DARKEST ITALY REVISITED: RACE, CHARACTER AND CRIMINALITY IN THE HISTORY OF ITALIAN IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES, 1790-1924

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ABSTRACT

From Lucky Luciano to Tony Soprano, the image and idea of Italian criminality is a well- established component of American perceptions of *italianità*. Where, when, and why did this stereotype originate? And what is the relationship between American prejudices about Italian criminality and the history of Italian immigration to U.S.? This paper answers these questions by documenting how American notions of Italian criminality first emerged when American visited Italy during the period of the Early American Republic (1790-1820). The paper shows how Italian criminality was first developed and transmitted through the travel writings of American Grand Tourists, such as Thomas Jefferson's secretary William Short, the novelist Washington Irving, and the historian Theodore Dwight. This study shows how these notions of Italian criminality, originating before the Civil War (1861-1865), shaped the way Italian immigrants were received upon arrival in the U.S. during the period of their mass migration, between the 1880s and 1924. In that year, the United States introduced a system of quotas based on national origin that "closed the door" to Italians and other immigrants. Tracing the genealogy of deep-rooted American stereotypes about Italian criminality back to their 18th century origin, this paper shows the trans-national features upon which Italians were categorized within the ethno-racial hierarchies that structured late 19th and early 20th century American society.

Keywords: Transnationalism; Grand Tourism; Immigration; Criminality; Ethno-Racial Formation.

M ost Americans are proud of their country's identity as a "nation of immigrants."[1] Many would also like to believe that the United States has always been an "asylum of liberty,"[2] offering refuge to the world's "tired, poor huddled masses, yearning to breathe free."[3] Yet, for most of its history, the United States has not been a particularly welcoming place for the foreign-born. According to the standards established by the Naturalization

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[1] Expressed in many ways, by many speakers and authors over the years, the idea of the United States is a "nation of nations" was, perhaps most famously, expressed by poet Walt Whitman in the preface to his 1855 volume, *Leaves of Grass.* The publication of U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy's book *A Nation of Immigrants* in 1958 ushered in an era in which the moniker has become a common reference.

[2] The idea of the United States as an "asylum of liberty" can be traced to Thomas Paine's popular tract *Common Sense* (1776), written during the American war for Independence (1775-1783).

[3] These lines are taken from Emma Lazarus, sonnet "The New Colossus" (1883). In 1903, Lazarus's iconic poem was inscribed on the inside of the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty.

Act of 1790, the first law passed by Congress under the Constitution regulating the status of foreign-born people inside the U.S., only "free, white, male aliens of good character" who had resided in the U.S. for at least two years were eligible to become American citizens. Persons who did not meet these criteria – for example, Native Americans, people of African descent, foreign-born women and all other "non-whites" – were classified either as property, dependents, or permanent aliens. Reflecting this tacit cultural consensus, as early as 1751 Benjamin Franklin defended North Americans' application of the racial category of "whiteness" exclusively to persons of Anglo-Saxon descent in his treatise *Observations Concerning the Increase of Mankind*. In this tract, Franklin advised his fellow Englishmen to make every effort to exclude "all Blacks and Tawneys" from settling in North America. His list of undesirables also included "swarthy," "non-white" European groups like "the Spaniards, Italians, French, Russians and Swedes," and even most German populations as well. In his view, the only purely white populations were "the Saxons, who with the English, make the principal body of white people on the face of the earth" (Franklin 1961, 225-234). The Naturalization Act of 1790, reflecting the social and cultural hierarchies developed during the British colonial era, adopted the notions of "whiteness" and "good character" to identify qualities understood to be the unique provenance of people of Protestant "Anglo-Saxon" (e.g. British/Northern European) heritage. With only a few minor alterations, these criteria structured the relationship between race, character, immigration, and citizenship until the American Civil War (1861-1865). Until the eve of the American Civil War, Franklin's ethno-centric sense of "true whiteness" as a quality exclusive to people of Anglo-Saxon heritage set the pace for the interpretive paradigms of race, national origin and character through which U.S. immigration and naturalization policy took shape. So long as the critical mass of "free, white" people seeking to naturalize as U.S. citizens hailed from the British Isles, Saxony and other parts of "pure white" Northern Europe, the formulation contained in the 1790 law helped maintain the cultural homogeneity of the predominantly Protestant, Anglo-American population. However, during the middle decades of the 19th century, the United States' color-coded immigration system faced a crisis when a rising tide of immigration from the Catholic and Jewish parts of Europe began to arrive *en masse* in

the United States. The arrival of these new immigrant groups meant that the legal definition of what it meant to be "free and white" could no longer stand as easy proxy for people of Protestant, Anglo-Saxon descent. The first waves of non-Anglo-Saxon newcomers of European descent arrived in the 1840s and 1850s and consisted of Catholics from Ireland and the French speaking parts of Eastern Canada seeking opportunity in the rapidly industrializing sectors of the U.S. economy. By the 1870s, the largest immigrant groups to the U.S. included Italians, Greeks, Lithuanians, Poles, Czechs, and Russian Jews, among others. To many native-born citizens, the mass arrival of "swarthy" Catholic and Jewish foreigners from Southern and Eastern Europe threatened the stability and homogeneity of the Anglo-American way of life. Fearing that mass immigration would carry Old World poverty, crime, and social divisions to American shores, Anglo-Saxon Nativists mobilized a national movement for immigration restriction.[4] By 1924, the advocates for immigration restriction succeeded in redefining the criteria that determined naturalization. Overturning the 1790 Naturalization Act, the National Origins Act of 1924 (also known as the Johnson-Reed Act) restricted immigration visas to two percent of the total number of people of each nationality already in the United States as of 1890. In effect, the Reed-Johnson Act closed immigration for non-Anglo-Saxon European nationalities, as well as for all Asians. Consequently, from 1924 until the overhaul of Reed-Johnson with the Hart-Celler Immigration Act in 1965, immigration and naturalization in the United States were regulated by national origin quotas, rather than by qualifications based explicitly on race and moral character.[5] Nevertheless, in the views of many U.S. citizens and government officials these categories and qualifications remained intimately intertwined. At the root of the divisive debates that have shaped U.S. immigration policy are fundamental

