

edited by **Dorothy M. Figueira**



“Minor Minorities” and Multiculturalism

Italian American and Jewish American Literature



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Literature

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eum

Italia, Americhe e altri mondi

Collana del Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani
(CISIA) dell'Università di Macerata

1

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I dedicate this book to Immigrant Families across the United States of America.

Especially to my own family: my grandfather Nick Gentile from Calabria, my grandmother Carmela from Basilicata, my father Charles Figueira from British Guiana, my daughter Lila from Andhra Pradesh and my daughter Mira from Gujarat – immigrants all.

Table of Contents

- XI Acknowledgments
- XIII Introduction

Historical Overview

Dorothy M. Figueira

- 3 Jewish and Italian Migrant Fictions: Syncretisms and Interchangeabilities Born of a Shared Immigrant Experience

Part I

Italian American Literature

Chapter 1

Marina Camboni

- 27 Going Native: Identity and Identification in Carol Maso's *Ghost Dance* and Robert Viscusi's *ellis island*

Chapter 2

Mary Jo Bona

- 55 Adria Bernardi's *Openwork* and Italian Women's Diasporas

Chapter 3

Leonardo Buonomo

- 91 Ethnicity, Gender, and Culture in Garibaldi M. Lapolla's *Miss Rollins in Love*

Chapter 4

John Wharton Lowe

- 109 Humor as Counterpoint and Engine in di Donato and Binelli

- Chapter 5
Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh
131 Salvatore Scibona's *The End*: Italian American Literature in Translation between Italy and the US
- Chapter 6
Valerio Massimo De Angelis
153 *The Unfortunate Pilgrim*: Mario Puzo's Deconstruction of the American Myths of Migration
- Part II
Jewish American Literature
- Chapter 7
David M. Schiller
177 From Ethnic Stereotyping to Geopolitics in the Vaudeville and World War I Era Songs of Irving Berlin and Al Piantadosi
- Chapter 8
Doris Kadish
193 Jewish Immigrants in the 1930s: Politics, Literature, Religion
- Chapter 9
Marta Anna Skwara
211 The Polish Factor in Jewish American Writing. Three Cases: Sholem Asch, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Jerzy Kosiński
- Chapter 10
Marjanne E. Goozé
237 The Holocaust Memoir as American Tale: Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive*
- Chapter 11
Paolo Simonetti
253 "Sounds Like Jew Talk to Me": Assimilation and Alienation in Bernard Malamud's *The People*
- Chapter 12
Charles Byrd
265 In Nabokov's Philosemitic Footsteps: Selected Russian-Jewish American Immigrant Novels of Gary Shteyngart and Irina Reyn

Part III

Canon, Pedagogy, and the Other

Chapter 13

Fred L. Gardaphé

- 291 Art of the State: The Politics of Multiculturalism in American Literary Studies; or, Who Hung the Rembrandt on the Multicultural Mural?

Chapter 14

Franca Sinopoli

- 303 “Transnationalism” and/or the Canon in Comparative Literary Studies

Part IV

Multiculturalism from Other Perspectives

Chapter 15

Thomas E. Peterson

- 319 *Weltliteratur* and Literary Anthropology: The Case of Italian American Literature

Chapter 16

Ulrike Schneider

- 331 Contextualizing Jewish American Literature

Chapter 17

Sabnam Ghosh

- 341 Pedagogies of Immigrant Otherness

Chapter 18

Ipshita Chanda

- 355 Plural Cultures, Pluralist Ethics and the Practice of Comparative Literature

Conclusion

Ethics of the Other

Chapter 19

S Satish Kumar

- 373 Rethinking Collectivities and Intersubjectivities: Inenarrability, Hospitality and Migrancy

	Chapter 20
	Jenny Webb
395	Theoretical Fluencies
409	Contributors

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Introduction

This book examines the literature of two significant immigrant groups in the United States, the Jews and the Italians. It looks both at the literature stemming from the great wave of immigration (1890-1920) as well as later and even more recent iterations of the immigrant experience. It seeks to connect these immigrant narratives to more recent theorizations of the Other in discourses and academic practices such as multiculturalism and World Literature. This study questions why these immigrant literatures are notably absent from the currently popular pedagogies of alterity.

The theory and pedagogy of multiculturalism, as it is practiced in America, presupposes two basic ideas. First, it recognizes that US history is not solely reflected in the activities of one race (white), one language group (English), one ethnicity (Anglo-Saxon) or one religion (Christianity). It quite correctly claims that African Americans, Latino and Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans and several other ethnic and immigrant groups have made central contributions to American culture. It also presupposes that there exists beneath the differences among an ethnically diverse American population some underlying principles and values that bring them together, notions such as equality, democratic government, individual liberty, etc. The assumption behind multiculturalism is that, given the “ethnic plurality” of American society, universities must create an environment that will uphold, promote, and respect different values. The premise is that knowledge and information of other cultures (within the purview of American culture) will lead to a more enlightened, tolerant and, therefore, more democratically representative society. However, such a

notion of diversity in the case of the domestic multiculturalism that is practiced in US academia today, presupposes a common Americanness, a final transcendent and self-reproducing essence that binds all Americans together. It requires a national character that guarantees the individual's right to differ. It celebrates the competing claims of an assimilationist "common culture" and fulfills the desire for a free-wheeling social order founded on the principle of unity in multiplicity. The institutionalization of multiculturalism in the American educational system has been presented by its theorists and practitioners as a way to foster minority rights¹.

An outgrowth of the movement in the 1980s on American campuses to revamp the canon, multiculturalism and its subsequent avatar, World Literature, propose to open the classroom to immigrants, subalterns, and exiles. Both multiculturalism and World Literature claim to envision the world from a decolonizing, anti-discriminatory, and anti-racist perspective. By including representatives of neglected groups, such pedagogies of alterity offer an appearance of liberal reform wherein the educational system claims to encourage tolerance, pluralism, and diversity. Multiculturalism stemmed specifically from the perception that progressive policies and Civil Rights gains have deteriorated. It claimed to address demographic change, and its more recent formulations in World Literature, developed from the same premises. These weighty concerns, however, may not necessarily be alleviated by mere canon reform. Moreover, the theories of multiculturalism and World Literature neither address the viability of such a reform project nor question the notion of a common culture and its assimilationist vision of the Other. In fact, the practice of reading a text through a multicultural optic, as it is presently preached in the American classroom, often leads to a levelling out of difference, since multiculturalism's underlying assumption is that people can better comprehend people like themselves. In this respect, multicultur-

¹ For an introduction to the theory and practice of multiculturalism, see Dorothy M. Figueira, *Otherwise Occupied: Pedagogies of Alterity and the Brahminization of Theory*, New York, State University of New York Press, 2008.

alism differs from the practice of Comparative Literature that has always aimed at engaging alterity and translating difference.

