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## The American Connection: The Italian Link to American Studies

It is certainly important for the proletariat that one or more intellectuals, individually, adhere to its program and its doctrine, become enmeshed with the proletariat and become and feel an integral part of it. (46)  
Antonio Gramsci, "The Southern Question"

Given the proletarian character and general illiteracy of the Italian immigration, it was not to be expected that the "Little Italies" would nourish intellectual pursuits. Educated persons were regarded with mistrust. (136)  
Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Coming of Age of Italian Americans"

It is my belief that the best way for Italian students to enter U.S. American studies is through the path of Italian-American studies. What I hope to show in this essay is that by studying Italian-American culture, the Italian student will gain a unique sense of the development of American culture without sacrificing the knowledge that comes from the more traditional approaches that have been used in the past. To study Italian-American culture is to study both the mainstream and margins of U.S. history. To study Italian-American experiences also sheds light on possible interpretations of contemporary Italian history as the country has shifted from a country of emigration to one of immigration. By studying Italian-American studies, a student will learn much about the impact of migration on society and the individual. This essay presents a brief overview of some of the key aspects of Italian-American culture that have had a significant impact on the socio-cultural development of the United States and then points to areas for future study.

Italian Americans have seemingly assimilated so rapidly into American identities that the scholar of ethnic studies has rarely included them in studies and collections of writings on American ethnic subjects. I would argue that while the acculturation of Italians to the United States has been rather

thorough, many never assimilated into U.S. identities and this, I would argue, needs to be the focus of Italian-American studies.

Just as the Italian immigrant to the United States was, for the most part, alienated from the mainstream economy – forced as most new immigrants are to take the work given to them or to make work for themselves – the second generation, the children of immigrants, became social immigrants, searching for acceptance in the larger society, something that would be easier for them once they lost the alien trappings of *Italianità* and mastered the means of obtaining power in American society. It would be in the third generation then that we see mass movement into the cultural mainstream. The irony here is that to be successful on a cultural level, they would have to accept or return to what their parents had to reject.

An observation by Margaret Mead, recounted in an essay by Jack Goody and Ian Watts, sheds light on the effects that an American education might have had on heightening the alienation experienced by many Italian Americans: “Primitive education,” she writes, “was a process by which continuity was maintained between parents and children. ... Modern education includes a heavy emphasis upon the function of education to create discontinuities – to turn the child ... of the illiterate into the literate” (336). This experience in American schools created division and difference; in essence the child became the teacher to the parent, the guide, the translator, and this became a notion that challenged the traditional structure of the Italian concept of family. *Italianità* became an obstacle to the entrance into American mainstream culture. Leonard Covello, who, with the help of novelist Guido D’Agostino, wrote his memoirs entitled *The Heart is the Teacher*, recalls his experience in the American school:

During this period [1900s], the Italian language was completely ignored. In fact, throughout my whole elementary school career, I do not recall one mention of Italy or the Italian language or what famous Italians had done in the world with the possible exception of Columbus, who was pretty popular in America. We soon got the idea that Italian meant something inferior, and a barrier was erected between children of Italian origin and their parents. This was the accepted process of Americanization. We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents. (43)

Covello's words help us to understand why so many first- and second-generation Italian Americans sought economic and popular cultural paths on the road to becoming American. These choices enabled success without strong identification with what was considered a sometimes anti-American immigrant culture.

Assimilation used to be thought of as a melting down process, a process by which each immigrant group reached the same common denominator: the American citizen. As early as 1922, John Valentino wrote an essay encouraging assimilation: "Immigrant children may yearn for freedom to live untrammelled American lives; but they can do so only by abandoning, physically as well as intellectually, their own households" (24). Going to college required such an intellectual abandonment; attending any American institution – be it the military, the library, or even the insane asylum – enabled such a physical abandonment. But by asking immigrant children to abandon their cultural foundation, or at least exchange it for one that was "American," those who longed for a single American culture were denying the utility of cultural diversity.