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[4] Nativism is an umbrella term encompassing the waves of social and political movements aimed at protecting the interests of native-born Anglo-Saxons above those of immigrants who did not hail from Northern Europe or the British Isles. As the Harvard-trained lawyer Prescott Hall, co-founder of the Immigration Restriction League, quipped in 1897, "Do we want this country to be peopled by British, German and Scandinavian stock—historically free, energetic, progressive, or by Slav, Latin, and Asiatic races—historically downtrodden, atavistic and stagnant?" (Hall 1897, 395). See also Higham, 2004.

[5] Specifically, the Johnson-Reed Act granted people immigrating from countries of Northern and Western Europe more than 140,000 visas each year; by contrast, Southern and Eastern European countries received just 20,000 visas and all the countries of Asia and Africa combined were given 3,000. The law did not apply to persons emigrating from other nations in the Western Hemisphere, such as Mexico and other parts of Latin America and the Caribbean.

questions about citizenship and national belonging: Who and what is an American? Who is qualified to become an American? To date, much of the scholarly literature examining this topic has focused on how variable constructions of race and ethnicity have been applied to successive waves of foreign groups, and how these various ethno-racial formations have shaped immigrants' prospects for full participation in American life. Inspired by critical perspectives developed by scholars such as David Roediger and other contributors to the interdisciplinary field of "Whiteness Studies," in the 1990s and early 2000s a new generation of immigration historians took up the task of uncovering what Matthew Frye Jacobson describes in *Whiteness of a Different Color* (1999) as the relationship between "European immigrants and the alchemy of race." Demonstrating the fluidity of late 19th and 20th century racial categories, Jacobson's influential study demonstrates that many of the people Americans now widely regard as belonging to white ethnic groups were previously perceived as racial "Others" understood to be "less than fully white." As evidence, Jacobson reported that, during the late 19th and 20th centuries, self-identified American Anglo-Saxons classified immigrants from the Catholic and Jewish parts of Europe, such as Irish and Italians, as belonging to inferior "Celtic," "Latin" or "Mediterranean" races. Jacobson convincingly argues that these inter-European racial differences reached their political apex with the 1924 Immigration Act and the U.S. decision to close the door to overseas immigration. He contends that during the inter-war years, Europe's racial Others began the slow movement toward "becoming fully white" (and thus "fully American") through a process of civic assimilation finally completed by the end of World War II. Thus, Jacobson concludes, in the Post-War period, Europe's "racial" Others were transformed into members of a new, broad-based "Caucasian" racial group able to enjoy the full privileges of American whiteness (1999). In conversation with Jacobson's thesis, other scholars have attempted to decode the racial construction of various European immigrant groups at the time of their enter upon American soil. Beginning with Noel Ignatiev's *How the Irish Became White* (1995) and Karen Brodkin's *How Jews Became White Folks & What that Says about Race in America* (1998), more recent contributions to this topic include: Thomas A. Guglielmo's *White on Arrival: Italians, Race, Color and Power in*

Chicago, 1890-1945 (2003), Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno's edited volume *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America* (2003), and David Roediger's *Working Toward Whiteness: How America's Immigrants Became White: The Strange Journey from Ellis Island to the Suburbs* (2005). Together, this body of work introduced the next generation of American Studies scholars to the power and complexity of the contingent racial formations that structured the ruling hierarchies of American social and political life and shaped national debate on immigration through the 1924 National Origins Act and beyond. While these studies are extremely valuable, the patterns identified by Jacobson and others overlook the extent to which, by the 1870s, Anglo-Americans had already developed a distinctive corpus of ideas connecting the national origin, racial identity, and moral character of various Southern and Eastern European groups. In fact, as this paper demonstrates, the stereotypes American Nativists applied to European immigrant "Others" in the late Gilded Age and Progressive Era (1865-1920) were prefigured in American travel writings and works of fiction produced during the Early National and Antebellum periods (1780-1861). Accordingly, I argue that Anglo-American reactions to immigration at the turn of the 20th century cannot be properly understood without reference to American ideas about race, character, and national origin established during the earlier periods of trans-Atlantic political and cultural history. Most notable is the fact that until the 1870s, prevailing American notions about the racial and moral character of various European populations were formed by U.S. travelers, journalists, businessmen and diplomats operating overseas. To illustrate how ideas about race and national character formed abroad before the Civil War affected national discourse and policy decisions on immigration and citizenship after 1865, this paper focuses on a specific group of immigrants to the United States between 19th and 20th century: Italians. Anglo-American ideas about Italian "national character" originated *prior* to the great waves of migration that began after Italian Unification in 1871 and contributed to the classification of Italians among Southern and European immigrants. Demonstrating how stereotypes about Italians first emerged at the time of Thomas Jefferson's office (1776-1820), this paper shows how opinions about the "Italian character" preceding the Civil War established a legacy behind the reception of

Italians during the peak years of their migration to the United States (1880-1924). More specifically, I will show the genealogy of the longest American stereotype about the Italian character: their alleged criminality. The story begins in Naples.

