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## The Urban Cowboy: Gender, the Frontier (Ethni)City and the Myth of the West in Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*

(Dis)placing the West(ern): New Transnational and Urban Perspectives

This article aims to consider the transnational presence of the myth of the West through Italian American literature, particularly Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965), which exemplifies the diversity of its urban manifestations by revisiting key western icons. It analyzes not only the circulation and cultural function of the Western in urban areas, but also the crucial interplay of gender representation in configuring old and modern myths. Before showing the relevance of Italian American culture to this revisionary project, it is necessary to establish the conceptual introduction to transnational and urban theory as appropriate frameworks of analysis which have re-oriented readings and conceptualizations of the West(ern).

On the one hand, as has already been made evident by recent research on the so-called Transnational Post-Westerns (see González), the transnational study of the myth of the West is highly productive for transcending that physical and symbolic US region. As a matter of fact, the Italian influence on one of the genre's pivotal resurgences is widely recognized, although little is yet known about the equally significant impact on Italian American artistic productions. Furthermore, the focus on this ethnicity leads to important critical re-readings of the West that highlight the discrepancy between the cowboy as an all-American white icon and the racial and ethnic diversity of actual cowboys (see Barraclough; Goldstein-Shirley; Hardaway).

On the other hand, apart from the well-known transnational cultural transfer in terms of cinematic genre, the Western ramifications have been particularly studied from a spatial point of view. In this sense, the so-called New Western Historiography (see Limerick et al.) has also challenged the traditional conceptualization of the West as an autonomous and self-reliant physical space, highlighting instead the existing connections to other economic and cultural centers in the US Eastern coast, including the interdependence between urban culture and the frontier myth (see Mennell). New findings can be located about the deeper influences of the Western and its archetypes, that is, the most celebrated cultural icons such as the cowboy or the frontier. By continuing to examine the flows of this mythical or legendary space of the West which transcend its geopolitical borders, well-defined manifestations of the genre can be discovered in otherwise unusual contexts and literatures.

This article evaluates in particular that powerful imaginary in other urban landscapes such as New York, which also featured a paradigmatic fascination with the concept of the (Old) West. This has been shown in the imagination of Italian Americans, as is well reflected in their early fiction and later artistic productions (see Casillo; Gardaphé *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*). This urban perspective has been surprisingly understudied and underrecognized. According to Neil Campbell,

the presence of the urban has often been another aspect of the hidden within the stories of the US West, a lost dimension buried below its mythic landscapes and heroic action narratives. In reframing these stories one needs to understand how the genre Western was constituted by this absence and recognize the subtle presence of the city *within* the West. (165; emphasis in the original)

The emergence of the “urban post-western” that Campbell identifies in some films attests to the constant redefinitions of the traditional genre. Although cinema has always been a useful channel for expressing the (re)definitions of the West, it is by no means the only creative device to have fashioned such a popular genre. In her early study *Early Westerns: How to Trace a Family* (1996), Nanna Verhoeff already alluded to the obvious contributions by film and literature, particularly with the rise of the dime novels that popularized

the Western story. In addition, there were earlier artistic manifestations, namely photography, that shaped the tradition of the West. More interestingly, Verhoeff also retrieved the importance of the urban setting or the metropolis, what was called the “frontier city”:

The Western frontier is de facto also an urban frontier. First of all, there was a lot of boosting and advertising to get people to move to the new cities, particularly by Railroad companies. These growing urban societies constitute an aspect that is often not taken into account in histories of representations of the West [...] so that when film came around, a few decades earlier a tradition of representations of the West already existed. (93)

As I will show, Mario Puzo’s novel can also be read in a new perspective when considering the contribution to this ethos of reimagining the Western frontier mythology within early twentieth-century New York City. De Angelis has also noted how this

central myth of American identity is evoked, that of the cowboy and the pioneer, of the Frontier, and of the inner migration from East to West. Puzo displaces this movement and its myth, one of the most iconic situations codified in Westerns, usually set in the barren wilderness of the Great Plains, to the East, re-enacting it in the urban environment of New York City. (162)

Considering not only Puzo’s literary text but also relevant evidence regarding his cultural context, this article reconsiders the Italian American position in transnational Western literature and analyzes the presence of the West in the city and gender representation. To this end, the analysis concentrates on two central elements of the classical West: the cowboy and the frontier, although reconceptualized in the context of twentieth-century immigration. These two elemental features serve to identify the US Western impact on Italian American culture in general and in its literature in particular, through the especially representative novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim*.