Comparative Literature was a discipline that developed out of the immigrant experience in post-World War II America. It is based on and has always recognized the multiplicities of cultures in its study of literature, and pays special attention to linguistic, historical, and cultural specificities. For these reasons, Comparative Literature demands knowledge of more than one national language and literature. It welcomes theoretical approaches from other disciplines, but tends to seek inclusion for the sake of comparing rather than any political agenda. It compares in an attempt to broaden understanding. Rather than objectifying (exoticizing, fetishizing) the Other as one often finds in multiculturalism, or its more global form of the recent American configuration of World Literature, Comparative Literature aims for metanoia. It seeks co-extentionality through hermeneutics and an ethics of encounter. It does not limit itself to multiculturalism's and World Literature's politics of inclusion.

However, within all these pedagogies, Comparative Literature included, there has been a regrettable tendency to omit from the canon quite a number of texts that are liminal to mainstream national literary production. Such literatures, among which we here count Italian American and Jewish American, find practically no place in American multiculturalism, perhaps because they fit no facile assimilationist pattern and appear "tribal" rather than "minority". They are also largely absent from Comparative Literature's and World Literature's roster of texts. This volume seeks to redress this neglect and reintroduce these two literatures into the general literary discussion of alterity that dominates literary studies today. These literatures have been selected as case studies for specific reasons. Jewish American and Italian American literatures are particularly rich traditions. Although they comprise a significant corpus within American literature and while there exist anthologies and critical studies for each of these immigrant literatures, they have never been studied in relation to one another. They have also not been examined together in the context of their common marginal role within the canon of American literature and its pedagogical politics. This volume al-

so investigates how the issues of race may have impacted on the role these literatures play (or do not play) in canon formation.

Race is an important concern both in this literature as well as in its reception. While the Jewish and Italian immigrants experienced challenges that were quite distinct from each other, they shared a similar experience of immigration: they both entered the United States as officially White, only to discover upon disembarkation that they were not viewed as such by the majority population. In this respect, Jewish American and Italian American texts comprise the first minority literatures in America to have reached a large readership. As such, a comparison of these immigrant literatures allows us to investigate the various discourses on race that contribute to the configuration of ethnic identity, both by dominant White American culture and within these immigrant groups themselves. This volume, therefore, aims at providing an innovative comparative approach both to multicultural studies and ethnic studies. It is a task long overdue. The literatures of Jewish and Italian immigrants also have much to contribute to the study of the Other, particularly through their authors' struggles with issues beyond race, such as gender, religion, cultural ascendancy and assimilation. Ultimately, this volume seeks to tie the study of these immigrant literatures to pressing theoretical and pedagogical concerns, namely, the role of American ethnic literatures in the multicultural classroom and their place in Comparative Literature and World Literature curricula.

Our investigation begins with Dorothy Figueira's examination of the historical context of Jewish and Italian immigration to the States that colors the literature deriving from the wave of immigration and its aftermath. She evaluates the circumstances that allowed immigrants to become as marginalized as they found themselves. What racial and political issues in American culture brought about the conditions that these literatures expose? Figueira shows, through the history of the immigration of Jews and Italians, how nativist racism became codified in law. She then moves forward to question whether the exclusion of these two groups has not been replicated in their subsequent balkanization within ethnic studies and its institutionalization in American academia. With her initial theoretical framing,

Figueira foregrounds the analysis of various works from within the two immigrant literatures in question that are the subjects of the subsequent essays in the volume.

We move from this general contextualized foregrounding to look first at specific instances of the Italian immigrant presence in American literature. Marina Camboni provides the opening essay in this section. She explores the complexity of notions of the self as part of the conscious process whereby an individual becomes a person capable of criticizing the roles s/he has been assigned within a given society. Moving from the concept of “person” found in Maria Zambrano’s work, Camboni’s essay underscores both the partiality of social roles, and the fact that in patriarchal society a person is conceived of as a male-gendered individual entitled to full human dignity and rights. She argues that, differently from the concepts of “identity” and “subject”, which have a distributive value, the notion of personhood applies to unique, embodied human beings, located in time and space. The two Italian American literary works analyzed in this essay, the 1986 novel *Ghost Dance* by Carole Maso, and *ellis island*, the long poem by Robert Viscusi (2011), confront such pre-determined ethnic identities. They offer distinct strategies for traversing the past to make space for the limited freedom in which not a pre-determined identity, but a unique human person can be shaped in the American context. Two narrative lines inform the analysis of these texts: the construction of a personal and American self through identification with the natives and the land; and the internal relationship whereby the personal and ethnic, the historical and the universal are joined in a constellation which has the single human life and its aspirations at its center. A second key critical argument is that both *Ghost Dance* and *ellis island* not only are highly experimental allegories, but belong as much to Italian American as to American literature and to World Literature. These two Italian American writers re-claim the American land as the common ground for personal and collective identity.

In Chapter 2, Mary Jo Bona analyses Adria Bernardi’s postmodern novel, *Openwork* (2007). Bona shows how Bernardi destabilizes the given history of migration to the

Americas by collapsing borders between narrator/author and by resisting traditional separation between private and public histories. Bernardi's portrait of Imola as a wet nurse and needle worker enables the author to draw attention to the peasant woman's historical role in nurturing successive generations of Italian children. From the mountain village on the border of Tuscany, Imola's post-*Risorgimento* story will cross and intersect with seven voices throughout *Openwork*, embracing unofficial records of women's lives through the trope of needlework. Structurally and thematically, the sewing of openwork functions as a transnational symbol of mobility in the novel, securing both a sense of permanence and a recognition that this kind of needlework depends on spatial openness. Bona argues that Bernardi presents the foundling wheel, the private home, and the orphanage as institutions that have demonstrably challenged, if not distorted, mother-child bonds. *Openwork* ultimately shows that, despite the confining nature of systems designed to restrict the maternal, women will create gestures of permanence to counter institutional forms of oppression.

In Chapter 3, we move back to an earlier wave of Italian immigrant fiction with Leonardo Buonomo's examination of *Miss Rollins in Love* (1932), the second novel by the Italian American author Garibaldi M. Lapolla, who is best known for the third and final novel he published in his lifetime, *The Grand Gennaro* (1935). *Miss Rollins in Love* centers on the relationship between a high school teacher of Latin, Amy Rollins, and her Italian American student Donato Contini. Buonomo maintains that this novel deserves to be rescued from oblivion for its interesting depiction of inter-ethnic communication and gender dynamics, as well as for its focus on education and art in immigrant America and their role as fundamental components in the construction of selfhood. Lapolla portrays Donato as a budding sculptor inspired by his father's artistry as a puppeteer and, more generally, by his family's experience as immigrants. Buonomo posits that Lapolla is offering a viable alternative to assimilation, a path to success in the United States in which one's heritage, instead of being sacrificed on the altar of Americanization, is in fact celebrated and transformed into the stuff of art.

