social movements confronted established power. As Van Gosse wrote in his attempt to map out new directions to research The Movement, “First, we urgently need local studies, of city, town, state, and countryside” (2002, 295). Second, he states, “we should look closely at how the once-new radicalism inflected and influenced institutions, communities, and constituencies” (ibid.). “Case studies,” he remarks, “constitute an endless process for historians—every community or locality, rendered historically, can be compared against other communities” (ibid.). After almost two decades and, by now, a well-established global turn in the study of U.S. history and culture, Van Gosse’s insight is still relevant within an innovative and multidisciplinary pattern of studies.

It is in this spirit that this special issue aims to reflect on the significance of 1968 and the Global Sixties. In 2018 and 2019, many international scientific journals have dealt with

¹ See, for instance, “Contemporary History Project (The New Left in Ann Arbor, Mich.), Transcripts of Oral Interviews: 1978-1979,” Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan; “Interviews and speeches, 1963-1987,” Joseph A. Sinsheimer Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University; “Civil Rights History Project collection (AFC 2010/039),” American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.

the legacy of such transformative years through critical accounts and forums.² Our contribution to the debate, in line with the journal's aims of reshuffling "oxidized practices and arbitrary academic hierarchies" (Morello 2018, 7), goes together with the awareness of being part of a "third generation" of scholars approaching the Sixties and its heritage's multiple meanings in history, literature, and studies of cultural and social movements. But this special issue of *JAm It!* is also the result of putting into practice the famous second-wave-feminism slogan "the personal is political." Indeed, our collaboration as editors fostered a fruitful interdisciplinary dialogue between two different but connected approaches to American Studies, one of us being a historian and the other one being a literary scholar. Moreover, this special issue is the product of a wider network of early-career scholars working in the field of American Studies that allowed the two of us to meet (back in 2016), to organize a conference at the Centro Studi Americani in Rome on September 28th, 2018, and to extend this model of networking further.

The 1st AISNA Graduates conference, "Rethinking 1968 and the Global Sixties," has been a foundational moment for the young scholars of the Italian Association of American Studies and for the association as a whole. We strengthened an existing network of early-career scholars currently engaged in the multifaceted kaleidoscope of topics, fields and diverse methodological approaches which stemmed from the Sixties and developed in a global perspective. For this special issue, we mapped out some of the research directions of these early-career scholars and put them in dialogue with more established researchers. This has been, and still is, an ongoing process, as our aim is to present some of the most compelling research areas to make "Rethinking 1968 and the Global Sixties" a living pattern.

The essays contained in this issue not only reflect on the meaning of the Sixties now, they also echo some of the ideas that those changing times helped disseminate around the world. This is evident from the plurality of voices—from different geographical locations and various academic backgrounds—that are here able to create a collectivity of knowledge. Peer-to-peer education and critiques of hierarchical knowledge were the protest-based premises of the academic teach-ins and the alternative universities in the United States, *les autogestions* in France or the *controcorsi* in Italy, all expressions of the same brand-new belief in a collaborative culture that emerged during the long 1960s across the national borders.

To connect the origins of our scholarly practice with the subject of our study is not only a way to keep on retracing an "embodiment" of knowledge. In fact, reflecting on the educational and communication theories and means of the 1960s social movements cast some new light on potential research directions. The network relationships established among the huge amount of diverse protesting groups inside the United States or among social movements and radicals at the transnational level are the ideal setting of inquiry for the data, text, or sentiment analysis applied to historical, literary and sociological studies.

² See, among others, *AHR* (2018); *The Sixties* (2018); Berk and Visser-Maessen (2019).

This is one of the ways the research on the Global Sixties could benefit from the burgeoning alliance between humanities and quantitative analysis, which originally comes from the social sciences' set of tools.