## Immigration, Ethnicity and Gender: The Cultural Function of the Western and the Archetype of the Cowboy

*The Fortunate Pilgrim*, set in New York City in the early twentieth century, features classic Western influences and, more interestingly, an urban cowboy. Although only Larry is explicitly defined in the novel as a cowboy, we can find further traces of the Western myth, rendered through the lens of the city and particularly the US history of ethnicity and immigration. For example, there are very explicit comparisons between the old pioneers and immigrants:

They were pioneers, though they never walked an American plain and never felt real soil beneath their feet. They moved in a sadder wilderness, where the language was strange, where their children became members of a different race. It was a price that must be paid. (Puzo 8)

As will be further explained, it is clear that Puzo was deeply influenced by a genre that was so popular in both film and literature. Furthermore, I contend that it is possible to analyze his novel around the influence of the myth of the West in terms of immigrant belonging, a myth scripted through an urban setting as well as from a female perspective, both of which modify some of the conventions.

Italian American critics have pointed out that the legendary cowboy of the West serves two main functions for migrants. On the one hand, it offers a cultural model for newcomers and helps the immigrant to develop a sense of belonging to the new country. On the other, also as a popular icon, it represents the “cultural ancestor” of the gangster figure, which guarantees the continuity of certain values (Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 182). Robert Casillo has alluded to the similarities between the Western genre and Italian cultural codes to study the deep influence of Westerns on contemporary directors such as Martin Scorsese and on Italian American audiences as a whole since the 1950s. More particularly, the Old West is resonant with Sicilian stories which deal with mafia gunfire, as well as with other alleged cultural traits. Casillo claims that

the resemblance between Western and Sicilian codes with respect to masculinity, honor, vengeance, and the treatment of women help to explain not only Scorsese's characters deep affinity for the American West (as in the films of Ford and Hawks) but that of many Italian Americans. (530)

On the one hand, Italian Americans literally embodied the Western, given that Dean Martin and Frank Sinatra typically starred in such roles and were, as Scorsese and a considerable part of the Italian American community, great consumers of westerns in their childhood. In fact, everyone was significantly exposed to such an influence, since the Western had become a mass product: "For decades [...] the expectation that the American film industry would supply westerns to eager audiences was regularly met, and thus largely taken for granted" (Creekmur 395). On the other hand, this influence needs to be analyzed in a broader light as part of a cultural and social transition where an apparently new cultural icon actually implies the regeneration or revival of former values and desires. More specifically, this transformation is generally linked to the accommodation of issues of gender, race and ethnicity. This cultural and ideological context is important to understand the manifold representations and reinventions of prominent archetypes such as the cowboy.

According to Richard Gambino, "the mafioso rivals the cowboy as the chief figure in American folklore, and the Mafia rivals the old American frontier as a resource for popular entertainment" (277). In this respect, it is interesting to compare how a far more well-known text by Puzo has captured the attention thanks to the mythology of the mobster. The introduction to a recent edition of his classic mafia novel *The Godfather* also shows that this text represents a new myth where "the mob story [i]s [now] the central epic" (Thompson 1). This myth replaced the old imaginary of the West with that of the urban frontier and the immigrant rise. In addition, "it provided a strikingly tempting alternative to the official and legal authorities of the day. As the Western pioneers carved a system of justice out of the wilderness, the Corleones create their own within the chaos and corruption of the city" (3-4). At the same time, they respond to the call of the "old" frontier, that is, the regional West, when Michael moves the family and the business to Reno.

Literary critic Fred Gardaphé has analyzed the shift of this popular attraction from the cowboy to the gangster: the latter appeals to spectators as a new incarnation of the codes of masculinity and of a vanished past of glory previously presented in the former. By the 1970s, the mafioso or gangster filled the void left by the charisma of the cowboy, especially in relation to issues of masculinity in US culture (*From Wiseguys to Wisemen* 90). Gardaphé claims that the American fascination with the Italian (American) male mob – and the consequent over-representation of this ethnic type – relates to a historic shift in gender power relations. “An ethnicized version of the iconic John Wayne” (90), as he describes this archetype, it is a projection of (lost) fantasies, a way to deal with changing notions of masculinity in the 1960s and 1970s. The plethora of characters “who exhibit physical power and aggressiveness, criminality, and overt sexuality” is not casual but serve (male) audiences to cope with “the fall of the traditional American he-man”, even if by association to a very specific ethnicity; in fact, the ethnic archetype conveniently functions as a surrogate of US mainstream masculinity: “these are attempts by Hollywood filmmakers to marginalize troublesome characteristics of traditional patriarchy that were under feminist attack by associating them with Old-World ethnic cultures” (42). In short, the use of this stereotype by mainstream media unveils not only an underlying gender ideology but also the fundamental interplay of race or ethnicity.