In spite of a substantial presence in literature, Italian Americans had little visibility in early American popular culture other than the Rudolph Valentino romantic exotic types and a few gangster films. Norman Rockwell paintings and illustrations, considered in the 1930s and 1940s to be typically American, never included images of Italians. Even the works of Italian-American artists themselves were conspicuously void of direct references to the immigrant experience. Filmmaker Frank Capra, who emigrated from Sicily with his family in 1903, managed to include the Martini family in *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946) as a marginal reference to the poor helped by George Bailey. In the literary arts, becoming an American is the focus of much of the early artists such as John Fante, whose "The Odyssey of a Wop," appeared in H.L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, a popular magazine of the 1930s and 1940s. Fante, a self-proclaimed prodigy of Mencken, wrote novels and became a Hollywood screenwriter. His *Full of Life* (1957), a mainstream Hollywood comedy starring Richard Conte and Judy Holiday, was based on his novel of the same title that helped bring this experience into the American mainstream.

Immigrant struggles, beyond trying to make a living and feed self and family, recounted in such novels as Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*

(1939), John Fante's *Wait Until Spring*, *Bandini* (1938), Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), Julia Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), and autobiographies like Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1943), included coping with the prejudice and discrimination that reached extremes in the 1891 New Orleans lynchings and later with the trial and 1927 execution of Sacco and Vanzetti. The literature produced during this period provides great insights into the shaping of American identities and into the obstacles that these immigrants faced while pursuing their versions of the American dream.

A history of the Italian-American intellectual is yet to be written, but when it is, one of the stories it will tell is the tension between what Antonio Gramsci has identified as the organic and the traditional intellectual. It will present a gallery of rogue scholars whose voices are vulgar and vital and whose places in American culture have never been stabilized by political lobbies, cultural foundations, or endowed chairs. It will tell the tale of the pre-Christian paganism of Italian culture that has resurfaced in popular culture through the antics of Madonna and the controversial cultural analyses of Camille Paglia. While both of these American women of Italian descent seem to be innovators in interpretation, they are in fact popularizers of ideas that have long remained submerged in the shadows of Italian-American culture. One need only look to Diane Di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* or the cultural criticism of Luigi Fraina and Robert Viscusi to find their antecedents. The major problem facing Italian-American intellectuals is not a lack of preparation for or sophistication in their critical methods, but a lack of self-confidence that the culture they come from can be used to express itself to the American mainstream audience. The lack of this self-confidence is one result of the immigrant experience.

In these days, when cultural differences are exploited more than similarities are explored, when the idea of working-class unity is clouded by the competition for leisure time and credit card possibilities, it's hard for us to even imagine that there was a time when what happened to the working class mattered to intellectuals. But these days, as more and more radical intellectuals are reclaiming their working-class backgrounds, it is important to remember the cultural work done by those immigrant intellectuals who dedicated their lives to the working-class cause. The earliest voices of Italian America heard publicly were those of political and labor activists such as

poet/organizer Arturo Giovannitti, Frances Winwar, journalist/organizer Carlo Tresca, and Luigi Fraina. What follows is a brief look at some of those immigrant intellectuals.

While Luigi Fraina did not develop an identity that strongly connected to his Italian ancestry, he certainly stayed true to his working-class origins. Fraina was born in Galdo, Italy in 1892 and came to America with his mother at the age of three to join his father, a republican exile. An early participant in the DeLeon socialist labor movement, Fraina was involved in the founding of the American Communist Party after experience in both the Socialist Labor Party and the I.W.W. In the early 1900s Luigi Fraina, who later changed his name to Lewis Corey, was one of the earliest to publish Marxist literary and cultural criticism in America. By the age of 30, he had disconnected himself from any political group, changed his name, and became a leader of the anti-Communist liberal movement. Working as a proofreader and editor by day as Charles Skala, Fraina began writing under the name Lewis Corey. During this period he was a union activist and a prolific Marxist critic and journalist; despite never having been formally educated beyond grammar school, he wrote a number of books about American capitalism. His *The House of Morgan* (1932), *The Decline of American Capitalism* (1934), and *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935) helped fuel the radical movement of the 1930s.