In Chapter 4, John Wharton Lowe looks at a novel from the same period, Pietro di Donato's towering masterwork, *Christ in Concrete* (1939), as presenting a tragic but inspiring narrative of Italian American immigration. Surprisingly, however, the somber story of a working family's struggles is off set and punctuated by unexpected doses of ethnically accented humor. Lowe contrasts di Donato's novel to a recent wildly inventive postmodern novel by Mark Binelli, *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!* (2006). Binelli takes this American historical event of the anarchists' conviction, seen by many as a failure of the American judicial system, and transforms it into a scathing satire of acculturation, popular culture, and the rise of Italian Americans in the entertainment industry. Lowe's essay meditates on the uses of tragedy and comedy in Italian American literature in general, contrasting and comparing the achievements of di Donato and Binelli as they sketch narratives that prove provocative and elegiac, but also comic. Lowe demonstrates how Italian American humor bases itself on and continues to draw from the comic traditions of Italy.

In Chapter 5, Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh analyzes Salvatore Scibona's novel *The End* (2008), which is set within a fictional immigrant neighborhood populated in the 1950s mostly by first- and second-generation Italian Americans (Elephant Park, Cleveland Ohio). In the US, this novel received quite a number of favorable reviews praising both its literary merit as a Modernist masterpiece and its authentic depiction of the ethnic immigrant experience. Both the author and his characters were praised for their exemplary Italian Americanness. *The End* was nominated as one of the five finalists at the 2008 National Book Award. Translated into Italian in 2011 as *La fine*, Scibona's novel also met with a positive reception in Italy, primarily by virtue of the author's Italian/Sicilian origins and the novel's sophisticated "modern" form. Both American and Italian critical readings reflect a still powerful great divide between ethnic and social documents on the one hand and high Modernism on the other. Such Modernist/ethnic readings erase or naturalize the complex racializing/ethnicizing dynamics at work inside and outside the text (the unnamed narrator vs. the Italian American

characters; the Italian American community vs. African Americans; the identitarian performances and strategies of the real author). As Petrovich Njegosh's essay argues, *The End's* and Scibona's critical, transatlantic success depend to a great extent on the racial/ethnic "reality effects" of a fictional Italian Americanness evoked through Modernist and Postmodernist literary tools as well as through extra-literary categories such as point of view, voice, memory, post-memory, ethnicity and race.

Part I concludes with Valerio Massimo De Angelis's examination of Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965) and its deconstructions of American myths of migration. De Angelis begins by comparing the different strategies adopted by two of the most representative authors of 20th-century American "ethnic" fiction, the Jewish American Henry Roth and the Italian American Mario Puzo. He then proceeds to deconstruct the dominant myths of migration in American culture. This essay aims at pointing out how – contrary to Roth, who somehow eventually manages to reinforce the idea of America as a "heterotopia" (to borrow Michel Foucault's terminology), if not a utopia as such – Puzo paradoxically dismantles those myths by telling the story of their fulfilment, at least from the point of view of the Italian American community. Roth translates the myth of the "Golden Land" into non-materialistic terms. He substitutes the metaphorical dream of wealth for a "real" dream that fantasizes the harmonization of the various hyphenated identities present in Manhattan's Lower East Side without making them lose their individual distinctiveness. Puzo painstakingly describes the ascent of an average, lower-class immigrant Italian family from poverty and their precariousness with reference to affluence and stability. Puzo's novel thus shows how the American dream is often purchased through the renunciation of cultural authority and ethnic identity. It entails the immigrant accepting to be melted away. De Angelis's obviously ironical title, that links the Italian American experience to the mythological founders of American civilization, sets the stage for a brutal deconstruction of the American Dream, all the more treacherous when the Italian immigrants manage to make it true. They are unfortunate, not because they are Italian and immigrants, who come

from a Catholic, rather than a Protestant environment and are, therefore, implicitly unable to comply with the imperatives of capitalist ethics. Rather, they are unfortunate precisely because their experience repeats and redoubles that of the original Pilgrims, revealing the self-defeating, Sisyphus-like logic of a myth of individual and collective progress through its deferral in the fulfillment of desire that actually hides (and strengthens) the de-humanizing machinery of exploitation.

The comparative component of De Angelis's essay, wherein the masterpieces of two giants of their respective ethnic literatures are juxtaposed and the Jewish American immigrant experience is compared with that of the Italian immigrant, sets the stage for Part II, which opens with David Schiller's essay on the Jewish and Italian influences on Tin Pan Alley compositions. In the early years of the twentieth century and at the height of Italian and Jewish immigration to the United States, two talented young men rose to prominence as professional songwriters. One, Al Piantadosi, was a first-generation American, born in New York City to parents who had emigrated from the Campania region of Southern Italy just two years earlier. The other, Irving Berlin, born in Mohilev, in the Russian-Jewish Pale of Settlement, came to the US as a five-year old child with his parents. Berlin's trajectory – from the vaudeville composer who trafficked in ethnic stereotypes to the icon of Americanism who composed "White Christmas" – is well known. But, before Berlin began to define Americanism in terms of support for World War I ("Let's All be Americans Now", 1917), Piantadosi's song, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" (1915), became the anthem of the American pacifist movement. Drawing on a rich legacy of primary sources, including both sheet music and recordings, this essay explores the similarities of these composers' early careers and the success that they both enjoyed, as well as the differences in their posthumous reputations. In doing so, it adds a fresh layer of understanding to the role that Tin-Pan Alley played in both "ethnic" identity formation and in the "Americanization" of immigrant communities. From the world of music, we then move to the role of Jewish Americans in the sphere of literary criticism.

In Chapter 8, Doris Kadish examines the dramatic rise of Russian Jewish immigrants in the New York cultural scene in the early 1930s. Her illustrative example is Philip Rahv, the co-founder in 1934 of *Partisan Review*, described by T.S. Eliot as the best American literary periodical. Kadish questions whether Rahv should be included in the history of Jewish immigrant literature or literary influence by Jewish immigrants, given that he emphatically rejected all affiliation with the Jewish religion, was anti-Zionist, and never chose to speak out against the rise of Hitler. Kadish, claiming that Rahv merits our attention for these very reasons as a counter-narrative to accepted notions of what it means to claim minority status or origins and as a reminder that there has never been one single path to belonging to an immigrant group or to representing its cultural viewpoint, especially for a group like the Jews. A comparison of Rahv to an author such as Saul Bellow illustrates the need to uncouple the terms “Jewish” and “immigrant”. Bellow retained his Jewishness and rejected the ideas and ways of the immigrant. Rahv rejected Jewishness, but remained an immigrant. His social and professional assimilation notwithstanding, he remained tied in profound ways to the language, feelings, ideology, and conflicts that he shared with Russian Jewish immigrants of his generation. Kadish examines two texts here: Rahv’s 1934 variation on a Yiddish poem, “Homeless but not Motherless” (a socialist realist depiction of the Depression focusing on class disparity and the Yiddish-speaking proletariat), and his famous 1939 essay “Redskins and Palefaces”. Both texts show that Rahv remained an immigrant in the sense that he never fully endorsed American values. His worldview was internationalist, not narrowly nationalist, neither American nor Israeli. Politically, his commitments were to non-American ideologies: socialism and non-Stalinist Marxism. Intellectually he remained attached to Europe. For Rahv, both paleface and redskin American writers failed to measure up to European giants like Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann in grappling with the crisis of values with which the modern world is afflicted or understanding history in its movement and evolution. In an epilogue, Kadish considers Rahv’s puzzling gift of his estate to the state of Israel and reflects upon what it says about his Jewish immigrant identity.