In turn, the emergence of the cowboy is situated within other social or cultural challenges. As film critic Melenia Arouch notes, in the context of racial conflict and the Anglo American need to reaffirm its identity both in the physical space of the US West and in the “narrative of the nation,” the cowboy was transformed into “a national emblem, a positive social symbol of masculine ethos in a time of instability” (4). Rebeca Scofield also associates the revival of iconic masculine imagery to the “supposed cultural emasculation experienced by white, male Americans in the 1960s and 1970s,” and mentions the 1980 film *Urban Cowboy* as reflecting the anxieties of this cultural and political terrain in which the Reagan era tried to counteract opposing tendencies of US life such as feminism and wider social protests, about gun control or the Vietnam War:

Following *Saturday Night Fever* and disco, John Travolta's starring role in *Urban Cowboy* offered the lynchpin in an already developing fad of cowboy chic. Whether they were petrochemical workers outside Houston or wealthy businessmen on Long Island, "real cowboys" proliferated in new spaces in the late 1970s and early 1980s. They dressed in starched shirts and tight Levi's, drank cheap beer, hit on women, and attempted to master the mechanical bull. America's renewed love affair with all things cowboy exposed a growing need to reassert white masculinity in both the political and cultural realms. (325)

This shows the extent of the reinvention of an archetype which pervades the US cultural imagination rather than being bound to a concrete physical space, moving therefore the traditional untamed frontier to the opposite Eastern coast and paradigmatic metropolis. In other words, the cowboy figure and the myth of the West by extension are by no means limited to precise geographic settings but function as cultural models and symbols of US history, standing for very specific notions of masculinity and national identity. As such, this framework is used to study new configurations of the myth of the West, particularly the representations which center on the space of the city, as mentioned at the start. I now turn my attention to analyzing the key (re)configuration of the urban cowboy in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*.

#### The *Fortunate Pilgrim*: Literary and Historical Context of the (Urban) Cowboy

*The Fortunate Pilgrim* adapts the myth and iconography of the West to an urban setting, which becomes clearly intertwined with the history of immigration, another powerful mythology if considered from a contemporary perspective, but this was not always the case. Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* preceded his bestselling novel *The Godfather* (1969), but few people have noted the critical potential of the former as an ambivalent representation of "all things American." Seen in the light of twenty-first century cultural criticism, Ellis Island and the history of immigration definitely stand in line with the Western frontier as iconic

images of the United States. Specifically, they have become the prevailing cultural narratives of the country, and as such are often used to convey a conservative discourse or ideology. According to Matthew Jacobson, during the 1970s the so-called ethnic revival succeeded in reestablishing the identity and legitimacy in the national fabric of European immigrants, including Italians, who had particularly experienced the twentieth-century US pressure to assimilate, losing their language, being considered as enemy aliens during World War II, and suffering other types of ethnic prejudice. This long-due conquest emerged in the wake of wider social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement, but evolved in different directions. Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty replaced the famous Plymouth Rock of the Pilgrim Fathers as a foundational national myth. Together with the common rhetoric of the “nation of immigrants,” they became landmarks in this public history of immigration and established a new mode of “American nationalism,” or what Jacobson calls “hyphen nationalism” or “Hyphen Nation” (11). While this served to acknowledge the so far discriminated hyphenated (that is, non-American) immigrants, the USA installed that myth of origins by excluding other histories such as those of African American or Native American communities. The history of immigration was duly recognized but at the expense of a “portentous *forgetting* of the gradual and violent history of this settler democracy [...] long before the first immigrants [...] ever came ashore” (9; emphasis in the original).

By contrast, in the novel, and considering the early-twentieth-century context in which it is set, what would become one of the key US narratives about the history of immigration was not yet legitimized. Immigrants, then perceived generally as non-Americans, were far from being considered icons and were rather influenced by mainstream models, namely the cowboys and the fantasy of the West as a way of acknowledging a legitimate national identity. In other words, the main mythology informing US national belonging was that of the cowboy, at that time a popular hero of unrivalled proportions. This explains why the male immigrant could embrace this figure as a cultural icon in an attempt to partake of the country’s social life and cultural norms. Gardaphé has identified this Western influence and the way in which “Puzo describes Larry [the young main character in *The*



*Fortunate Pilgrim*] as an urban cowboy” (*From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 24), due to the cultural climate in which the author was immersed:

Puzo continually refers to the cowboy, a popular figure in films of the late 1930s and early 1940s, a type of admired, public masculinity that boys of Larry’s era imitated. The cowboy figure conveys a strong and stable sense of masculinity, an appropriate symbol of American independence. (27)

