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Is There a Canon in Italian-American Historiography? Historians, Places, and Languages

Almost half a century has passed since Italian-American history has established itself as a legitimate scholarly field of inquiry with the American Italian Historical Association (now renamed Italian American Studies Association) in 1968. Since then, a good number of scholarly books on the Italian experience in the United States have been published, and, in retrospect, Italian-American history appears to have achieved at least one crucial goal: no longer a mere celebration of an ethnic heritage, it has produced a collection of works whose methodological and theoretical relevance has successfully transcended the boundaries of the field. The continuing vitality of Italian-American historical studies in the face of the epistemological change that since the 1960s has revolutionized the social sciences in general and U.S. immigration history in particular may in fact be a consequence of the paradigmatic nature of the Italian-American saga for the overall cultural experience of modernity. At the turn of the twentieth century, more than three million immigrants from Italy provided the unprecedented expansion of the U.S. economy with an inexpensive labor force, in the context of a massive global human movement out of the recently unified nation-state (29 million people between 1876 and 1976). In the U.S., turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants, their descendants, and further new arrivals from Italy became members of a culturally diverse society, developing complex ethnic and racial identities, while maintaining a sense of affiliation – and often actual transnational relationships – with the diasporic “home” across the Atlantic.

My students (Italian and non-Italian) are generally fascinated by this story. I am sure this is due in part to the extraordinary visibility Italian-American characters achieved as icons of American popular culture, which made representations of Italian-American life an enthralling archetype of *Italianità* for global audiences; but more importantly because of the immediate

perceptibility of the heuristic value of Italian-American history for the comprehension of the contemporary human condition.

But if Italian-American history is such an exciting tale to be listened to, doesn't this also depend on how it has to be narrated? Is there a canon in Italian-American historiography? I argue that there is, and it resides in the spatial imagination of Italian-American historians who have been able to craft most convincing geo-historical entities (the *paese*, the region, the nation, the diaspora, the Atlantic, Ellis Island, Little Italy, the suburbs; in turn connected by roads, bridges, canals, trains, ships, subways, mailing systems, and electronic images and information), and it exists because of those articulate, illuminating historical narratives of mobility and identity. Since the 1960s, Italian-American history has developed different languages and narrative styles, reflecting not only the different interpretative purposes, tastes, and talents of its interpreters – the historians – but also the different geographic scales they have been concerned about. The two landmark Italian-American historians I will briefly discuss, Rudolph J. Vecoli and Donna R. Gabaccia, are themselves linked by place, having been born in the East (Connecticut and Massachusetts respectively) but spending a significant part of their professional lives as Directors of the Immigration History Research Center in Minneapolis (IHRC), a peripheral location in the geography of Italian America with its center in New York/New Jersey (along with Rhode Island, these are states with the highest percentage of population with Italian ancestry). With their seminal works, Vecoli and Gabaccia have marked two consequential periods of Italian-American studies, and, what is more important, made this relatively small subfield provide new, leading perspectives to Migration and American History. They did so by focusing on, and in the process shaping, two different historical places – Little Italy and the Italian Diaspora.

RUDOLPH VECOLI: LITTLE ITALIES AND ETHNIC HISTORY

The birth of AIHA in 1968 had a vital antecedent in *The Journal of American History* in an article titled “Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of *The Uprooted*,” by Rudolph Vecoli (1964). Born in Wallingford, Conn., to Tuscan immigrant parents and growing up in an Italian-speaking home, Vecoli received his Ph.D.

from the University of Wisconsin in 1963. With his doctoral dissertation, which described the social and economic life of the Italians in Chicago before World War I, and in condensed form in the fourteen-page essay for *JAH*, Vecoli took issue at nothing less than the foundational text of U.S. Immigration History – Oscar Handlin’s *The Uprooted* (1951). From his Cold-War, liberal perspective, Handlin had proposed a view of the experience of European immigrants to the U.S. at once compassionate and optimistic. Their cultural values useless for American life, immigrants had to suffer alienation, social disorganization, and displacement until they assimilated into the mainstream of American democracy. Armed with the example of Italian communities in Chicago, Vecoli argued for the persistence of ethnic cultures in the face of assimilation (a process to which he clearly attributed a cultural-pluralist negative significance). Against Handlin’s notion of “uprootedness,” Vecoli underscored the *agency* of immigrants as they built their urban enclaves and organized everyday life in the host country around selected elements of their original culture: “The *contadini* of the Mezzogiorno came to terms with life in Chicago within the framework of their traditional pattern of thought and behavior,” he stated (“Contadini in Chicago” 417).