In Chapter 9, Marta Skwara examines how Jewish American writing is often mediated by the source culture, particularly its representation of home by the first generation of immigrants who remember traits of their native culture and make creative use of it in their writing. She examines three Jewish American authors of Polish origin, who at different points of their lives settled in the US and offered contrasting attitudes towards their Jewish-Polish background, which, in turn, determined their American literary careers. She looks at the Polish elements in their writings and questions the facile generalizations that have been applied to their “Jewish American writing”. She begins by examining Sholem Asch. Despite his having settled in the US during World War I and having become a naturalized American citizen in 1920, Asch has consistently been labelled as a Jewish or a Jewish writer of Polish origin, even though his plays were staged in New York and most of his novels were written and published in the US (in Yiddish and/or in English translations) and, among them, seven were exclusively devoted to Jewish American life. Skwara also investigates Isaac Bashevis Singer. Just like Asch, Singer never wrote in Polish, but again like Asch, he made his Yiddish literary debut in Poland (in 1935) and won wide audience among Yiddish readers. He immigrated to the US soon afterwards and began writing in English, while continuing to write in Yiddish, and actively participate in the process of translating his works. Singer never forgot his Polish heritage, incorporating it into his novels and short stories that were usually set in pre-war Poland. He enjoyed enormous success (not only in America but also worldwide – Singer was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1978). The last writer examined in Skwara’s essay is Jerzy Kosiński, who never wrote in Yiddish and never published in Polish, his native language and the language in which he received his higher education. Nevertheless, he based some of his novels written in America on his Jewish-Polish experience. Perhaps it would be more proper to say: he based them on dark fictions he created of this experience. Having introduced these three cases, Skwara outlines three specific dimensions of these Jewish-Polish-American writers’ works: biographical (which inevitably means racial, historical, political and cultural), lin-

guistic (including language transformations, adaptations and translations), and intertextual (embracing all kinds of textual memory and its evocations). Their literary fate is varied; it is determined by their memory of their native heritage, but also significantly by the attitudes regarding Poles and Poland held in their adopted country. In the pre-World War II period and in the wake of the Holocaust, the negative reception of Asch's work in the US and the blindly uncritical reception of Kosiński tell us much about the role that Poles have played in the American consciousness, even up to the present day. At the time this paper was presented at the conference, the then US President Barack Obama had recently spoken of "Polish concentration camps", much to the dismay of Poland.

This notion of immigrant authors, "writing for" American audiences, catering to American ideological agendas, and mirroring their prejudices is amply seen in the next essay in the volume, where Marjanne E. Goozé examines Ruth Kluger's memoir *Still Alive*. An earlier version of this book appeared in German in 1992. While Kluger called the English work "another version, a parallel book" of that earlier text (210), Goozé's essay makes the case for *Still Alive* being viewed as an independent text, written for an American audience, and in particular aimed at American feminist readers, or, more specifically, Jewish feminist readers. This parallel book re-contextualizes Kluger's (the spelling of the author's name in the German version) story within the American cultural archive. She contends that what Kluger wrote in 2001 was colored by her understanding of American second-wave feminism and the role Holocaust memoirs and fictions have played in the American memory community since the late 1970s. The 2001 text belongs to narratives of the Jewish American experience. While Kluger accomplishes the transformation of her German memoir into an American version in several ways, she consciously refuses to participate in "the Americanization of the Holocaust". This reticence is due to the narrative structure of the memoir. It does not limit itself to her Holocaust girlhood, as the book's subtitle indicates, but to her whole life testimony, where she reflects upon the nature of memory and the genesis of both versions of her memoir. The

memoir reveals how more than four decades of living in the US shaped the author's portrayal of her younger self, leading to the publication of this Jewish American feminist autobiography, with its own ideological perspective.

In Chapter 11, Paolo Simonetti looks at the American Jewish writer as “a specialist in alienation”. He views this alienation as (at least) a threefold process: from American culture, from Jewish-Yiddish culture, and from European culture. For this reason, Bernard Malamud opined, Jewish American writers find themselves in a historically unique position, being particularly fit to tell a multifaceted story. In this essay, Simonetti analyzes Malamud's last novel, *The People* – which remained unfinished at the time of his death in 1986 and was published posthumously three years later – as an original narrative that aims at revisiting the “official” historical interpretations about the conquest of the American nation, as well as the principles of US democracy. Reflecting on the origins of multiculturalism, Malamud set his novel in 1877-78, during the bloody conflict between the United States Army and the Nez Perce tribe of Native Americans who call themselves “The People”. This novel is a metafictional historical novel dealing with some of Malamud's recurring topics, such as the father-son relationship and the possibility of pacifism in the midst of war. It is also a strong reflection on the social and moral contradictions of migration and assimilation. In *The People*, Malamud blends different cultural traditions – the Western and its postmodern rewritings, the captivity narratives typical of the colonial period, the European *Bildungsroman*, the allegorical and humoristic parables of Yiddish folklore, even Holocaust narratives – in order to find a voice capable of challenging WASP-oriented models of assimilation. It is significant that, during the last years of his life, Malamud depicted with few but essential brushstrokes the tragicomic nature of such a protagonist: Yozip Bloom, a Jewish peddler who against his wishes becomes the chief of an Indian tribe. He is a liminal figure, caught between not only two, but three different worlds, cultures, and traditions: the millennial Jewish heritage of Eastern Europe, the ambitious faith in progress and conquest proper to young America, and the ancient traditions

of the Native Americans that he sides with in order to guarantee their survival. What makes *The People* particularly interesting is the narrator's unique voice, as well as his dislocated point of view, different from both that of the conquering white people and of the defeated Indians. His voice is staggering, unsure, and often unable to express adequately his own feelings, so that its meaning is deliberately and continuously misunderstood and altered. His own name is even unstable. In the process of negotiating his fluid identity, the Jewish-Indian American Yozip/Jozip/Joseph lives through an ordeal very similar to the experience of thousands of migrants who arrived in the United States in the last two centuries; the novel's plot also reenacts the dynamics of conquest and colonization that brought about the ghettoization and the silencing of dissenting or inconvenient voices, easily dismissed as "Jew talk".