The rise of Fascism in Italy of the 1920s-40s would have a tremendous effect on the identity and behavior of Americans of Italian descent. This effect would become a prime subject in their literature. Jerre Mangione captured this experience in his memoirs, *Mount Allegro* (1943) and *An Ethnic At Large* (1978):

In my years of becoming an American I had come to understand the evil of Fascism and hate it with all my soul. One or two of my relatives argued with me on the subject because they had a great love for their native land and, like some men in love, they could see nothing wrong. Fascism was only a word to them; Mussolini a patriotic Italian putting his country on its feet. Why did I insist on finding fault with Fascism, they asked, when all the American newspapers were admitting Mussolini was a great man who made the trains run on time? (*Mount Allegro* 239-40)

Trapped between two countries (their parents' homeland and their own), Italian-American writers tended to stay aloof of the international political situation of their time. It wouldn't be until after the fall of Mussolini that Italian Americans would, in any significant way, address Fascism in their fiction and poetry. The earliest anti-fascist writings dared to contradict the pro-fascist posture assumed by the American government, and such leading figures of modernism and the American literary scene as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot, were also, interestingly enough, if not outright pro-fascist, at least sympathetic to Mussolini's Fascism (Diggins 245). Those Italian Americans who opposed Mussolini from the beginning did so at the risk of being attacked or labeled as communists by the larger American public as well as their own pro-Mussolini countrymen.

One of the earliest Italian Americans to voice his opinion of Italian Fascism in his poetry was Arturo Giovannitti, who with Joseph Ettor, organized the famous 1912 Lawrence Mill Strike. In his poem "To Mussolini," he accuses the Father of Italian Fascism of winning "fame with lies." And he tells il Duce that "No man is great who does not find / A poet who will hail him as he is / With an almighty song that will unbind / Through his exploits eternal silences. / Duce, where is your bard? In all mankind / The only poem you inspired is this" (72). In "Italia Speaks," Giovannitti depicts America as a child of Italy who can rescue its mother from "The twin ogres in black and brown [who] have polluted my gardens" (76). Giovannitti composed poems that echo Walt Whitman's patriotic odes during the Civil War. In his "Battle Hymn of the New Italy" we find a synthesis of Giosué Carducci and Whitman, as Giovannitti calls for the Italian people to rise up against Mussolini and Hitler.

Along with Giovannitti, those most prominent anti-fascists whose writing appeared most frequently in American publications were the "fuorusciti," those Italian intellectuals who left Italy and found refuge, more often than not, in American universities: Gaetano Salvemini at Harvard, Max Ascoli at the New School for Social Research, Giuseppe Borgese at the University of Chicago, and Lionello Venturi at Johns Hopkins (Diggins 140). These "fuorusciti" were responsible for a number of influential anti-fascist publications. Their presence made "the universities one of the few anti-Fascist ramparts in America" (Diggins 261). Constantine Panunzio, a professor at the

University of California at Los Angeles and author of *The Soul of an Immigrant*, one of the earliest book-length autobiographies by an Italian American, contributed to the understanding of the plight of Italian Americans in this period through his article “Italian Americans, Fascism and the War” published in 1942 in the *Yale Review*. Panunzio explained the relationship between Italian Americans and the government of the immigrants’ native land, arguing that while Italian Americans might have nibbled the bait of Fascism “as mainly a diversion or a means of escape from the feeling of inferiority which the American community imposed on them” (782), they never swallowed the hook, and “Now that the test of war has come, there is no question as to where almost one hundred per cent of our Italian immigrant population stands” (782).

