

## FILMS FOR TEACHING ETHNICITY

In the 1960s the landmark publication of "Myth of the Melting Pot" by Nathan Glazer and Daniel Moynihan drew attention to ethnicity as an enduring feature within American society. Despite studies that periodically rediscover this phenomena, many Americans and non-Americans continue to be surprised by the persistence of ethnic cultures in the United States. The following recent films use innovative approaches to examine various issues relating to ethnicity and ethnic identity among Americans.

These films do not constitute a complete list of recent films dealing with ethnicity or specific ethnic groups. For information about additional films and resources, consult your school or library media specialist for distributor's catalogues and for indexes such as American Folklore Films and Videos: An Index, compiled and published by the Center for Southern Folklore.

**AMERICAN TONGUES.** 1987. Louis Alvarez and Andrew Kolker (60 minutes).

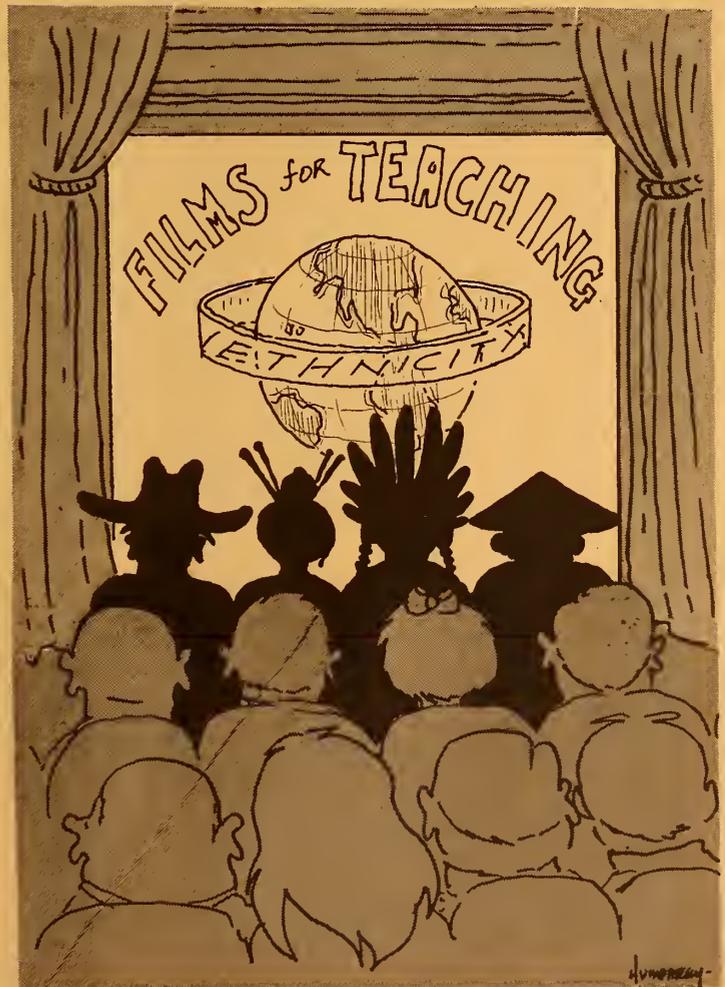
It is a commonplace that Americans share the same official language even though Bostonians are often identified by a single phrase ("park the car") and New Yorkers by the fact that they "schlep" rather than "carry." "American Tongues" takes an often humorous look at these and other aspects of language diversity in America. The varied historical causes and social consequences of the fact that Americans speak English differently are explored. The film not only presents regional speech or "dialects" of English, but explores the intimate and taken for granted relationship between how people speak, how they think about themselves, and how they are judged by others. The filmmakers are sensitive to speech not only as the means by which we communicate, but as the principle medium

through which we interact and negotiate issues of trust and character. What might otherwise be dry observations about these social aspects of speech are brought to life through voices as diverse as a Tangiers Island waterman, an Italian-American from Boston's North End, and a Kentucky backwoodsman.