In Chapter 12, Charles Byrd examines the flourishing of Russian-Jewish American fiction in the past two decades. He focuses on the works of Gary Shteyngart and Irina Reyn, two of the most important novelists spearheading this trend. Both authors, as Byrd points out, are interestingly deeply influenced by the works and writings of the Russian American writer Vladimir Nabokov. Though a non-Jew, but having married Jewish, Nabokov exhibited a consistently philosemitic orientation in both his life and his writings. Byrd argues that, for Shteyngart and Reyn, Nabokov functions as an avatar of "transculture" (or "transculturalism"), distinguished here from "multiculturalism", in the tradition of Mikhail Epstein's theory (*Transcultural Experiments: Russian and American Models of Creative Communication*, 1999, *inter alia*). Shteyngart's first two novels, *The Russian Debutante's Handbook* (2002) and *Absurdistan* (2006), express transculturality in their complex counterfactual geographies, which expand upon and make the Jewish experience a model of counterfactual geography found in Nabokov's *Ada* (1969). Byrd then notes that Reyn's 2008 novel *What Happened to Anna K.* also provides a transcultural understanding of the Jewish experience through the prototype of the Russian émigré in Nabokov's *Pnin*. Finally, Byrd elaborates on how Reyn's more recent novel, *The Imperial Wife*, transculturally

juxtaposes the story of a Russian Jewish émigré in New York with the history of young Catherine the Great's emigration from Germany to St. Petersburg. In echoing a more contemporary iteration of the historiographical metafiction of Malamud's last novel explored in Simonetti's essay, Byrd's piece offers an interesting counterpoint within the pluralities and continuities that comprise the Jewish American experience and the narratives emerging from it.

The volume then shifts from the literary analysis of these immigrant fictions to their theoretical implications. As noted, these immigrant texts are largely ignored by the commodification and anthologization of the Other one finds in literary studies today. Yet, they have much to teach us regarding canon formation, pedagogical politics and the ethical stakes involved when we purport to engage alterity. These final three clusters of essays open up the discussion to these very issues. The analysis of Italian American and Jewish American literary production examined in this volume offers only a select, yet representative, but by no means inclusive set of inquiries. However, it highlights the richness, diversity and significance of the corpus of immigrant fictions both past and present. In doing so, it brings into relief their relative absence from the canons of multicultural, American, World Literature canons. Moreover, these works (not to mention their neglect) raise some serious questions about academic shibboleths regarding inclusion, canon formation and pedagogical politics. The discussions of immigrant literary texts in Parts I and II of this volume and the weight of their testimony allows us in Parts III and IV to broaden the theoretical discussion beyond what is currently deemed sufficient and sufficiently inclusive and propose some more innovative directions for further discussion.

Fred Gardaphé opens the discussion by examining the place of Italian American fiction in the light of contemporary pedagogical discourses of multiculturalism and inclusivity in the humanities and literary studies today. His essay focuses primarily on the politics of assimilationism that underlies iterations of inclusivity through academic multiculturalism, which in the United States, Gardaphé argues, continues to be predominantly de-

fined by Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon frames. Such frames, he further notes, underpin notions of high and low art, that severely and detrimentally impact the reception of not only Italian American art and literature, but all forms of expression that are not conveniently framed by such a mythology of high culture generated for and by the scholarly community. Gardaphé views multiculturalism as a rich and generative methodological approach for engaging with the experiential pluralities that comprise the idea of an American national culture. He holds out hope for the possibility of multiculturalism, should it move beyond a narrow politics of assimilation and inclusion.

Franca Sinopoli then examines the model of “literary transnationalism” as a new meaning of Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* as an antithesis and antidote to the “centre vs. periphery” model (or majority vs. minority), through which the mainstream literary heritage can be filtered in its extra-territorial or decentered existence. She refers to models of “literary mobility” that have developed within the studies on literature and migration in the twentieth century. Sinopoli places the “transnational paradigm” as originating inside a remarkably rich contemporary theoretical horizon, which goes beyond traditional literary studies (that is, focused on a monolingual and monocultural idea of literature) and finds fruitful connections with those theoretical discourses that deal with themes such as plurilingualism, translation, heteroglossia, and transculturalism. The relationship between literature and language, a central object of study in the transnational mobility model, is not only read in the perspective of the so-called belles-lettristic tradition, but also in a culturalist vein, which underscores the interconnections, plurivocality, self-translating effort, and hybridization of different cultures and languages. It addresses those instances when foreign subjects become culturally and linguistically estranged in a new national context. This transnational perspective was developed in the 1990s in the social and anthropological ambit of immigration studies. It differs from the previous perspectives of migrant studies, which stress the observation of the forms of migrants’ integration inside countries of destination. Transnationalism focuses instead on new cultural, economic, social and institution-

al forms that are created by migrant subjects and communities whose identity is at least double, since they participate in the reality of two or more countries.

The next three essays investigate this immigrant literature from an outside (not English/American Studies or Ethnic Literature) perspective. What are the implications of this literature for dialogue across national literary canons and more general studies in multicultural and world literatures? Thomas Peterson, as an Italianist, looks at several essays in this volume, and from them makes a case for a literary anthropology of Italian American literature borrowing from Paul Ricoeur's notions of alterity, as well as Goethe's and Auerbach's visions of *Weltliteratur*. He asks how one confronts Italian American literature as a part of such notions of *Weltliteratur*. Borrowing from Wolfgang Iser's theories of literary anthropology, he interrogates both the transgressive potentials within immigrant literary cultures, such as that of Italian Americans and the ramifications they pose within the functionings of a world literary canon. Finally, in order to illustrate the common ground and reciprocity involved, Peterson addresses the sociological and linguistic complexities of the Italian American literary corpus by mirroring it in Italian literature. Here he chooses an example from his own scholarly repertoire, Pascoli's 1904 poem, "Italy".

Ulrike Schneider reflects on some of the Jewish American literature essays in this volume. In doing so, she contextualizes the Jewish American immigrant experience and the literature it produced within a larger history of the Jewish experience in German and Europe following the rise of Nazism and the Holocaust. As a Germanist whose work focuses on German Jewish writers, Schneider attempts to map the shared experiences, especially the generational trauma of the Holocaust, that she contends are foundational to both German Jewish and Jewish American literatures.

Sabnam Ghosh, a comparatist who teaches courses in multicultural literature, then explores the canonical trends in Italian and Jewish American Literature and their reflection in current syllabi in multicultural and Ethnic Literature courses in the US. She seeks to document the reception of various ethnic authors.