A further means to explore the world-wide network of 1960s social movements is borrowing the concept of “connectedness” from Global History and historical sociology. Connectedness refers to the history of mobility of people, goods, ideas, information, beliefs and practices in a borderless world (Belich et.al. 2016, 15). Historiography has already gone beyond the West or any other national originalism to tackle 1968 events: the paradigm of the Global Sixties has geographically reframed the long 1960s protests, recently retracing untold stories of youth rebellions in Asia and Africa (Jian et al. 2018). But what about the international connections and reciprocal inferences carried out by travelling activists, underground papers, and newsreels mailed overseas to share political experiences or even correspondence among the representatives of far hotspots of radicalism and subculture? After two decades of comparative accounts of different national experiences and a lively literature of self-centered memoirs or biographies of travelling activists, the actual political and cultural exchanges that occurred across the borders still deserve scholarly attention.³ For example, accounts of student-and-worker strikes in Italy were not rare in some American underground papers of the late 1960s.⁴ Around the same period, Italian students who happened to be in the United States during some campus occupations, translated, published, and disseminated in Italy some selected protest papers from American colleagues.⁵ Most likely those kinds of materials circulated widely. The rebellious claims went global, but the world was still divided by the Cold War and, conceptually, split in three worlds. What if these mutual translations, calques, loans of ideas and models of action gave birth to interpretations, cross-fertilizations, or misrepresentations able to survive in national politics and cultures throughout the following decades up to today?

Going back and forth from “the times they are a-changing” to our own present time as scholars is a substantial part of unraveling the work and reflections laying behind this special issue. Along this journey, Jeffrey C. Stewart offered us an inspiring motto when, in concluding his keynote speech at our conference, said: “Our knowledge affects others and other people’s knowledge affects us.” Stewart’s open editorial elaborates further on this, and highlights a continuity between the knowledge revolution of 1968 and the kind of disseminated knowledge that the internet allows for today. Knowledge, he remarks, is now “a dialogical formation, a system of exchange between people who are constantly updating

³ Exemplary in this sense is the research put forward by Martin Klimke. See Klimke and Scharloth (2008) and Klimke (2010).

⁴ Examples can be found in *Workers’ Power* 69, December 8, 1972; Andrea Savonuzzi, “Strike Wave in Italy,” in *I.S. - International Socialist* 14, December 1969, p.12; and in “Hour of The Wolf News,” in *Kaleidoscope* (Madison) 3, no. 15, June 1971, p. 7, all in *Culture di opposizione negli Stati Uniti. Periodici degli anni Sessanta e Settanta*. Fondazione Gian-giacomo Feltrinelli.

⁵ See Cavalli and Martinelli (1969).

knowledge by input from its consumers” (Stewart 2019, this issue). So, the concept of connectedness is reshuffled into the practices of our network of early-career scholars “operating out of a ’68 model” (ibid.) to keep the mobility between people, ideas, knowledge, and narratives alive.

This connectedness and inter-connectedness of scholars and scholarships confirms the idea that reflecting on the Sixties now does not come out of an anachronistic effort. Likewise, stretching or condensing the five decades behind us to keep up with contemporary issues does not mean dismissing an accurate historical awareness. Simon Hall’s invited contribution to this issue is exemplary in this sense. Hall’s essay provides an up-to-date review of the historiographical literature around 1968 by means of an original and sharp discourse, which stresses equally the legacy and the discontinuities of the late 1960s social movements in the United States. The subsequent historical reconstructions of the following decades are put against the various cultural turns in American Studies. Against the backdrop of some 1960s narratives, Hall critically analyzes the role of historians and their projections, without sparing himself. In fact, his provocative essay is an invitation to reflect on which historical categories still matter nowadays.

This reflection is especially relevant for teaching practices. Indeed, Hall’s final remark introduces in the issue a recurring debate on the teaching of a so magmatic and contentious subject such as the ‘long 1960s.’ We believe that approaching this task with an innovative approach could provide some timely tools to handle such demanding issue. Indeed, explaining the historical dynamics of that period in front of a young audience requires not only to find effective ways to manage a time that is still both fascinating and divisive, but also to attend to the frequent requests for comparison between then and today’s demands for social change. These requests are inherently rooted in the subject, as the Sixties impact on the social movements’ strategies and politics that followed (including the present ones) is well-acknowledged. Nevertheless, the teacher is asked to deal, in historical perspective, with a wide range of socio-political issues that are central for today’s students. That is, the students’ needs change according to the national or international politics they are necessarily confronted with and their specific social backgrounds. Regardless of the necessity of avoiding presentism, all of these variables strongly affect the pedagogy of student-centered teaching.

It is within this line of thought that Lorenzo Costaguta contributes to the issue by sharing a thorough reflection on his own personal experience on teaching the Sixties to today’s students. His essay, “Teaching the Sixties: Politics, Pedagogy and the Meaning of a Decade” offers a number of relevant teaching strategies. One of these is the use of a social-constructivist approach, so that the students’ “prior knowledge on the Sixties stop[s] being ‘a problem’ and [becomes] a resource” (Costaguta 2019, this issue). Another strategy concerns the syllabus design, which needs to meet the students’ expectations in an appealing way. Moreover, Costaguta’s essay comprises an analysis of the challenges that teaching one

(isolated) module on the history of the Sixties may pose. On the one hand, students might be lacking the necessary background to fully understand the political categories that activists used to refer to fifty years ago. On the other hand, it is crucial to include the most recent scholarship within a transnational approach. While offering some solutions, Costaguta eventually opens his reflection up to many further issues, calling for new, specific methodological teaching practices.