**Distributor:** The Center for New American Media, 524 Broadway, 2nd Floor, New York NY 10012/ (212) 925-5665.

**CELEBRATION.** 1988. Karen Kramer (30 minutes).

Every year on Labor Day the largest Caribbean community in the United States celebrates carnival along Eastern Parkway in Brooklyn. The event, which brings together Caribbean



immigrants from virtually every island, is a spectacle to rival the pre-Lenten bacchanal that has been celebrated in Trinidad and other islands since the days of slavery. Kramer aptly captures the spirit of the event, coupling infectious calypso rhythms with the striking visual displays of the carnival bands, costumed performers, and rocking and raucous crowds. But the film does more than simply confirm the familiar capacity of Caribbean peoples for celebration. The event itself becomes a window into the thoughts and feelings of expatriate West Indians as they are interviewed during preparations for the carnival. Through these interviews the viewer comes to appreciate the importance of carnival to people determined to maintain their sense of identity and their links with West Indian culture.

"Celebration" presents a mosaic of ethnic experiences in the U.S. in a novel way. Carnival in Brooklyn brings together Jamaicans, Antiguans, Haitians, and Barbadians, although Trinidadian immigrants are at the core of the pageantry of the event. This island diversity serves to remind us of an often overlooked cultural difference within urban American black communities (e.g., between West Indians and Afro-Americans). For teachers interested in exploring this difference with their students, this is an upbeat film that easily holds the viewer's attention.

Distributor: Erzulie Films, 22 Leroy St., New York NY 10014/ (212)691-3470.

FAMILY GATHERING. 1988. Lise Yasui (30 minutes).

In "Family Gathering," Lise Yasui, a third-generation Japanese-American, uses home movies, archival film, family photos, and interviews with family members to chronicle the tale of a Japanese-American family, begun when her grandparents immigrated to the U.S. during the beginning of the century. In

the early years the Yasui family story was the embodiment of the American dream: a successful family business; community leadership; and children, raised in America, attending college and becoming doctors and lawyers. However, the upheaval caused by World War II, the resulting anti-Japanese sentiment in the U.S., and the forced relocation of the Yasui family to the internment camps, had lasting consequences, the scope of which Lise Yasui discovered only while making the film.

Lise Yasui's straightforward narration is filled with warmth and honesty and fully complements the images she presents. In this film an ethnic filmmaker examines her own family and in the process reveals the consequences of ethnic intolerance.

Distributor: New Day Films, 853 Broadway, Suite 1210, New York NY 10003/ (212)477-4604.

MADE IN CHINA. 1985. Lisa Hsia (30 minutes).

Chinese-American filmmaker Lisa Hsia grew up in suburban Chicago, a typical American kid. She was more involved with the concerns of American popular culture than with her Chinese heritage, her experience of Chinese culture limited to Sunday evening Chinese dinners in Chicago's Chinatown. It was with a sense of personal and ethnic discovery that Hsia traveled to China following college to learn Chinese and to discover her roots. While living with distant cousins in Beijing, she tries to learn what it is to be Chinese by attempting to become a good "daughter" in her cousins' household and by trying to absorb the sights and sounds of the land of her ancestors. Instead she discovers a little about the complexity of culture, as she learns that being Chinese-American does

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not necessarily make it easier to live in China.

Hsia chronicles her journey of self and cultural discovery with humor and off-beat touches, which result in a very personal and accessible film.

Distributor: Filmmakers Library, Inc.,  
133 E 58th St., Suite 703A, New York NY  
10022.

ZIVELI: MEDICINE FOR THE HEART. 1987.  
Andrei Simic and Les Blank  
(51 minutes).

"Ziveli: Medicine for the Heart" by anthropologist Andrei Simic and filmmaker Les Blank explores the characteristics of ethnicity among a European-derived community--the Serbians of Chicago. As its subtitle suggests, the film is an evocative look at Serbian-Americans as they experience their own ethnicity through traditional music, dance, food, and family celebrations. Life history narratives of immigrant Serbs, the close relationship between family and church, and other historical background on Serbian culture are skillfully woven into contemporary scenes in which identity is celebrated. The return to Serbia (Yugoslavia) by third-generation Serbian-Americans is presented as a kind of pilgrimage in which younger members of the ethnic group claim their culture. The film is an excellent vehicle for exploring evidence of cultural diversity in America.

Distributor: Flower Films, 10341 San  
Pablo Ave., El Cerrito CA 94530; (415)  
525-0942.

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