VEDI NAPOLI E POI MUORI[6]

Despite the remarkable achievement of a victory over the greatest military force on the planet during their War of Independence (thanks to French support), and an equally astounding record of economic growth and territorial expansion throughout the decades prior to the Civil War, Americans remained deeply insecure about their intellectual and cultural achievements as a nation. Above all, late 18th and early 19th century Americans feared the judgement of European aristocrats about their artistic and scientific achievements. Compensating for their abiding sense of post-colonial inferiority, citizens in the Early Republic attempted to live up to European (in particular English) standards of taste and sensibility by adopting a range of imitative cultural practices. One of the principal rituals of refinement that American citizens appropriated from their former mother country was the British tradition of taking a Grand Tour of Italy (Baker 1964, Prezzolini 1971). The template that inspired Americans to travel to the peninsula in the years prior to Italian Unification had its origins in the late 17th century, when fashionable young aristocrats from England concluded their classical educations by setting off in a private carriage accompanied by a tutor and perhaps by a few servants on an extended sojourn to learn about the politics, culture, art, and architecture of neighboring lands. The itinerary of what became known as the Grand Tour varied according to fashion but typically included destinations in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and above all the Italian peninsula and its islands.[7] With Roman ruins, ancient monuments, lavish palaces, rich collections of Renaissance paintings, and picturesque natural beauty, Italy was regarded as

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[6] Literally: "See Naples and then die," it means that one must see the beauty of Naples before dying but it also offers warning about the dangers associated with visiting Naples. The origins of this famous and repeatedly cited expression remain a topic of debate. Appearing perhaps most notably in Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's Italian Journey: 1786-1788 (1816), the phrase is a nearly ubiquitous utterance in connection with travel writing about Southern Italy.

[7] For an overview of the origins, practices, and itinerary of the Grand Tour see Black 2003.

the *non plus ultra* of an enlightened gentleman's education. By 1776, the year the United States declared their independence, Italian travel had grown so fashionable among well-heeled Britons that Samuel Johnson sardonically gibed: "A man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see. The grand object of travelling is to see the shores of the Mediterranean" (Boswell 1791, 61). The culmination of the Italian Grand Tour was a visit to the Southern Italian Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Comprising the vast domains of mainland Italy south of Rome as well as the island of Sicily, the Bourbon Kingdom and its capital city Naples captured the imagination of foreign visitors from throughout late 18th and early 19th century Europe. This sentiment was epitomized by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe's admonishment that to live fully one must first go "see Naples and then die" (Boswell 1791). Across the Atlantic Ocean, many citizens of the rising American Republic, from Thomas Jefferson to Herman Melville, shared Goethe's interest in Naples and Southern Italy (Reinhold 1985). The exchange that developed between the U.S. and Naples prior to the invasion of Garibaldi's *Mille* is remarkable given the contrasts between the two countries. The United States was a republic, born in revolution, out of a British colonial past. The Two Sicilies was instead a Catholic Monarchy, with roots in antiquity, formed from the union of Sicily and Naples in the 15th century and ruled by a Bourbon dynasty since 1734.[8] At a time when Italians were governed by a half-dozen rival states, American tourists travelling abroad saw the Southern Kingdom as a critical symbol of Italian Otherness. Some American travelers pictured Naples as a benighted land defined by indolence, criminality and backwards superstitions; others saw it as a romantic refuge; a third contingent regarded Southern Italy as an emerging market inhabited by people with interests in increasing trade and national standing, but who remained mired in poverty as a result of a tyrannical government. In place of the theories of difference based on genetics that emerged by the early 20th century, late 18th and early 19th century Grand Tourists attributed the poverty and

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[8] From 1734 through 1815, the two constitutionally separate kingdoms of Naples and Sicily were ruled as a "personal union" under the control of the Bourbon monarchy. During the two periods of French invasion in Southern Italy (1799 and 1806-1815), the Bourbons maintained control of Sicily but lost power in Naples. After the restoration of the monarchy at the end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815, the two hitherto separate (yet united) crowns were merged as a united realm called the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies which lasted until the unification of Italy in 1861.

underdevelopment they perceived in Southern Italy to a combination of geographical and climatic determinism, atavistic social practices, and the influence of the Roman Catholic faith. Following the lead of Protestant tourists from England, Americans ascribed Southern Italy's social conditions to the impact of the Catholic Church, an institution they derided as an engine of tyranny and ignorance (Franchot 1994). When combined, these geographic and cultural factors crystallized into a distinctive set of American ideas about Southern Italian national character, a short-hand term for perceived cultural differences that chauvinistically celebrated American industry and pragmatism as compared to the stereotypical Southern Italians' stereotypical preference for *il dolce far niente* (sweet doing nothing) and indulging their passions (Brand 1957). In keeping with the conventions of British Grand Tourism, American travelers kept journals of their trips; if travel was a mode of cosmopolitan education, the travel journal was the school in which the lessons were preserved. The range and tenor of American ideas about Southern Italians that developed on the Grand Tour can be observed through a brief, comparative survey of writings by three representative Anglo-Americans: William Short (1759-1849), who was Thomas Jefferson's personal secretary; the novelist Washington Irving (1783-1859); and the historian Theodore Dwight (1796-1866). Drawing upon first hand encounters with Italians in all parts of the peninsula, each of these writers contributed to American interpretations of national character, morality and politics in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies.