In fact, Westerns and cinema in general became interlinked as apt vehicles for Americanization:

the genre’s increased popularity became deeply intertwined with what appeared to be its quintessential Americanness. By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, the western was intricately associated with the discourse of Americanization, which itself began to impart a national identity to the country’s rapidly expanding popular cinema. (Creekmur 396)

In short, Puzo’s formative years (he was born in 1920) coincided with the heyday of the classical cowboy genre: “By 1910, the western was firmly established with the moviegoing public and would reach its zenith in the mid-1930s when more than two dozen cowboy stars were making series of cowboy movies” (Pitts 1). Certainly, the main male character and the setting of the novel are a voiceover of cowboy fantasy. Furthermore, resorting to the legendary West helps both adaptation to the new country and an acceptable codification of masculinity. *The Fortunate Pilgrim* actually opens with a scene where the protagonist Lorenzo (Larry) Angeluzzi is riding on a horse as he performs the role of an urban cowboy along the railroad tracks by signaling when a train is coming through: “In 1928 the New York Central Railroad used the streets of the city to shuttle trains north and south, sending scouts on horseback to warn traffic” (Puzo, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* 3). Although the novel uses the term “scout,” the pictures and the press of the times show that the word “cowboy” was more common. This is how young men on horseback were generally known back then, as New York City or West Side cowboys, given that from about the 1850s the City Council created the job to avoid the high number of casualties caused by

street-level freight cars such as on 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue (precisely where Larry is working), which was nicknamed Death Avenue (LaFarge n. pag.). Linked to this fictionalization, the discovery of those virtually forgotten figures has also inspired the “historically-based” tale for children *Tenth Avenue Cowboy* (2008), by Linda Oatman High, set in 1910, at the very time of “the real-life cowboys who actually rode through city streets warning of oncoming trains” (Littlewood n. pag.).

Puzo’s novel also displays a more mythic connotation of the figure of the cowboy, who is actually becoming a vanishing hero, particularly in the context of the processes of modernization: “In a few more years this would end, an overhead pass built. But Larry Angeluzzi, not knowing he was the last of the ‘dummy boys,’ that he would soon be a tiny scrap of urban history rode as straight and arrogantly as any western cowboy” (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 3). Moreover, Puzo continues the captivating description with an insistence on, apart from his riding prowess, his physical appearance that recalls the typical characterization in many US Western films, which feature a neat and good-looking protagonist (Abel 171): “His spurs were white, heavy sneakers, his sombrero a peaked cap studded with union buttons. His blue dungarees were fastened at the ankle with shiny, plated bicycle clips” (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 3). In short, Larry perfectly embodies “the charism of the cowboy” previously discussed in Gardaphé’s analysis of the figure; he is as valid a hero, daring and seemingly individualist in his adventure or quest, which is evidenced by the explicit comparison: “He cantered through the hot summer night, his desert a city of stone” (3). This is the portrayal of a powerful and honest young man, intended to inspire due esteem or respect: he waves as he makes his horse “rear up for the people sitting on the sidewalk,” while “little children stopped their games to watch him in silent admiration” (3). Drawing once more on Gardaphé, “these feats demonstrate that Larry is well on his way towards manhood, since in order for a (young) boy to become a man, he must perform masculine feats in public” (*From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 24).

In addition, Larry is explicitly compared to the famous early cowboy star Ken Maynard (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 48). However, Larry is a very distinct type of the traditional hero; he is an urban cowboy, since the setting of his exploits is the growing metropolis of New York City, which

is undergoing urbanization and industrialization. Thus, rather than riding in the prairies, he “spurred his jet- black horse through a canyon formed by two great walls of tenements” (3). Instead of sleeping outdoors under a starry sky, he daydreams about his future “in the smelly stable, cowboylike on prairie of stone” (50). Moreover, as much as he enjoys prancing in front of the people on the sidewalk, far from enjoying an exhilarating ride with his horse, Larry is compelled to lead “the animal left into the open railroad yards that formed a great spark-filled plain of steel down to the Hudson” (4). In other words, the western imaginary is replicated in the urban context, which necessarily produces a different outcome. During his journey through the streets, Larry comments on one of the “outdoor movies shown by Hudson Guild Settlement House” in which he sees “a monstrous horse and rider, bathed in false sunlight, thundering down upon him”; instead of identifying with the images, Larry feels threatened as he “felt his own horse rise in alarm as its tossing head caught sight of those great ghosts” (4). This is a telling reaction which disrupts the narrative, given the fact that the character has up until then seemed to fit so well into the myth of the West. Although Larry is so obviously inspired by that heroic imaginary, his negative reaction to the menacing “ghosts” suggests that he has become aware that his reveries do not represent the “true” West, caught up as he is in the “false sunlight” of the West.