She also reflects on the origins and development of Italian American and Jewish Studies departments. She concludes with a survey of recent Italian American and Jewish American literary syllabi, anthologies, and their place in the awards given to ethnic literature in general. This analysis of the literary presence of these literatures offers documentation for the reflections made elsewhere in this volume regarding liminality, acceptance and rejection of the literary presence of these two groups.

Finally, an Indian Comparative Literature scholar, Ipshita Chanda, addresses the significant implications of multiculturalism as a hermeneutic frame for the study of literature today. She asks whether multiculturalism without Comparative Literature's supranationalism can answer the questions literature raises, or even help us understand them. The comparative frame for reading is founded upon the fact of otherness that makes possible the act of comparison. Thus, the comparative approach provides a way of understanding and encountering the very fact of otherness (and not metaphorically the Other or an other), concretized through situation, culture and chronotope in literature. To impose "culture" as a distinct category of analysis, according to Chanda, raises questions about the relation of the comparative approach with ethics on the one hand and society or "culture" on the other. Above all, it breaks open the silence regarding the position of the "scholar" in Comparative Literature – is she not trained to encounter and understand otherness as universal condition? What then is the point of focusing upon cultural difference except to restate the obvious? This confusion of ontology and method has led to the periodic crises, once looked upon as precursors to doom. But, from Étienne to Spivak, crisis and death have been answered by remedies for everything (Bernheimer and multiculturalism) saluting the existence of a many-cultured but single "world" (Damrosch) and leading to proposals for changed nomenclature and new categories of engagement. Since Comparative Literature is not a (or any) literature but a practice, all our attempts to cast the net wide enough to extend the area of operations by constantly including writing by/about all forms of life on the globe or planet, will always leave room for contentious debates about who is included/

excluded by what/whom and/or why. This reduces the ethical aspect of literature to moral majoritarianism and subverts the aim of the comparative method which is grounded in engagement with the Other.

Multiculturalism is one such attempt to neatly categorize, officially and in a politically correct fashion, the plurality and heterogeneity, not to mention the intractable, irreducible “otherness” that characterizes human existence and human endeavor. As a theoretical schema, it is posited on a particular conception of the relation between location and difference, which contradicts the dynamism and the openness to difference necessitated by the comparative approach. A comparative reading begins from the premise that plurality is the given condition of human society which makes acts of comparison possible: multiculturalism as an analytical or as an interpretative category essentializes the dynamic interaction between humans. In contrast, the practice of Comparative Literature arises from and addresses the fact that the plurality of human society demands that we learn to participate in conversations across difference, rather than theoretically assimilate it into categorical knowledge. The essays collected in this volume try to understand this difference related to the method of the discipline, within the context of “method” within various literary disciplines as well as in Humanities scholarship in general.

S Satish Kumar’s essay extends the theoretical exploration in Chanda by focusing on the ethical implications of current methodological approaches to the study of the Other in literature. Kumar’s piece posits a praxis of hospitality as being historically foundational to practices of Comparative Literature. Based in Levinas’s ideas of ethics, Kumar examines contemporary questions within practices of the humanities relating to the status of and engagements with alterity. Borrowing from Kant’s *Perpetual Peace*, Kumar posits a possibility of imagining hospitality as a categorical imperative. In doing so, he argues for a deontologized and depersonalized view of an ethics of being towards the Other, echoing Levinas’s idea of radical exteriority, in understanding questions of intersubjectivity as they pertain to practices of reading comparatively. Kumar’s contribution to this

concluding section delves deeper into such questions through an examination of the status of immigrant-American narratives within practices of Comparative Literature, which itself has largely been an immigrant-discipline in the US especially following the two world wars. It is through such examinations that he works towards broader conclusions regarding a praxis of hospitality within practices of Comparative Literature today.

In the volume's concluding essay by Jenny Webb, we return to the larger issues of multiculturalism and literary studies within which these works on Italian American and Jewish American immigrant fiction take place. Jenny Webb provides a thoughtful coda in which the theoretical framework undergirding this current work is reiterated and rearticulated. Webb underscores the importance of retaining the social and political structures of multiculturalism in mind, and then argues for the conscious cultivation of continuing theoretical and philosophical fluencies in order to avoid the replication of the colonizing power structures that have previously complicated work on multiculturalism within the academy. To illustrate her point, Webb takes a closer look at the concept of assemblage theory as articulated by the contemporary Mexican American philosopher Manuel DeLanda.

This volume seeks to create a space for addressing the migrant narratives across the history of America's existence as a national entity. Inscribed on the pedestal of the monument that is perhaps globally the most iconic symbol of America's nationhood, the Statue of Liberty, are the words of Emma Lazarus that greeted the many waves of immigrants: "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free...". As evidenced in the essays this volume presents on Italian and Jewish American writers, many of whom emigrated to the United States through Ellis Island, America meant for many early immigrants the promise of a more bearable life and a more habitable land. Although many of these authors expressed a yearning for the lives they or their parents had left behind in the "old country", the desire to "be American", especially as we move towards second- and third-generation immigrants, led to complex ethnic-American identities that were as fraught as they

were vibrant. Therefore, while this volume focuses specifically on literature stemming from Italian and Jewish immigrant experiences, in doing so it also seeks to bring these past experiences of migrancy into dialogue with the present crisis in America around questions of immigration. It seeks to contextualize such a broader understanding of migrancy and the immigrant experience in America within more contemporary theorizations of Otherness, examining how such theories of alterity impact both academic discourse and its pedagogical foundations in curricula for the college and university classroom. In doing so, we hope to arrive at possible templates for understanding, both within the academy and beyond, the moral and ethical responsibilities involved in encountering and engaging the immigrant Other today.

Historical Overview

Dorothy M. Figueira

Jewish and Italian Migrant Fictions: Syncretisms and
Interchangeabilities Born of a Shared Immigrant Experience

We all remember how, before he was elected, John F. Kennedy had to make the unprecedented promise to the American public that he would not be ruled by Rome. A few years later, Barry Goldwater made headlines with the quip, “I always knew the first Jewish President would be an Episcopalian”. He was, of course, referring to the fact that, although born a Jew, he had been raised Episcopalian. Being Catholic or being Jewish has always been an issue in the United States. When I was a teenager, I remember my Aunt Dorothy explaining to me her new career as an author at the height of the Women’s Liberation Movement, as it was then called. She told me that there were many Italian American women authors, but I did not realize it because they all had Jewish surnames. She was referring to her Italian American friends, married to Jewish men, who were in her writing/consciousness-raising group. She was also acknowledging the permeability of such designations of ethnicity or ethnic identity.