Similar anti-fascist sentiments are found in the fiction of Jerre Mangione. Mangione’s interactions with activist Carlo Tresca became the material upon which he would build his second novel, *Night Search* (1965). Based on Tresca’s assassination, *Night Search* dramatizes the experience of Michael Mallory, the illegitimate son of anti-fascist labor organizer and newspaper publisher by the name of Paolo Polizzi, a character based on Carlo Tresca. Through an investigation of his father’s murder, Mallory learns to take action and, in doing so, comes to an understanding of contemporary politics. Mallory very much resembles Stiano Argento, the main protagonist in Mangione’s earlier and more strongly anti-fascist novel, *The Ship and the Flame* (1948).

While immigration to the U.S. from Italy slowed between the 1920s and 1940s, due to political maneuvers such as the U.S. quota restrictions of 1924, a number of Italian intellectuals were allowed to immigrate to the United States in flight from Fascism. Most prominent among those were scientists such as Enrico Fermi, who has come to be called father of the atom bomb, and writers Arturo Vivante, P.M. Pasinetti, and Nicolo Tucci. Vivante, a physician, contributed frequently to such major publications as *The New Yorker*. His fiction includes a collection of short stories *The French Girls of Killini* (1967) and three novels *A Goodly Babe* (1966), *Doctor Giovanni* (1969), and *Run to the Waterfall* (1965). Pasinetti came to study in the United States in 1935 from Venice and first published fiction in *The Southern Review*. He earned a Ph.D. at Yale in 1949 and went on to teach at UCLA. Pasinetti published three novels, *Venetian Red* (1960), *The Smile*

on *the Face of the Lion* (1965), and *From the Academy Bridge* (1970); his work earned him an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1965. Tucci, who first came as a student, published two autobiographical novels, *Before My Time* (1962) and *Unfinished Funeral* (1964), using European settings to depict a liberation from the history that the emigrant experiences. For these writers, their sense of the literary was significantly shaped by the prominence in 1930s Italy of *Americanisti* such as Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese, both translators and influential editors who helped introduce American literature to Italian culture.

One of the great answers to the Southern Question was the creation of Italian America, which, Viscusi has suggested, was founded on the myth of the rich throwing the poor out of Italy, and it was inside the Little Italies of Italian America where former Italians became the very intellectuals that Gramsci had hoped would lead his country in a revolution ("A Literature Considering Itself" 270). And while Italian immigrants wasted no time in making physical Little Italies, much time would pass before they would create a self-conscious cultural notion of Little Italy; for that, they would have to invent Italian America.

The creation of Italian America can be read as a defensive strategy that helped protect the vulnerable Italian immigrants through the replanting process and enabled them to develop this cultural sense of Italian identity from which they could venture into the U.S. As the Italian moved away from the Little Italies, the rewards and risks of Americanization became greater. Many immigrant men received U.S. citizenship by literally making the U.S. – building roads, skyscrapers, and by fighting in the various wars. These *colonie* became the sites of the earliest development of Italian-American identities, but were never meant to be permanent settlements. As critic Robert Viscusi tells us: "Little Italy meant a captive market of eternal exiles, who could neither enter the order of English America nor return to Italy. ... Little Italy was not only little by definition, but it was always getting smaller. ... In literary history, Little Italy has had two favorite themes: its own nostalgia, and its own death" ("Making Italy Little" 64-65). When Little Italies die physically, they are often preserved in literature and film. So what happens to Italian-American identities that were once defined by geography and nurtured on unchanging notions of what it means to be Italian?



Once you become aware of the impact Italians have had on U.S. American culture from its earliest explorations to its latest scientific advances, you realize that one could stop at just about any point in American history and find an Italian influence, and through it all Italian Americans have unknowingly been reinventing their ethnicity whenever they have learned something new about themselves, and in due time the immigrant paradigm would stop working as a way of conceptualizing Italian-American identity.