As a matter of fact, it is common for studies on the West to remark on the centrality – or lack thereof – of the authenticity of Westerns. This preoccupation with reality specifically concerns the apparent conflict between the genre’s tendency to immortalize a myth of the West in opposition to historical consistency, thus causing an “outrage over Hollywood’s distortions of history” (Scott xiii). However, not only did the most popular Western films but also the novels about the West adapt “original” stories, but they also disentangled some of the genre’s fundamental meanings from that specific region. Richard Slotkin discusses the characteristic abstraction of well-known literary conventions to appeal to new audiences and mass culture: “by translating the West into a purely mythic or fantasy-space, [authors] made western settings available for a range of stories unlimited by the constraints of historical or conceptual consistency” (216). In this sense, it is interesting to note the diminished

role of western landscapes and regional history in favor of the representation of a more urban experience. For example, Zane Grey, “the most popular Western writer of all time” (211), makes “use of the old Myth of the Frontier to answer the dilemma of a post-Frontier, metropolitan society” (215). Specifically, the detective story is the clearest example in which the traditional mythic space is replaced by an urban setting by adapting those western standard elements. Thus, following Slotkin, the “hard-boiled” detective finds its literary roots in the “red-blooded” cowboy. Crime fiction

follows a formula of heroic action. [...] like the West of the nineteenth century, the modern city is a living entity capable of generating events (crime, waves, scandals, new rackets) that may require incorporation with, and modification of, the formulas of literary fiction. (217)

Puzo’s novel also attempts to revive the frontier world within a growing metropolitan society. Although not in relation to crime, in Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* the urban frontier is definitely present, and this (un)familiar setting similarly incorporates as well as alters the conventions of fictions about the West(ern), such as that of heroism. On the one hand, if Larry himself gets only a glimpse of his heroic role in the American imagination, he turns out not to be the expected male hero in Italian tradition either, particularly when his father dies and Larry is forced to replace him as the breadwinner. It can be argued that his ethnicity presupposes a substantial factor that essentially diminishes the quintessential freedom and autonomy that the traditional cowboy would enjoy. On the contrary, tied as he is to his family and imbued with the immigrant work ethic, Larry turns out to be a young man bound by the authority of his mother and unable to economically provide for her and his younger siblings:

In typical Italian fashion, in the father’s absence, the father’s responsibilities fall to the oldest son. Therefore, Larry must begin contributing to the family’s welfare at a young age by providing for the family through his railroad job and by protecting his brothers when they get into trouble on the street. [Nevertheless,] when he falls short of providing the customary protection for the entire family, his mother, Lucia Santa, must step into a family position of power traditionally reserved for men. (Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 25)

On the other hand, in the 1920s New York, like many other US cities, was subject to ongoing transformation and urban expansion. Hence, we can further identify literary readings of New York as a “frontier story” and, more fundamentally, the spirit of conquest in relation to the history of immigration and urbanization. Esther Romeyn has noted how the city has figured as a primarily open and limitless space, a mythical land of opportunity, in the immigrant imagination, pointing out specifically the Italian American belief that the streets in New York were paved in gold. Nevertheless, the fierce reality of another saying turned out to be more appropriate: Italian immigrants had to “make America,” or *fare l’America*, the expression initially used to express the decision to migrate and the hope of making a decent living, although the majority of immigrants just wanted to make enough money to return to Italy. In fact, their literally having to build the new country radically modified immigrant expectations, given that Italians did not find streets paved in gold, as was advertised of the “New World,” but paved the streets themselves.

In this respect, Italian male immigrants had to face their own urban frontier and take on the responsibility of leading their families to a new kind of civilization, as well as assisting in the city’s transformation into modernity. However, in the novel this spirit of conquest, in the context of twentieth-century immigration and urbanization, is not portrayed through Larry but the figure of Lucia Santa, his mother, who becomes his substitute as the most important character when the novel progresses. In fact, in a substantial reversal of gender roles as usually depicted in migration history and literature, the nickname Fortunate Pilgrim refers to a female immigrant, *La Mamma* or *Mamma Lucia*, as the novel has been translated into Spanish, Italian or German. It is an autobiographical narrative that recreates the author’s mother and her migratory and family-raising struggle. Puzo himself considered this novel his best, even though it was eclipsed by *The Godfather*, which dealt with the mafia subject matter that the market and audiences were looking for from writers of Italian origin (Puzo, *The Making* 4). De Angelis also explains the contrasting reception of the novels and how the male figure seemed to be more likeable, which could explain why “the protagonist of *The Godfather* is Lucia Santa turned

into a man" (158), that is, that Don Corleone was actually based on the female immigrant:

Even if the critical reviews were mostly favorable, sometimes verging on enthusiastic, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* did not make a fortune for his author. Maybe telling the story of an average, lower-class immigrant Italian family was not yet the subject material upon which a writer could build a career. But four years later a very different family, headed not by a woman who is "sainted" (*Lucia Santa*), but by a man whose honorary title designates a surrogate of God himself, the Godfather, won Mario Puzo fame and financial success. (158; italics in the original)

Lucia Santa will assume control due to the death of her husband and the failure of Larry himself to support the family as breadwinner, as was demanded of men, especially within the Italian tradition. Gardaphé argues that the husband Anthony Angeluzzi offers no other performance than "his failure as a man" (*From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 25). Furthermore, his death is precisely the opportunity that authorizes Lucia Santa to almost completely exert her power in the family, although she fills the breadwinner role only after the eldest son Larry has in turn failed to do so, a role also complemented by the sister Octavia whose earnings keep the family from the poorhouse. In this respect, Lucia Santa bitterly describes her own husband, besides as a drinker and gambler, as "the master, but a chief without foresight, criminal in his lack of ambition for his family, content to live the rest of his life in the slum tenements a few short blocks from the docks where he worked" (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 29). In dying, Anthony additionally shows his inability to execute the one duty he is expected to properly fulfil, providing for the family. This explains why he is even held as somehow responsible for his own death given that, in Lucia Santa's view, he has "carelessly let himself be killed in one of those accidents that were part of the building of the new continent" (10). As a result, the women in the family, Lucia Santa and her daughter Octavia, "are enacting masculine roles quite naturally to fill voids left by the men in their lives, who ultimately present masculinities that have failed to perform" (Gardaphé, *From Wiseguys to Wise Men* 26).

In this particular case the heartfelt "disruption" is further linked to the specific effects of immigration on family dynamics and gender roles

therein: “such power is also a result of what has been critically identified as the afore-mentioned ‘failed masculinity’ of Italians due to unsettling displacement or other consequences of migration” (Pelayo-Sañudo, “Failed Family Sagas” 51). In the novel, Lucia Santa’s second husband, Frank, is also a failure when he is hospitalized and “given a long period of rest. But this man had to work, he had children to feed” (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 115). Far from being a coincidence, this event is judged as a social ill of masculinity and immigration: “it was always the men who crumbled under the glories of the new land, never the women. There were many cases of Italian men who became insane and had to be committed, as if in leaving their homeland they had torn a vital root from their minds” (115).

All in all, the displacement of the urban hero for the heroine results from the reversal of gender roles in relation to twentieth-century immigration and the development of Italian American ethnicity. As has been shown above, in Italian American society and literature “it is acceptable that women ‘usurp’ their husbands’ power when these ‘fail’ in their traditional roles” (Pelayo-Sañudo, *Spatialities* 61). In addition, it is in this resumed position of power that Lucia Santa challenges some of the traditional male narratives of personal glory and heroism. Defining these in her own terms, she renders a female experience of such central concepts of the culture, which are also typical of the Western, as well as of gangster stories. For example, she rejects the values of respect and honor through violence that Larry proclaims when retaliating a previous offence against his younger brother Guido:

Larry felt tired and at peace. He was no longer a villain. Tonight when he rode up Tenth Avenue on his horse, the great black engine and endless train behind him, people on the Avenue would look at him, shout to him, talk to him. He would be treated with respect. He had protected his brother and the family honor. No one would dare mistreat anyone in his family. He fell asleep. (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 86)

By contrast, Lucia Santa is

a little irritated by all the fuss about the fight, the masculine pride and hoopla, as if such things were really of great importance. Now

she wanted to hear no more of it. She had that secret contempt for male heroism that many women feel but never dare express; they find masculine pride in heroics infantile, for after all, what man would risk his life day after day and year after year as all women do in the act of love? Let them bear children, let their bodies open up into a great blood cavern year after year. They would not be so proud then of their trickling scarlet noses, their little knife cuts. (87)

In line with such female socialization, the individualist male conquest is substituted by a sense of triumph in a collective sense. This is indeed a typical representation of Italian American female identity that critics have identified in different novels. In *Claiming a Tradition: Italian American Women Writers* (1999), Mary Jo Bona has studied this recurrent representation found in female literary production and has coined the term *ethnic bildungsroman* to analyze such texts. It refers to novels of development which reflect the experience and values of some minorities and women, such as the focus on family growth rather than individualistic autonomy which used to be the most common sign of maturity in the traditional bildungsroman. Whereas this genre has conventionally focused on a male quest for autonomy away from the institution of the family, Bona has set to prove that it needs to accommodate the specificities of female and ethnic identities too. It is precisely the family that is a key component of Italian American cultural identity as well as of women's socialization: "modified by the categories of ethnicity and gender, the characters' developments [...] are crucially influenced by their position in the Italian American family" (19).