UN PARADISO ABITATO DA DIAVOLI?[9]

William Short was the man whom Jefferson would one day refer to as his adoptive son and who would later serve as the future President's eyes and ears in the Kingdom of Naples. He was born to William Short (the Fifth) and Elizabeth Skipwith at Spring Garden in Surry County, Virginia, in 1759 (Cullen 1994, 564-565). Short came of age closely connected to Jefferson and his family. The mentor-mentee dynamic that would define their life-long bond began during Short's tenure as a law student under Jefferson's former tutor, George

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[9] Literally, "A paradise inhabited by devils." Delivered as a description of Naples and Southern Italy, this phrase is attributed to the Neapolitan philosopher Benedetto Croce.

Wyeth, at the College of William and Mary (Cullen 564-565). Sufficiently impressed by Short's "peculiar talent for prying into facts," Jefferson hired the young man in the wake of his diplomatic appointment as U.S. Minister to France (Jefferson 1783). Once abroad, Jefferson encouraged his protégé to visit Italy, which he did in the fall of 1788. Through Short's letters – the first extensive travel letters written by an American in Southern Italy – Jefferson enjoyed a vicarious encounter with the conditions of life on the peninsula, all the way into the heart of Bourbon Naples. After passing through Northern Italy, Short set forth from Rome for the Kingdom of Naples on January 15, 1789. Like dozens of subsequent other American tourists, Short's tour of Naples was modeled on the British travel plan and included stops at Pompeii, Herculaneum, Campi Flegrei, Virgil's Tomb, the Sibyl's Cave, and an ascent of Mt. Vesuvius (Short 1789). In Naples, social conditions captured Short's attention first. Along the way from Terracina to Naples, Short observed that despite the region's natural marvels, everywhere there were "numberless objects of poverty and distress." "There must be a cruel defect somewhere," Short concluded; "Most certainly it is not either in the soil or climate" (Short 1789). The fault, he implied, layd in the kingdom's social institutions. Arriving in the capital on 16 January, Short spent seventeen days exploring the sites around the Bay of Naples (Short 1789). On 17 February 1788 Short wrote a second letter to Jefferson detailing his journey: he began with a description of his entrance into Naples. He was astonished by the size and poverty of "the immense crowds of people which are constantly in the streets:" the human spectacle of the *lazzaroni* had an unsettling effect on him.[10] "Many people are pleased with this circumstance and extol the vast population of Naples," he noted, but "I confess it produced a different effect on me. These crowds are composed only of people of the lowest and poorest order. They remain there because they have no other place to go to. They are ill clad dirty and have the marks of evident and pressing poverty upon them" (Short 1789). Naples, in his eyes, was a city of the homeless. For Short, the misery of the urban poor was all the more striking in contrast with the wealth and finery of the upper classes: "The middle of these streets . . . are filled with

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[10] The lazzaroni were a class of people often described as street people living under a chief and were frequently depicted as beggars despite the fact that many subsisted as day laborers. In contrast to the Parisian sans-culottes, the Neapolitan lazzaroni were conservative monarchists fiercely loyal to the Bourbon government, especially to king Ferdinand IV.

as much brilliancy and show as are the sides with wretchedness and poverty. The most superb carriages, and fine horses with elegant trappings, are in a kind of constant procession here" (Short 1789, 571-575). By May 1789 William Short was back at his post in Paris (Jefferson 1789). The observations he gathered on his tour of Campania conveyed to Jefferson an image of the Bourbon capital and its famous bay as a region marked by venerable ruins, fertile soil, and an economy in need of the liberating force of free trade. In Naples, Short discerned the weight of feudal oppression and monarchical despotism.

Sixteen years later, a twenty-two-year-old writer from New York named Washington Irving followed in Short's footsteps and made his own pilgrimage to the Italian *Mezzogiorno.* Like Short, Irving found that few aspects of Southern Italian society stood in greater contrast to life in the United States then the gap between the luxury of its upper classes and the deprivation of the poor. In addition to praising the scenery and lamenting the Kingdom's divisions of wealth, Irving characterized Naples as a land of *banditi* (criminals). When the young writer set out northward on the overland journey from Syracuse to Catania, he carried his fears of Southern Italian brigands with him at every turn in the road. As a precaution, Irving travelled with a company of eleven mounted American marines, stationed in Sicily as a part of the U.S. war against Tripoli, then underway. At first, the presence of a military guard gave Irving some comfort but travelling through the Sicilian countryside aroused his dread: "The first day we passed through several solitary places where the mountains abounded in vast gloomy caverns that seemed the very haunts of robbery and assassination" (Irving 1863, 114). By the end of March 1805, Irving was ready to leave the Southern Italian kingdom: he admired Naples's romantic scenery and artistic treasures, but he found the contrast between the opulent few and the impoverished many dispiriting and his fears of criminal attack exhausting. Travelling North through the rural parts of Campania on route to the Papal States, he remained anxious about *banditi*. Passing the night at an inn in Terracina, he was awakened by a mysterious sound at the door; convinced that bandits were about to assault him, he cried out for help and rushed at the door armed with a pistol, discovering that it was only a dog begging for food (Irving 1863, 63). In May 1805 Irving arrived at the Lateran Gate unscathed. To his relief, the Kingdom

of Naples proved to be a country of peaceful, if oppressed and impoverished, people. The ubiquitous *lazzaroni* were irksome, but unthreatening; and despite his fears he had avoided the unwanted encounters with brigands. The real scourge of the South, the New Yorker concluded, was its tyrannical elites and corrupt government officials. This was a thesis he later developed in fiction (Wright 1965). Two decades after his visit to Sicily and Naples, Irving indeed wrote "The Italian Banditti," a series of Southern Italy-based short stories included in his popular *Tales of A Traveller by Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1824). Surprisingly, rather than the marauding fiends who haunted Irving's travels in 1805, the Southern Italian *banditi* he depicts in his fiction are hardworking peasants driven to brigandage by poverty and corrupt Bourbon officials. In the cycle's opening tale, "The Inn at Terracina," Irving's narrator explains the bandit's heroic place in Southern Italian society:

> [The banditti] secure . . . the good-will of the inhabitants of those wild regions, a poor and semi-barbarous race, whom they never disturb and often enrich. Indeed, they are considered a sort of illegitimate heroes among the mountain villages, and in certain frontier towns where they dispose their plunder . . . It is true that they are now and then hunted and shot down like beast of prey by the *gens- d'armes* their heads put in iron cages and stuck upon posts by the road-side . . . but these ghastly spectacles only serve to make some dreary pass of the road still more dreary, and to dismay the traveler, without deterring the bandit. (Wright 1965, 193-4)

The Italian counterparts to Robin Hood, Irving's brigands are what the 20th century historian Eric Hobsbawm would dub "primitive rebels or social bandits, a peasant rebelling against landlords, usurpers and other representatives of . . . the conspiracy of the rich" (Hobsbawm 1959). Irving would have agreed. For all their fearsome reputations and occasional violence, his *briganti* are courageous, freedom-loving rebels aspiring to a better life. They are depicted as an organized militia at war against the Bourbon authorities: donning "a kind of uniform, or rather costume that designates their profession . . . to give themselves a kind of military air in the eyes of the common people," they attack symbols of Bourbon power and avenge the abuses of the king's police (Irving 1850, 263-264-327). In this telling, the Italian *banditi* were nascent republicans looking to the United States for their ideals and the promise of a better life. For example, at the end of "The Story of the

Young Robber," the final tale in Irving's cycle, a French painter temporarily held captive by a troop of sympathetic *banditi* recounts their captain's desire for re-birth in the land of liberty: "He told me he was weary of his hazardous profession; that he had acquired sufficient property, and was anxious to return to the world and lead a peaceful life in the bosom of his family. He wished to know whether it was not in my power to procure him a passport for the United States of America." Confident that the young bandit would find a propitious future in the rising Republic across the sea, Irving's narrator declares: "I applauded his good intentions, and promised to do everything in my power to promote its success" (Irving 1850, 351). Washington Irving was not the only writer to suggest that discontented Southern Italians looked to the United States as the model for their political future. The trend gained momentum in the 1820s in response to the early stirrings of the *Risorgimento* in the *Mezzogiorno* and elsewhere across the Italian peninsula. Four years before the publication of *Tales of a Traveller* (1824), tens of thousands of ordinary Sicilians and Neapolitans mobilized to demand that the Bourbon government adopt a program of liberal reform. Led by the *Carbonari* (charcoal burners), the secret revolutionary societies founded in Naples and other parts of Italy in the early 19th century for the purpose of defining the rights of common people against absolutism, the revolutionary coalition cultivated widespread popular support throughout the kingdom's provinces as well as in the capital city. Under the command of the celebrated Generals Guglielmo Pepe, Pietro Colletta, and Luigi Minichini, the revolutionary movement succeeded in forcing the Bourbon government to agree to a constitution on 2 July 1820. The changes were bold: the government's adoption of the radical Spanish constitution of 1812 provided for democratic governments at all levels, with voting rights granted to all males over twenty-one regardless of literacy (Davis 2006, 295). Sadly, the Neapolitan attempts to establish liberal, constitutional rule did not last: in May 1821, backed by Austrian support, King Ferdinand reentered Naples, revoked the constitution and immediately launched a policy of repression and retribution (Davis 2006, 304). After the failure of the 1820 *Carbonari* revolution, American tourists wondered whether or not the poor, huddled masses of the *Mezzogiorno* were cut out for self-rule. On this topic, American opinion was divided. Even

Washington Irving seemed torn, as his fiction showed. The ennobling vision of poor, Southern Italians turning to crime and brigandage as a means of rebellion against Bourbon misrule that Irving represents in his "Tales of the Banditti" reflects the author's nascent support for the early stirrings of the Italian *Risorgimento*. But his faith in Southern Italian capacity for American-style democracy was only partial. Despite the optimism he expressed about the Southern Italian character in the "Tales of the Banditti," Irving harbored suspicions that the people of the *Mezzogiorno* were ruled by violent passions and volcanic tempers that disqualified them from republican life. For instance, in other of his Italian-based short stories, Southerners are depicted as people with in-born violent tempers that drown out reason and the love of liberty. Irving's "Story of the Young Italian," also published in *Tales of a Traveller by Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.* (1824), recounts the tale of Ottavio, a young Neapolitan painter driven to commit murder after a lifetime of victimization by corrupt laws and dishonest authorities. Tragically, Ottavio's unwitting act of retributive violence turns him into a fugitive, exiling him from his true love, Bianca, and destroying his future as an artist. Mid-way through Irving's story Ottavio warns his readers: "You who are born in a more temperate climate and under a cooler key, have little idea of the violence of passion in our southern bosoms" (Irving 1850, 448). The fact that a crime of passion transforms Irving's protagonist from the would-be hero of a new social order into a criminal brigand offered Irving's readers a cautionary tale that later 19th century American Nativists recycled in the name of restricting immigration from Southern Europe: if Southern Italians were to succeed as a self-governing people they must first overcome the irrationality of their inborn tempers and control their violent passions.