The entire next generation of immigration historians moved from Vecoli’s succinct but effective theorization. For the most part themselves the children of Eastern and Southern European immigrants and educated in the mass universities of the late 1960s and 1970s (but heavily critical of the homogenizing effects of late-capitalist bureaucratized society), these young historians opposed the concept of the “melting pot” as part of American exceptionalism propaganda, emphasizing the uniqueness of each group’s experience and strategies of survival. The ethnic history paradigm, which found its summa in John Bodnar’s *The Transplanted* (1985), even challenged the assumption that turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrants actually *wanted* to become Americans, deconstructing it by pointing at the high number of returns and low percentage of naturalizations (in which Italians championed). Ethnic historians drew also methodologically from Vecoli: for the historians of the Italian-American experience the favorite scale of analysis was definitely the urban community (their favorite time-frame was the peak years of immigration through the Immigration Act of 1924); a productive choice because of the high degree of residential concentration of first- and second-generation Italian immigrants.

In the best examples, the use of quantitative and qualitative sources and a multidisciplinary approach allowed historians to locate the processes of socialization and identification in an actual context, as well as thoroughly penetrate “Little Italies” as regards labor, housing, family structures, gender, associational life, and political and religious participation. That is why a few works of the late 1970s and 1980s transcended the boundaries of Italian-American studies. Eric Foner’s edited volume *The New American History* (1997) placed three books of Italian-American history in an essential bibliography of Immigration History, and all of them were community histories: Virginia Yans-McLaughlin’s *Family and Community: Italian Immigrants in Buffalo, 1880-1930* (1977), Donna Gabaccia’s *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street: Housing and Social Change among Italian Immigrants, 1880-1930* (1984), and Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street: Faith and Community in Italian Harlem, 1880-1950* (1985). A volume edited by Robert Harney and Vincenza Scarpaci, *Little Italies in North America* (1981), suggested that an actual research and narrative universe had formed around the study of Italian-American urban communities, while Gary R. Mormino’s and George E. Pozzetta’s *The Immigrant World of Ybor City: Italians and Their Latin Neighbors in Tampa, 1885-1985* (1987) demonstrated that the same formula could also address interracial and comparative questions (the book won the Immigration and Ethnic History Society’s Theodore Saloutos Memorial Award).

Even though Vecoli remained over the years the intellectual founding father rather than an active participant in “Little Italy Studies,” dedicating most of his energies to cultural organization and the construction of yet another place – the archive (he was a frantic collector of primary sources for the collections of the IHRC) – he contributed significant writings on the basic three “R”s of Italian America – Religion, Radicalism, and Race (to these, Donna Gabaccia would add some of the most notable ones on the two “F”s of Family and Food) (Vecoli 1969; 1983; 1995). When Vecoli passed away in 2008 he was widely recognized as a crucial figure in both Italian-American and U.S. immigration history; a status that his lucid, essential, and jargon-free writing style, reflecting his wariness for broad generalizations and categorizations, had helped him to achieve (“Forum on *Sempre, Rudi*”).

DONNA GABACCIA: TRANSATLANTIC CROSSINGS AND ITALIAN DIASPORAS

By the early 1990s, though, this classic model of study of Italian-American communities had exhausted its momentum. The effects of the post-1965 immigration, overwhelmingly originating in Central and Latin America, Asia, and the Pacific, had redesigned the Departments of Ethnic and American Studies nationwide and U.S. Immigration as a discipline. Italian-American history became a fragment of the history of European immigration, whose principal value for historical theory and methodology now lay in the discussion of the centrality of race in shaping the experience of immigrant Americans. Globalization and the collapse of the Soviet bloc, in turn, deeply transformed U.S. history in a post-national or transnational direction. In this context, migrations to North America became interesting when studied with a multipolar approach and in their circulatory movements, rather than as two-way processes. Almost single-handedly, historian Donna Gabaccia was able to inflect all these new perspectives into the case of the Italian diaspora, making it extremely relevant for scholarly historical debate, and in the process revitalizing Italian-American history as a useful sub-discipline for twenty-first-century historiography.