In Larry's case, his descent into crime in the novel can be explained by the male models available for him in his community. He becomes the individual in society that is expected in terms of gender and ethnicity, that is, by pursuing the values of honor and respect through violent means. This violence, which can be taken to the extreme, is justified in the name of family: "He felt full of affection for his mother and brother and the whole family. 'Nobody is gonna lay their hands on anybody in my family,' he said. 'I woulda killed the guy except for my job in the railroad'" (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 86). Hence, the urban cowboy of Hell's Kitchen also imitates the gangster role typically associated with Italian American manhood.



Notions of family are implicated in male bonding in the Italian American community (for example, the important bond between mother and son) and also in traditional forms of Italian American masculinity, particularly the world of wise-guys and mobsters. For women, identity is also deeply connected to the family and therefore complicates the usual narratives of autonomy and individual victory in fiction. In short, the quest and final success of the whole family is what counts the most and Puzo's text fits well the definition of being one of those "Family Novels of Development" (Bona, *Claiming a Tradition* 23). By the end of the novel and elucidating its title, Lucia Santa will manage to move her family to the Promised Land. She gets out of the congested urban space which is Manhattan's Little Italy at the time and reaches the greener suburbs of Long Island. *The Fortunate Pilgrim* ends with Lucia Santa's congratulatory confirmation to her children that "yes, now they were on Long Island" (301). Following De Angelis, there is a clear spatial and temporal break as they finally ascend "the city upon a hill, as in the very last paragraph of the novel, where Lucia and her sons and daughters really go *up* towards their new life, crossing the bridge that will separate them from their past" (161; emphasis in the original). This is a final and hard won conquest away from the filth and clamor of the tenements where especially she, as a woman, was confined and burdened by "the endless chores" (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 190).

In this sense, even though the act of "leaving Little Italy" for suburbia (see Gardaphé *Leaving Little Italy*) has been commonly associated with becoming white and middle-class, or achieving the American Dream (Dwyer 61), this longing for departure by the central female character may well be seen in the manner of the traditional Western fantasy looking for wider spaces, with its sense of promise and freedom. The immigrant and urban space can be considered to be difficult to tame since the environment Lucia Santa inhabits is especially hostile and she finally abandons it. Despite hard work, Italian immigrants generally had to live in unsafe and crowded tenements (see Hall), surrounded by the contamination produced by the concentration of industries around lower Manhattan (see Anbinder), as well as endure labor exploitation and ethnic prejudice (see Connell and Gardaphé). It seems that the suburb, similarly to the most basic notion of the US West, becomes a new mythology in the immigrant imagination,

encapsulating the idea of progress, which the novel's title also underlines. In fact, Lucia Santa is not the only one to leave for Long Island, which is, admittedly, the immigrant dream despite the idea that the ghetto may offer a safe and familiar place away from the "foreign land" of America particularly for first-generation immigrants (Mulas 51). She has no one to say goodbye to on Tenth Avenue as everybody has already "moved out": "And others too had left for all those strange towns dreamed of for so many years" (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 296-97).

The suburbs were the "utopian havens [...] from the ills of city life" (Gardaphé, *Leaving Little Italy* 31). Yet, despite the intense desire, Lucia Santa's promised land is a place she hesitates to go to when the moving day is approaching. She is nervous, cannot sleep and thinks that "she had never meant to be a pilgrim. To sail a fearful ocean" (*The Fortunate Pilgrim* 296). This hesitation can be arguably interpreted as the fear that the promised land might be a new frontier to conquer. It is no coincidence that the departure is compared with immigration through those references to the pilgrimage and the ocean. This large move to the suburbs was a significant episode in the Italian American community which was equated with a second migration or diaspora (Hendin 14; Bona, *By the Breath of Their Mouths* 139), and the disappearance of the enclaves of Little Italy in many cities. To conclude, therefore, Puzo further complicates the western frontier mythology in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* by constantly avoiding any settled definition and identification with a precise location. The representation of the frontier (ethni)city is a central device, as well as the gender perspective. The West is also reimagined beyond the male character Larry, the so-called urban cowboy in the novel, by focusing on another alternative pioneer, the female pilgrim Lucia Santa.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is worth contextualizing the important role of Italy in the revival of Westerns. There exists a central spin-off of the classical Western genre since the 1960s, which had a comparable global impact and acquired its own status in what is known as the Spaghetti Western (see Frayling). The Italian production of Westerns, or Spaghetti Westerns, with its own particular political function, came to replace US conventions of the Western genre as such. As a case in point, Italian director Sergio Leone is for many the main referent, when not “the master,” of the genre. According to Michael Fisher in *Radical Frontiers in the Spaghetti Western: Politics, Violence and Popular Italian Cinema*, his films and several other Italian Westerns have a clear political orientation, which is both local and international, engaging with causes as diverse as the Mexican revolution, fascism and Nazism, as well as the leftist Italian movements around 1968. Moreover, this new political context explains one of the attractions in the Italian reinvention of the genre in formal terms, namely “the Hollywood genre’s obsessive focus on the legitimacy of violence” (Frayling 2).