This reinvention, as Michael M.J. Fischer tells us, is accomplished through a narrative's "inter-references between two or more cultural traditions" which "create reservoirs for renewing humane values" (201). By identifying and reading these inter-references, we will be able to see that, as Fischer concludes, "Ethnic memory is ... or ought to be future, not past oriented" (201). This is an idea that needs to be developed as we begin looking for ways to present Italian-American culture in classrooms at all levels and to preserve it in museums and other cultural institutions. In an earlier work, I proposed the idea that representation of ethnicity by Italian Americans has become a matter of choice, a prerogative in the postmodern world. The choice, in brief, is whether or not to visibly identify self and/or subject in writing as Italian American. Those Italian-American writers who choose to deal with the Italian/American experience through Italian/American subjects are those whom I call the visible. Italian/American writers who for a variety of reasons choose to avoid representation of the Italian/American as a major subject in their works are those I refer to as the invisible. There are two ways of reading this prerogative: Richard Alba's notion of the "twilight of ethnicity," in which traditionally stable signs of Italian/American ethnicity diminish over time, inevitably disappearing entirely, and Michael Fischer's notion of the "re-invention of ethnicity," in which "... ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual ... something over which he or she lacks control." I argue that Fischer's is the more accurate way of reading the cultural product of contemporary Italian Americans. Fischer tells us that ethnicity, "is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" (195). Thus, in the case of Italian/American artists, we need to observe the ways in which both an American and an Italian tradition function in their works. Locating and analyzing

this juxtaposition requires knowledge of both cultures so as to foster a consideration of the cultural reciprocal relationship between American and Italian cultures as evidenced by the identifiable signs of Italian/Americana that appear in the texts created by Italian/American writers.

Many Italian American artists such as Don DeLillo, Lisa Scottoline, David Baldacci, and Carole Maso have seemingly passed into Alba's "twilight." Yet, twilight has a way of obscuring signs that are visible during other times of the day. No writer totally transcends his or her ethnic background and melts invisibly into the American intelligentsia; one reason they have not been identified as Italian Americans is that their work has yet to be read for signs of *Italianità*, which show up between their (in Edward Said's terms) filiative (birth) and affiliative (association) cultures, or as Werner Sollors phrased it: descent and consent. What I am suggesting today and what my longer investigation demonstrates is that Italian-American identity is fluid and constantly shifting shapes, changing often, more often than most scholars acknowledge. How else can we account for a significant increase reported by the 2000 census of the number of those who identify themselves as Italian when there has not been a similar increase in immigration from Italy since the 1990 census?

So if Italian Americans are moving away from the experience of immigration, how can and will people continue to identify themselves as Italian American? Until we have studies that explore beyond the possibilities of the European-American identity noted in the recent work of Richard Alba and the "ethnic options" of Mary Waters' study, we do well to examine how Italian-American identities are being reshaped through the culture's artists, who are often *avant-garde* and challenging staid notions of identity.

A post-immigrant paradigm of Italophone studies is one in which the Italian American must confront not only the silence of the past, but also the silent lessons of racism that have been instilled as the immigrants learned to become white in the United States and especially how this racism affected their creation of identities as Italian Americans, as Robert Orsi has pointed out in his article, "The Religious Boundaries of an Inbetween People: Street *Feste* and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990."

Italian-American identity was formed from both history and story. Until recently there has been a film/fiction emphasis in Italian-American culture,

as opposed to a non-fictional emphasis via documentary studies. The impact of the fiction has been greater than its nonfiction. When we begin to examine this fiction and what is in it that can be called Italian-American culture, we see that *Italianità* becomes a closet with all the claustrophobia that small spaces encourage. For example, rarely can one see a horizon in an Italian-American film or novel. Even the paintings by Italian Americans tend toward the urban, the crowded and close up, as opposed to possible meditations on the open spaces of the country, the unknown, and the natural. Instead, there is a claustrophobic concentration on the known and the familiar, as though reality and history was a mantra that could make everything safe were it simply repeated often enough.