Unlike the ambivalence expressed by Washington Irving in his fiction, other American travel writers pondered the nature of Southern Italian national character and reached damning conclusions. In the eyes of historian Theodore Dwight, it was clear that Sicilians and Neapolitans did not possess the rational temperament that was a prerequisite for citizenship in a democratic Republic. Rather, in Dwight's prejudicial view, Southern Italians were inveterate criminals whose poverty and ignorance stemmed from laziness and inability to control their passions. Arriving in Naples in December 1820, Dwight (1796-

1866), a twenty-five-year-old Yale graduate and scion of a prominent New England family, visited the Two Sicilies just six months after the *Carbonari* led revolution in July and spent five weeks in Naples during the Kingdom's nine-month experiment in constitutional government (1820/21). In 1824, the same year as Irving's *Tales of a Traveller,* the future American biographer of Giuseppe Garibaldi and author of a popular history of the Roman Republic of 1849 published his first book on an Italian subject, *A Journal of a Tour in Italy in the Year 1821 with a Description of Gibraltar* (1824). Compared to the ambiguous depiction of Southern Italians presented by Irving, Dwight's *Journal* depicts Neapolitans as a servile and ignorant people, congenitally incapable of bringing about their own liberation from the twin manacles of the Bourbon Monarchy and the Catholic Church. Though sympathetic to the cause of liberty, Dwight could find in the Southern Italian character no seeds of independence and no hints of a successful revolution to come (Dwight 1824, 73). Throughout his *Journal*, Dwight's pessimistic claims about Southern Italians are supported by the testimony of his principal native informant Signore Mattia, a Neapolitan man he befriended on the voyage from Gibraltar to Naples. On route Mattia warns the American that all Neapolitans are "great thieves," and he volunteers to escort Dwight around the city, lest he "should be cheated, robbed and perhaps murdered" (Dwight 1824, 41). It is not clear whether Mattia was a real person or a literary device to reinforce national stereotypes. At times he comes across as a hustler exaggerating the dangers of Naples for the sake of free dinners and a tip: "Many of those extravagances which seemed to stamp him as a madman, are now converted into national peculiarities. He is not, as I can see, a whit more irascible than his countrymen. They all fly into fits of passion as hastily." In the *Journal* Mattia plays a puckish Virgil to Dwight's American Dante as the two men tour Naples infernal streets. Heeding Mattia's warning to "take care of your pockets," and "keep your mouth shut – or they will steal your teeth," Dwight declares: "I never would condemn a nation in the gross; but I think a traveller can hardly visit Naples without being struck with the disposition to cheat him manifested by almost every person with whom he has any concern" (Dwight 1824, 9). If conditions were miserable inside the capital city, the rural provinces were even worse. Reporting on news of the kidnapping of two English gentlemen on the main carriage

road North of Rome, Dwight emphasized the omnipresent danger of the kingdom's *banditi:* "There is very little pleasure in travelling that road, I assure you. You hardly see a man in all that tract of country who does not look as if he were half an assassin" (Dwight 1824, 159). In contrast to the bleak scenes he encountered in Naples, Northern Italy – and Turin in particular – presented an encouraging prospect. There he could confidently look for the spread of liberal institutions in the hands of rational men. Writing from Florence several weeks after he left the South, Dwight drew a sharp line between Northern and Southern Italy: "It is going back to past centuries to land at Naples: and travelling north is to move along with time and the gradual progress of society." In contrast to Naples, where *lazzaroni* lived in the streets and bandits infested the countryside, the people in Turin appeared ready for self-rule: "The houses are good and built with much regularity, and the principal streets are as straight and broad as those of Philadelphia . . . These things argued at once a superior taste for what we consider many of the necessaries and comforts of life, and the dress and comportment of the citizens proved that they had advanced an important grade in civilization" (Dwight 1824, 465). In the decades ahead, Dwight's opinion, that Italy's future as a modern constitutional state depended upon the rule of the purportedly more rational, orderly Northern Italians, led by the Savoy Monarchy, over the indolent, quick-tempered criminals who lived in the South, predicted U.S. policies. Indeed, throughout the peak years of the Italian *Risorgimento* and into the period of mass migration of Southern Italians into the United States, Dwight's bi-furcated assessment of Italy's "two halves" and the perceived differences between their respective populations came to define prevailing American notions about Italy and Italians. Back home, Dwight played a central role in translating these ideas into political action. After his tour of Naples and Italy in 1821, he returned to the United States and became a leading architect of what historian Howard R. Marraro would later call the American view of the *Risorgimento* "as a religious problem" (Marraro 1956). By 1842 Dwight was publicly promoting the idea that Italy's future would be best developed under the Piedmontese monarchy through the American Philo-Italian Society, an organization based in New York. Along with painter and inventor Samuel F.B. Morse (1791-1872), educator Henry Philip Tappan (1805-1881), and others, Dwight framed the

movement for Italian Unification as a struggle between Protestant Enlightenment and Catholic darkness. His organization's mission was "to unite Protestant Christendom in this holy war" ("The Christian Examiner and Religious Miscellany" 1845, 286). Where could such "Protestant" leadership be found? Dwight looked to the Italian provinces North of Rome. After 1848 Dwight was a vocal supporter of the movement led by the Northern Italian born Giuseppe Garibaldi, whom he called "the George Washington of his people." Throughout the decade before the Civil War, Dwight promoted these views alongside other prominent American supporters of the *Risorgimento,* most of whom were fellow alumni of the Italian Grand Tour (D'Agostino 2004, 33).