Moving away from pedagogical issues, the second part of the special issue aims at giving a sample of the variety of topics that characterize the current research of American Studies graduate students in Italy and abroad on the ‘long 1960s’ and its legacy. Stemming from a selection of the papers presented at the 1st AISNA Graduates Conference, the following contributions are exemplary of the idea of rethinking 1968 now. In “I Got the Cell Count Blues:” Danez Smith, HIV, and the Legacy of The Black Arts Movement,” Toni R. Juncosa establishes a connection between the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s and the 1970s and a contemporary poet, Danez Smith. Juncosa remarks that in *Don’t Call Us Dead* (2017), Smith continues the legacy of the BAM, renovating its attempts at raising awareness around structural violence against non-white US citizens. Juncosa argues that Smith’s poems, representing HIV/AIDS as a form of imprisonment, are in dialogue with the discrimination the artists working around the BAM were calling attention to. The essay contends that Smith’s collection aims at participating in the creation of a collective consciousness for people who are otherwise silenced in contemporary U.S. society, that is, it aims at re/gaining nationhood for queer, black and seropositive subjects.

Vincent Veerbeek’s “Writing 1968: A Native American Perspective on the Nineteen-sixties” underlines the role the standpoint of minority groups has in composing the mainstream public memory of a well-remembered decade as the Sixties. For this purpose, Veerbeek addresses the perspective of American Indians on the politics and culture of the 1960s through the words of essayist and leading American Indian voice Vine Deloria, Jr. This kind of analysis allows Veerbeek to reframe the decade’s main issues and events according to American Indians’ common beliefs and interests. Moreover, the focus on the Vietnam War and the African-American freedom struggles puts Deloria’s works in dialogue with other influential black voices of that time, stressing the relevance of first-hand accounts to rethink the Sixties’ public memory.

Rachele Colombo’s “‘The paranoia was fulfilled’—An Analysis of Joan Didion’s Essay ‘The White Album’” discusses the sixties through her analysis of Didion’s essay. Colombo focuses on Didion’s paranoia and the atmosphere in Los Angeles before and after the Manson murders (1970). The essay retraces the interconnection between that social situation and Didion’s personal depiction ten years later. Didion’s narrative shows signs of her own paranoia and disorientation, which she expresses by writing in fragments. In other words, Colombo remarks, in “The White Album,” Didion surrenders to a society she cannot understand and can only narrate through fragments and disconnected images.

While these latter contributions participate to that plurality of voices and connectiveness this special issue aims at realizing, the two interviews that follow focus on the impact the ‘long 1960s’ had on research methods and approaches. Margarida McMurry and Virginia Pignagnoli interviewed Robyn Warhol, one of the leading scholars in the field of feminist narrative theory. Marta Gara interviewed John McMillian, who has reevaluated the analysis of the underground press as a plentiful source of information on the American social movements of the long 1960s (McMillian 2011). Warhol’s interview starts from a discussion of the texts from the Sixties that were foundational in forming her critical thinking, and concludes with the idea that, today, attending to difference, and in particular gendered difference, is still crucial. The interview with McMillian introduces some of the still under-represented potentialities of underground papers, for both American Studies and transnational research.

Finally, in keeping with the dialogic spirit of both the journal and this special issue, the book review section concludes with the input of two early-career scholars—Natália Guerellus and Walter Bruno Renato Toscano—on, respectively, Christopher Dunn’s *Contracultura: Alternative Arts and Social Transformation in Authoritarian Brazil* (2016) and Alessandro Portelli’s *We Shall Not Be Moved* (2019). The reflection on the Sixties emerging from the variety of voices composing this special issue provides, we believe, an interdisciplinary connection of practices, methods, and forms through time and space. This interdisciplinary connection is a tool that makes the 1960s not only a “usable past” for early-career Americanists. On the contrary, our rethinking, far from ambitions of comprehensiveness, is a means to reflect on the various movements of the 1960s through the sharing of information and knowledge and a fluid network of ideas and scholarships.

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