I have been thinking a lot about my namesake aunt as I read Italian American and Jewish American immigrant fictions. She had worked in the early days of television and was fascinated by the art scene in New York her entire life. She stayed married to Uncle Sidney (not an easy man) because of his press seats that for almost forty years got her into every opening night performance she cared to attend – and she attended many. In 1964, she produced an off-Broadway production of George Panetta’s *Kiss Mama*, a play dealing with the clichéd plot of an Italian-Jewish mixed marriage. My aunt was a friend of the playwright and she and her friends, like Julius La Rosa who starred in the play,

must have thought they would profit from the plot similarity to *Marty*, which, featuring Ernest Borgnine, had recently been such a hit on television. Interfaith love stories are a staple of Italian American and Jewish American literature and life, at least in New York.

Then my aunt did something quite extraordinary. She wrote a play, applied for and was awarded, at the age of sixty-something, an O'Neill Fellowship for "New Playwrights" to Juilliard. She dubbed her play a "Valentine" to her immigrant parents. My aunt, who had her finger on the pulse beat of the times, was marketing a feminist paean to her immigrant roots and was asserting rather late in life her *italianità*. My mother, her only sister (their brother had died in the War) met this gesture of her sister's cultural awakening with suspicion, since her sister had always been ashamed of being Italian, had abandoned the care of her elderly parents to my mother, had not even invited them to her second marriage, and had missed her father's funeral. Yet now, she was becoming a professional Italian American profiting, according to my mother, by portraying negative stereotypical ethnic and tribal customs that she attributed to Italian Americans. The play was entitled *1932* and it had one reading at Juilliard with a cast of Jewish actors (who later went on to fame in a television police drama) playing my grandparents and some Italian actors (who would later appear on *The Sopranos*). That was that. The play was never produced; she dropped out of the program at Juilliard and never wrote anything again.

Imagine my surprise, fifty years later, as I was thumbing through Barolini's anthology of Italian American women's writing, *The Dream Book* (1985), to discover a footnote mentioning my aunt, Dorothy Gentile Fields, as an "Italian American author". How could she be an author when her play was never published or performed? Were Italian American critics so desperate for a canon, that anyone who had written anything, was designated an accomplished author? And a feminist, at that? Was the criticism of Italian American literature grasping at straws to fabricate a canon? And who were the immigrant Italians to be depicted in such a canon: *cafones*, gangsters and eter-

nally self-sacrificing oppressed mothers?¹ I was able to secure from my cousin (a former actor, now an English teacher) a copy of his mother's play. I must say, I was rather moved by it, but not because it was particularly well written. It took ample advantage of standard Italian immigrant fiction tropes (the fascist relatives, the subjugation of females within the family, the obligatory *cafone*, an interfaith love affair, religiosity/anti-clericism, *paisans* banding together and/or betraying each other, the matriarch feeding hungry non-Italian neighbors during the Depression, etc.). However, I found it interesting for purely personal reasons: it depicted my grandfather whom I had loved and have always thought possessed a properly tragic sense of life and was a very progressive individual.

Structurally, the play had some faults and the subplot of the World War I veterans' Bonus March on Washington in 1932 did not fit with the plot and was inconceivable from a production point of view. The depiction of tenement life was reminiscent of *The Goldbergs* and too cloying to bear the theme of social activism that had been grafted onto it. The characterizations were broadly drawn and the dialogue a bit forced. But what ultimately amazed me about this play was my aunt's savvy in writing it – knowing that, in the late 60s and early 70s, ethnicity was a viable commodity (and perhaps her ticket out of bourgeois or, in my grandfather's English, “bushwa”, Westchester County) – and how this recognition trumped her self-loathing as an Italian American. Such a recognition of ethnicity started to gain ground at the time, as class-markers in “American” institutions were often lost in translation. The revered institutions of 1950s- and 60s-America such as The Boy Scouts were simply referred to by my grandfather as “Fascisti”, much to my poor immigrant father's regret when he tried to establish the first Boy

¹ The term *cafone* (pl. *cafones*) as it is used in popular American Slang, originates in the Italian social and cultural lexicon of the late 1700s and early 1800s. In Italian the words *cafone* (masc.), *cafona* (fem.), and *cafoni* (pl.), were used to designate people belonging to the peasant classes. The word evolved an adjectival sense in being used to describe the unrefined and uncultivated behavior of the peasant classes in Italy at the time. It is from such a usage that the prejudicial or derogatory connotations associated with the word today derive their meaning (see Hayes 2009).

Scout troop housed in a Catholic Church in our Hudson Valley community, so his sons could share his own Scouting experiences from when he was a youth in South America. My aunt had scouted out the market: while Italian American writers were yet to fully explore their experiences, Jewish authors had already fetishized self-loathing. Jewish American literature was an already established commodity, while Italian American authors tended to traffic in *schmaltz*, because the potential readership believed (and, perhaps, still do) that Italian Americans are actually the caricatures that we still see depicted in television and movies. Jewish American literature in comparison was more variegated since its authors had honed their skills in a broader competitive market. The expectations for Italian American literature were low (and still are). No one expected to discover the Italian American Philip Roth or Saul Bellow. Few read Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim*; he had to write *The Godfather* in order to become rich. John Fante never held the popularity of a contemporary Jewish author of equal caliber. Just as Richard Russo does not have the same cachet as other ethnic authors today.

However, there was a commonality between these two immigrant groups that went beyond their outsidership in mainstream American culture and the discrimination they both experienced. Curiously they were interchangeable on the stage and on the screen, where Jewish actors played Italians and Italian Americans played Jews². They also shared a common immigrant malaise which expressed itself in their literature. Italian American and Jewish American literature both articulated the immigrants' ill-ease with their identity in the New World³. Their experience of alienation found expression in their respective immigrant literatures, because they were made to feel inferior and unwanted in America in similar ways, and this process is worth examining in greater depth.

² I am thinking here primarily of *The Untouchables* 1959-63 TV series, where Jewish actors played Italian mobsters and Italian actors played Jewish gangsters.

³ One might here think of the depictions of immigrant parents one finds in Anzia Yeziarska's *Children of Loneliness* (1923).

A History of American Racism against Jewish and Italian Immigrants

At the time of this massive emigration from southern Italy and eastern Europe, America was experiencing a resurgence of political racism (Richards 1999, 171). The new immigrants, who were mostly eastern European Jews and southern Italians, quickly underwent cultural racialization. Southern Italians and eastern European Jews were simply not viewed as white. The Italians, in fact, were regarded as Blacks (Foerster 1919, 383, 407-8, 504-505; Gambino 1998, 107-116; DeConde 1971, 98-103, 116-119), even though they were legally classified as white (Guglielmo 2000, 9). What was innovative here in the treatment of Jewish and Italian immigrants was that the racism that had traditionally been applied to African Americans, Native Americans and Asians was for the first time being applied to Europeans. This racism was fueled by the disconnect that existed in post-Civil War America. The abolition of slavery and the promise of equal citizenship co-existed alongside institutions that legitimated racism. Nineteenth-century racism would take on a new form from its earlier model, especially for the new Jewish immigrants to the United States.