DARKEST ITALY COMES TO THE UNITED STATES

The negative stereotypes about Southern Italians generated by American travelers like William Short, Washington Irving, and Theodore Dwight prior to 1861 took on a special resonance in the aftermath of Italian Unification when, between 1880 and 1924, more than four million Italians crossed the Atlantic Ocean to seek opportunities and build new lives in the United States (Bodnar 1985, Handlin 2002). While some Americans greeted Italian immigrants as a welcome addition to the growing foreign-born industrial work force, many others did not. In fact, to large numbers of native-born Anglo-Saxon Americans, Italians appeared as unwanted aliens – a people at once exotic and strange, possessed of in-born traits and cultural habits that rendered them less than "fit" to become self-governing citizens of the American Republic.[11] The negative qualities that late 19th and early 20th century Anglo-Americans perceived in Southern Italians were composed of a litany of slurs and "one-size-fits-all" generalizations consistent with an earlier generation of stereotypes about people from the former domains of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Inflected through the lens of "scientific racism" and the burgeoning field of eugenics, by the early 20th century Southern Italians were profiled as possessing a distinctive set of physical, moral, and cultural traits that were at odds with Anglo-American values. Echoing tropes

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[11] For overviews of this history see: Deconde 1971; Gabaccia 2000; Carnevale 2009; Orsi 2002.

expressed in the writings of Short, Irving, and Dwight decades earlier, the undesirable traits Americans attached to Southern Italians included their Roman Catholic faith, peasant roots, inability to speak English, swarthy skin tones, and reputations for violent Mediterranean tempers. Above all, between 1880 and 1924 Nativists charged that Italians were predisposed to criminality and criminal behaviors, including a predisposition to commit crimes of passion and participate in organized criminal conspiracies. As a result of these widely circulating prejudices and stereotypes, Italian immigrants to the United States faced frequent harassment, discrimination, and persecution by American citizens and U.S. officials alike (Connell and Gardaphé 2010). The prejudices that early 20th century Anglo-Americans held about Italian racial and moral character are epitomized in the language and findings of the official reports prepared by the U.S. Immigration Commission (the so-called Dillingham Commission), a Congressional body composed of U.S. senators, representatives, and social scientists appointed by President Roosevelt in 1907 to investigate the effects of foreigners on American life.[12] In 1911 the Dillingham Commission published a 41 volumes report on all aspects of American immigration. Drawing upon the corpus of preexisting ideas about the racial and moral character attributed to Italians by earlier American writers, government officials recycled antebellum stereotypes that perpetuated the long-standing notion that people from Southern Italy constituted an inferior race predisposed to criminality. For example, the authors of Commission Report Volume 36, investigating connections between Immigration and Crime, declared that "Italian criminals are largest in numbers and create the most alarm by the violent character of their offenses in this country" (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 36, 286). Expounding upon this claim, a report published in Volume 4 (The Emigration of the Criminal Classes) announced:

> An alarming feature of the Italian immigration movement to the United States is the fact
> that it admittedly includes many individuals belonging to the criminal classes, particularly

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[12] Named in honor of Republican Senator William P. Dillingham (VT), the Commission reports offered a range of perspectives identifying both the positive and negative impact of immigration on American life. Proponents of immigration restriction mobilized those findings that supported the Nativist agenda culminating in new restrictions on immigration in 1917 (instituting a literacy test) and 1921(instituting quotas), on route to the landmark National Origins Act of 1924.

of southern Italy and Sicily . . . (and by) the not unfounded belief that certain kinds of criminality are inherent in the Italian race. In the popular mind, crimes of personal violence, robbery, blackmail and extortion are peculiar to the people of Italy, and it cannot be denied that the number of such offenses committed among Italians in this country warrants the prevalence of such a belief. (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 4, 209)

Consistent with antebellum theories of Italian identity, the Dillingham Reports divided the Italian race into two separate and unequal groups. In Volume 4, U.S. Officials declared: "Ethnologically there are two distinct branches of the Italian race – the North and the South Italian . . . It may be briefly said, however, that the North Italians have a large admixture of Celtic and Teutonic blood, while the South Italians are largely a mixed type in which Greek, Spanish, Saracen and other blood is more or less prominent" (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 4, 177-8). The fact that American immigration officials classified Italian nationals into two different racial groups was unique. Specifically, Southern Italians (or South Italians as they were also labeled) were believed to belong to the Latin or Mediterranean ethno-racial group, whereas Northern Italians were a branch of the allegedly superior Alpine, Nordic, or Teutonic racial group also claimed by the predominantly Protestant, Anglo-Saxon people. Regarding phenotypic differences between Northern and Southern Italians, U.S. Officials explained:

Physically, the Italians are anything but a homogeneous race . . . The Apennine chain of mountains forms a geographical line which corresponds to the boundary between two distinct ethnic groups. The region north of this line . . . is inhabited by a very broad headed (Alpine) and tallish race, the North Italian . . . All Italy South of the Apennines and all of the adjacent islands are occupied by a long-headed, dark "Mediterranean" race of short stature . . . The Bureau of Immigration places the North Italian in the "Keltic" division and the South Italian in the "Iberic." (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 5, 82)

Elaborating on these distinctions, the Commissioners observed that Sicilians in particular were "vivid in imagination, affable, benevolent but excitable, superstitious and revengeful" (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 5, 127). To support these findings, U.S. officials drew upon a vast literature on the racial identities of Italians and other Europeans authored by European scientists. Remarkably, works by leading Italian scientists and government officials, including Pasquale Villari, Giustino Fortunato, Sidney Sonnino,