This is why it is so important for Italian Americans to understand their own histories as they move beyond the experiences of immigration. If this does not occur, the problem is that Italian Americans will become fixed on how others identify them: as gangsters, buffoons, obsessed with producing and consuming food, and any number of other ways society packages and consumes commodities inspired by Italian culture. While much of this representation and commodification is simply so much spice to create alternatives to the bland, Anglo-Saxon fare, it is also a way to project opposites to a people obsessed with separating good and evil, light and dark, black and white. Without knowledge of ethno-history, without knowledge of ethno-stories, individual ethnic groups are limited to reacting to what others produce and kept from creating their own expressions. Italian Americans are being defined by others not by themselves. One key to helping us understand this is the examination of what happened when the Italian language stopped being spoken and how communication flow stopped between parent and child, between one generation and another. We need studies of how and why dialects and language were lost and how these losses created generational gaps and memory lapses.

Another area ripe for exploration is the role that irony has played in the evolution of Italian-American identities. We also need to understand how Italian Americans, through the practice of literalism, have created a rigid notion of Italian-American culture based on an immigrant paradigm that no longer works in terms of contemporary identities; this is precisely why the rosters of Sons of Italy Lodges rarely contain members under the age of 40.

We need to understand the effects of discrimination and persecution, and how the resultant fear led to ignorance and an inability to detach oneself from the culture so that a sense of humor could develop that would lead Italian Americans into a more lively sense of American identity. Future Italian-American identities depend on our understanding of how literalism has created gaps between generations that can be bridged only through education and the development of a new irony.

Mainstream American writers such as Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Diane di Prima, Gregory Corso, Philip Lamantia, all the children or grandchildren of immigrants, did not come to identify as Italian Americans until later in their lives. Their work was never seen as Italian-American by neither their critics nor their communities; yet these same writers, known as members of the Beat Movement, have inspired younger generations and continue to be read in college literature courses. This phenomenon is more often the rule rather than the exception when an American of Italian descent becomes famous. Very few of these "Americans" were accepted, let alone acknowledged by the Italian-American community for reasons including their inability to self-identify as Italian Americans and the fact that their work did not reflect concerns that were considered to be traditional Italian-American issues and are often filled with an irony that earlier generations mistake for self-hatred. These artists represent the type of border that has always existed between what was and what is Italian-American culture. Often writers such as Gay Talese or Don DeLillo, in their older years have taken up Italian-American subject matter in their work only to romanticize and idealize it in ways that support traditional Italian-American identities, but ignore how those identities have changed through the generations. Future studies need to examine how Italian-American identity has shaped their perspectives. We also need to examine the toll taken on Italian-American identity by the traumas of immigration and two world wars. And finally we need to examine the various elements that make up identity, in terms of race, gender, class, and lifestyle. Italian Americans must find out where they are in relation to each of these elements. As they do, they will no doubt begin to grow different from each other and more like the other Americans with whom they interact. This is the work we expect from intellectuals, and in many ways the *avant-garde* of Italian-American culture has not yet had a strong impact on Italian-American identity. Until we see

the development of serious Italian-American studies at all levels of American education, Italian-American culture will always be dependent on familial channels for maintenance and dissemination, and we know this source is no longer stable as intermarriages occur more often than not, and even those marriages fail in more than 50 percent of the cases. What is called for is nothing less than to include Italian-American histories and stories in the body of material that one must master to be considered American. The future of Italian-American culture lies in its ability to enter educational institutions. Italian Americans, who have finally exceeded the average educational level for a U.S. citizen, are in good positions to foster the inclusion of their culture in all American institutions. These new areas, occupied by scholars who have new ideas and new tools to work with, will take us beyond the twentieth-century focus on identities built on immigration experiences and into new previously unexplored areas of Italophone studies.

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