<sup>2</sup> My understanding and definition of terms such as “mythical” and “archetype” are based on the common belief that the West has been basically imagined and retrieved over the generations around very specific and abstract images and idea(l)s, mostly transmitted by popular culture and linked to meanings of national identity. Borrowing from Nicolas S. Witschi, “the American West is an extremely powerful idea, one that has evolved over several centuries in the imaginations of countless people both in the US and abroad, an idea (re)produced in books, movies, paintings, and the like. It is an idea that shimmers with abstractions such as frontier, opportunity, honor, individualism, and justice, and it is often (but not always, to be sure) recognized by visual cues such as the cowboy hat, the horse, vast stretches of open rangeland rimmed by snowy peaks or desert mesas, and the handgun” (4).

<sup>3</sup> I would like to acknowledge the Roosevelt Institute for American Studies Research, in Middleburgh, The Netherlands, where I spent a week to do research in the field of American Studies. I am grateful for their support to write my article and for providing me with the sources I needed while working at the facilities. A particularly helpful one was this on-site thesis I had found through their online catalogue.

<sup>4</sup> For example, critical studies about the popular Wild West shows have concentrated on the crucial representation of race as a vehicle of expression for national identity. It is essentially a spectacle of contesting nations or races (typically Indians or Arabs) in which the US subject (typically the cowboy) would become the final conqueror and the superior rival in the competition (see Kollin).

<sup>5</sup> The opening image not only evidences Puzo’s concern with the question of modernity but replicates the advancement of the frontier and nation building in the USA which is such an integral part of the western imaginary (as is shown, for example, in the famous film *High Noon*).

<sup>6</sup> In fact, in an interesting reversal of traditional representations about cowboys, the story can well adapt to the setting of the city and capture different sorts of migration,

eastward rather than westward, given that the main character Ben is a boy who moves with his family from a ranch in the West to New York City. Although he experiences a really difficult transition, as he thinks that he cannot fulfill his former dream of becoming a cowboy, Ben soon finds about the “real” urban cowboys (the Tenth Avenue Cowboys) living and working in his neighborhood. It is thanks to this crucial encounter that eventually Ben “begins to feel as though the city is truly his home” (Fleishhacker, qtd. in Clark n. pag.). The author herself has recognized the impact of those unknown yet “real cowboys,” revered as idols and heroes by children at the time (qtd. in Clark n. pag.). After some research, she decided to take them as the subject matter of her book. For this reason, it is worth analyzing the relevance and role of that mythic character of the West in the urban context too. As a review of the book effectively points out, this not only provides a “glimpse into life in early-20th-century New York City,” but also “could be used to expand studies of American history, cowboys, and cross-country migration” (Clark n. pag.).

<sup>7</sup> Of course, Puzo is not the only one to compare the western imaginary to modernity. This is a common trope of Western films, for example, advocating for a simpler existence through the figure of the cowboy, particularly in the face of rife progress or mechanization (Hockenhull 174; see also Pelayo-Sañudo “Never-Aging Stories”). At the same time, one cannot overlook the general concern about the pace or consequences of modernization, ranging from the evils of industrialization to contemporary mass culture, all of which is often manifested in the “ancient ideal” of pastoralism in US culture (Marx 4).

<sup>8</sup> They comprised, for instance, more than 80 percent of the workforce in New York’s Department of Public Works, which was responsible for the construction of the skyscrapers and the subway system (Mangione and Morreale 138; see also Gabaccia).

<sup>9</sup> Although this topic goes beyond the scope of this article, Mary Jo Bona also identifies different texts which portray mentally or physically impaired men as opposed to powerful and resourceful women, “immensely strong immigrant mothers who help the family survive the early days in America. [...] The writers often characterize their fictional males as divided selves, suffering eventual illness and even death” (207). Following Marinaccio, “the matriarch with an absent husband” (286) is a recurrent literary heroine. See also other useful studies with more explanations for the depiction of “superheroic” women and mothers who are acknowledged a powerful position within the family (see Barolini; Nardini; Orsi).

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