Leopoldo Franchetti, and Francesco Saverio Nitti, played a fundamental role in establishing the ethno-racial taxonomies used by U.S. officials to classify Italians immigrants: this literature reflected political and sociological divisions taking place within Italy after its Unification, in 1861 (Moe 2002). Since at least 1871, ethnographers employed by the victorious Piedmontese army reinforced the long-standing notion that the newly unified Italian nation was made up of two separate and unequal parts: an affluent, modern, industrial North and an impoverished, backward, agricultural South. In line with this formulation, the vexed relationship between Italy's "two halves" defined the central dilemma of the country's political, social, and cultural history as a unified nation-state according to a debate as old as Giuseppe Garibaldi (Petrusewicz 1998). In the wake of the *Risorgimento* and the creation of the modern Italian state, the first generation of *Meridionalisti* (Southern experts), sent into the former Bourbon domains by the reigning authorities based in Turin, blamed the *questione meridionale* (problem of the South) on the people of the *Mezzogiorno*. In the racialist thinking of the day, the Southerners were considered an inferior stock to the superior inhabitants of the Northern Italian provinces (Lumley 1997, Moe 1998, and Dickie 1999). Across the Atlantic, American Nativists picked up on these pseudo-scientific distinctions and applied them to their own preexisting prejudices when Italian immigrants – the great majority of whom originated in the South – began to arrive massively on American shores in the 1880s. In one striking example, the authors of the Dillingham Commission's *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (1911) drew upon the typologies developed by the influential Italian sociologist Alfredo Niceforo to organize the racial classifications used by U.S. immigration officials to identify the psychic character of Northern versus Southern Italians.

> An Italian sociologist, Niceforo, has pointed out that these two ethnic groups differ as radically in psychic characters as they do in physical. He describes the South Italian as excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, impracticable; as an individualist having little adaptability to highly organized society. The North Italian, on the other hand, is pictured as cool, deliberate, patient, practical and as capable of great progress in the political and social organization of modern civilization . . . Niceforo shows from Italian statistics that all crimes, especially violent crimes are more numerous among the South than the North Italians. (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 5, 82-3)

In addition to relying on this scientific evidence of congenital criminality amongst Southern Italian immigrants, the Dillingham Commission observed that Southern Italians were also prone to poverty and illiteracy. These qualities were especially alarming to U.S. immigration officials because, as the Commission cautioned:

> To the student of Italian immigration to the United States the South Italian movement numerically and otherwise is of by far the greatest importance . . . The numerical preponderance of the former race adds vastly to its relative importance, but in popular opinion at least, it is the *character* rather than the number of South Italians which constitutes the real problem. It is generally accepted that the North Italians . . . are more easily assimilated than their southern countrymen, who, because of their ignorance, low standards of living and the supposedly great criminal tendencies among them are regarded by many as racially undesirable. (Immigration Commission 1911 vol. 4, 177-8)

The racialized notions of Southern Italian criminality expressed in the 1911 Dillingham Commission reports are fundamental to understanding the history of Italian immigration to the United States. Among them is the fact that the Commission reports resonated with perceptions and conceptions about *italianità* that had been a pervasive component of Anglo-American culture since the days of Thomas Jefferson and Washington Irving. Since the period of the Early Republic, Southern Italians had been depicted by American writers as stiletto-wielding "dagoes"[13] prone to criminal violence and "Vesuvian" fits of rage, or as *banditi* affiliated with organized criminal conspiracies such as the Mafia, Camorra, and the dreaded society of the Black Hand (Mano Nera). As this paper details, during the period of mass Italian immigration to the United States that took place between 1880 and 1924, these negative stereotypes had a determinative impact on how Italians were treated on American soil. From the lynching of eleven Sicilians in New Orleans on suspicion of criminal conspiracy in 1891 to the 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti for murder charges connected to their involvement with anarchist politics in 1920, the notion that Italians, especially Southerners, constituted an inferior race with an in-born propensity for

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[13] An alteration of Diego, a common Spanish name, "dago" was a derogatory term applied by Anglo-Americans to "Latins" of Italian, Spanish, or Portuguese descents during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

violence and criminality was commonly accepted, and encouraged discrimination against Italian immigrants and their descendants in myriad ways (Botein 1979).

While these extreme episodes of anti-Italianism are well-known, what is less known is when and how the stereotypes of Italian criminality first took root in American culture. Equally opaque are the mechanisms through which these notions influenced national debate about U.S. immigration policy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This paper demonstrates that these historical developments are intimately linked. Prior to 1865, Americans who travelled, did business, and practiced diplomacy overseas gathered ethnographic information about the character of particular foreign groups, including Italians, and transmitted their observations to Americans back home through a stream of published and unpublished travel writing, journalism, and fiction. Through this process of trans-national cultural reportage, American merchants, diplomats, and travelers compiled and spread a catalogue of prejudices and stereotypes about various ethnic and racialized national groups in Europe, which defined and influenced the perception of these same groups upon their arrivals to the United States during the period of mass immigration (1880s-1924). The specter of Southern Italian criminality originated out of this particular trans-national context of encounter. The biological-based constructions of race and racial difference that emerged during the late 19th century can be traced back to the period before the Civil War: the stereotypes about Southern Italy and Southern Italians transmitted by the first American travelers turned into a corpus of prejudices that Anglo-American Nativists later applied to Southern Italians and Italians in general upon their arrival. By explaining when, how, and why Americans constructed and transmitted their negative ideas about the Italian character from the 18th century onward, this paper marks an essential step toward the comprehension of how these deep-rooted stereotypes about race, character, and criminality have shaped the experiences of Italians in the U.S. Moreover, analyzing the historical relationships that developed between Americans and Italians prior to the era of mass migration through Ellis Island helps us to better understand the debates surrounding U.S. immigration policy that led up to 1924, the year the United States introduced a system of national-origin-based quotas that effectively "closed the door"

to Italians and other non-white, non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants seeking freedom and opportunity in the land of liberty.

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