Gabaccia was born in Great Barrington, Mass., and grew up in rural Columbia County, New York. A “daughter of the Sixties” developing her progressive views as the first child in her working-class immigrant family to attend college, at the beginning of her career Gabaccia was herself very mobile as an academic migrant: she studied in Germany and did research in Italy for the above mentioned Ph.D. dissertation, and later book, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* – a microhistorical analysis of the Sicilian community of Milocca and its translocal twin reconstituted on a few blocks of New York’s Little Italy and an analysis that originally merges women, family, housing, and migration history (“Student Exercise”). In the mid-1980s the book was ahead of its time, though. Gabaccia was to discover that her inventiveness and transdisciplinarity actually isolated her, as national histories and area studies still reigned over History departments: there was not an academic placement, a market, and an audience for transnational and global migration studies. Apparently, Gabaccia would have just given up and chosen another profession if it weren’t for the 1990 annual AIHA Conference in New Orleans. Attending the conference to deliver what she supposed to be her “‘swan song’ paper,” Gabaccia,

met new colleagues (Fraser Ottanelli, Joseph Barton, Sam Baily, Carol Bonomo Albright, and Fernando DeVoto) who praised the global and comparative approach I attempted in it. Collectively, their enthusiasm worked its influence on me. Rather than write another book about immigrants for American historians, I began to fantasize of writing a book about Italian migration for scholars interested in class and ethnicity in many lands. I also quickly met an interdisciplinary group of Americanists searching for global and comparative ways to interpret modern history and life in the U.S. Here was the audience I wanted to address. (*Italy's Many Diasporas*, xii)

In the next two decades, Gabaccia lived up to the promise both of transforming Italian global migration in a paradigm for diaspora studies and of performing a painstaking work of cultural organization, mobilizing international scholars around symposium and editorial projects about “Italians Everywhere.” This network logic, which allowed individual experiences of research to overcome national and disciplinary boundaries, developed into the publication of two collections, *Italian Workers of the World: Labor Migration and the Formation of Multiethnic States* (edited with Fraser Ottanelli, 2001), focalizing the intersection of labor migration, workers’ internationalism, and nation-building, and *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (edited with Franca Iacovetta, 2002), on the comparative experience of migrant Italian women workers, militants, and mothers to different countries. A more recent collection has explored the world of nationalism, intimacy, and emotions Italian migrants have created in the diaspora (*Intimacy and Italian Migration: Gender and Domestic Lives in a Mobile World*, edited with Loretta Baldassar, 2011).

A formidably prolific writer, Gabaccia has authored two monographs that have established themselves as new classics. *Italy's Many Diasporas* (2000) is the definitive history of Italian migrations, in a *long-duree* that spans from the Middle Ages to the turn of the twenty-first century. It addresses proletarian, trade, and political migration and covers the five continents as places of destination. *We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Foods and the Making of Americans* (1998) is a history of immigrant and ethnic eating in the U.S., which insists on the long-term proclivity of Americans to cross the boundaries of taste and identity on the food terrain. In all these works, the Italian-American case has special prominence, as a particularly significant experience for the

illumination of the questions of class, labor, nation, race, gender, and sexuality that Italian migrants have elaborated in response to the specific conditions they have encountered in the world; among them as participants in a global diaspora; and in the relationships with their original “home.”

With Gabaccia’s work, Italian-American history has also entered a new era from a narrative point of view. Gabaccia’s prose reproduces in form – with her very imaginative writing style – the dense, highly theoretically informed, contents of her essays. Perhaps less obsessed with the “objectivity” of sources than Vecoli, Gabaccia is more versed on broad theorizations and interpretations. She has consistently used the Italian and Italian-American case to deconstruct existing, and create new, interpretative postulates. Her works are *tour de forces* that are always rewarding for the scholar of Italian-American history who appreciates the tremendous heuristic values of the field.

MARINA CACIOPPO

The Role of Early Serialized Fiction in the Development of a Canon of Italian-American Literature

For a long time, “few in academia regarded Italian-American literature as a category in itself” (Bona, “Introduction” 3). The idea of an Italian-American literature seemed far-fetched to both Italian and American academics. On the European side of the Atlantic, the closedness of the bureaucratically defined disciplines and a certain snobbery toward the perceived lack of aesthetic quality of Italian-American writings and of the high cultural status of their writers has hindered its development and institutionalization as a field; on the other side of the Atlantic, the dominance of the glamorous gangster stereotype as a pole around which representations of Italian Americans gravitate has set the agenda for many scholars and has obscured the rich and varied cultural production of the group since its beginnings over a century ago.