The initial Jews who landed in New Netherland in 1652 actually enjoyed more rights than they had experienced back home. They were included in the Burgher Law which afforded them both citizenship and the right to practice their religion. In 1656, in what would become Manhattan, Peter Stuyvesant was even rebuked by the Dutch West India Company for attempting to forbid Jews from buying property or participating in the militia (Chametzky 2001, 19). After the English took over from the Dutch and renamed New Netherland as New York, Jews were naturalized along with foreign Protestants and Quakers (but not Catholics). They could not, however, vote or hold office. Most of the Jews in the United States at the time of the Revolution were Sephardic. They initially comprised .05% of the population and spread throughout the land, as merchants, farmers and peddlers⁴.

⁴ This percentage would rise at the height of immigration to 3%.

In 1763, the Sephardic merchants in Newport, Rhode Island erected the earliest synagogue in the nation. As Jews emigrating primarily from Germany, many followed the Enlightenment theology of Moses Mendelssohn who taught that Jews should adapt to the mores of the countries in which they settled. Given the non-Jewish nature of their new land, Jewish rabbis and laity sought to make their religion more compatible with citizenship. In early nineteenth-century Europe, Reformed Judaism had developed from a will to adapt as well as from necessity. In America, given the vast expanses of space, there would be many obstacles for Jews to practice their faith in the far-flung regions where they had settled without a sizable population of their co-religionists. They therefore actively sought to integrate themselves into their new-found communities. These early Jewish immigrants would be culturally distinct from the later Ashkenazi immigrants who mostly emigrated from eastern Europe and Russia. During the colonial period, very few Italians had come to the US since there were legal obstacles at the time preventing Italians from leaving home. In the early days, those Italians who emigrated came from the North. So, they too were culturally distinct from the predominantly southern Italian immigrants who came later. These distinctions or the sense of identification and solidarity between both the Ashkenazim and Sephardim, and the northern and southern Italians paled in comparison to the welcome they received on arrival.

In the aftermath of the Civil War, segregation and anti-miscegenation had become very popular political platforms. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, among the more educated segregationists and anti-miscegenationists, justification for their views could be found in the pseudo-science of eugenics, a field that had come into vogue. Ironically, it was Italian scientists, such as Cesare Lombroso, Giuseppe Sergi and Alfredo Niceforo, whose research provided the initial “data” proving that southern Italians were racially distinct from northern Italians and inferior. Sergi’s skull measurements had shown that northern Italians had descended from Aryan stock and southern Italians were of African blood. Aryan race theory in Europe was already well advanced in its theorizing, as witnessed by

the work of Arthur de Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain. Jews were also distinguished from the Aryans (Figueira 2002). In fact, European racial theorists deemed them to be quite the opposite of what was thought to be the Aryans from which Caucasians descended. For European race theorists, Jews and southern Italians were stigmatized as inferior human beings, even before large numbers had landed in the States. Now, the findings of the Italian race theorists were being disseminated and used to discriminate in America against southern Italians and eastern European Jews. Such European theories of racial inferiority were wholeheartedly adopted by American eugenicists whose own research was funded by wealthy American nativists. Pseudo-science and racism had neatly joined forces.

One of the first projects to prove southern Italian and eastern European Jewish inferiority was sponsored by the Eugenics Record Office based in Cold Spring Harbor, NY. The early work of the Cold Spring eugenicists entailed the identification of defective bloodlines. Acting in conjunction with American nativists, the Eugenics Record Office investigated what scientists of the time referred to as the “Germ Plasm” of the American population. Their efforts were directed at preventing its deterioration through mixture with inferior groups of individuals. The “Germ Plasm” of the first settlers in America from northern Europe and England was believed to be of the highest quality, certainly superior to that of the new immigrants. It was felt that Mediterranean peoples and eastern Europeans possessed particularly defective Germ Plasm, since they were clearly morally below the races of northern Europe. Southern Italians, according to Ross Ellis, “lack the conveniences for thinking”; Neapolitans were particularly “a degenerate class” who “infected with spiritual hookworm [...] displayed a distressing frequency of low foreheads, open mouths, weak chins, poor features” (Okrent 2019, 188). Similar representations were propagated concerning the Jews.

William Z. Ripley, in *The Races of Europe* (1899), had broken down different peoples into divisions with the Nordic/Anglo-Saxon deemed the best and the southern Italian and the Jew viewed as a mongrel race of slaves. Italians were inferior

to whites and racially identical to Berbers, southern Italians differed from the northern Italians who, after all, had given us Rome and its ideals, its great men, and the Renaissance. In the case of the Italians, it was crucial to draw distinctions between the northern and southern variety, since the majority of the immigrants that the restrictionists wanted to bar consisted of the latter group. Similar distinctions were drawn between the Sephardim and the Ashkenazim. Ripley's categorization of races was subsequently taken up by Madison Grant in *The Passing of the Great Race* (1916) and Lothrop Stoddard in *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy* (1920), both proponents of restrictionist policy. The concern was that southern Italians and eastern Jews, as lower types, would compromise America's future.

Grant held that ancient Rome could not possibly have been produced by the same race that was then invading the US (Grant 1923, 89; qtd. in Richards 1999, 174, 153-154). For that matter, the discoverer of America, Christopher Columbus, could also not have been Italian and must have been Nordic (Grant 1923, 208). According to Grant, the new immigrants were "the broken and mentally crippled of all races" (89; qtd. in Richards 1999, 174). Although the Italians had given us "art", it was the Anglo-Saxon race who had given us the science (Grant 1923, 229) needed to show that Italian immigrants could not be improved by exposure to American culture (89-94). Something had to be done to stem their immigration. Teddy Roosevelt, believing that the United States had become a dumping ground for Italians in particular, lamented that southern Italians were, in fact, "the most fecund and the least desirable population of Europe" (Okrent 2019, 83).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italians and Jews served as scapegoats of the country's fears of alterity. The Italian immigrant, in particular, also brought into relief America's self-doubt in its liberal nationalism (Richards 1999, 173). The United States government did not initially know how to respond to the threat posed by their Otherness, so it responded in the only way that it knew how, by transforming Italian immigrants into the one group they really knew how to subju-

gate, the American Blacks. After all, the US had effectively suppressed and controlled the Negro. They now sought to do the same with these unwanted immigrants. Toward this end, the effort was initially launched to make southern Italians Black. Such an identification was logical since, according to the American Genetics Association, southern Italians had first emigrated from Africa, from Carthage to be precise (Okrent 158). The Italians' "blackness" had been codified by the appellation "guineas", a term that had marked African slaves and their descendants and now designated Italians. Since Italians were now deemed Blacks⁵, they could be treated like Blacks, could do the work of Blacks in the American South, and they could be denied access to streetcars in certain cities, certain schools and movie houses, labor unions, and some churches in the North. They could thus be managed. They were also subject to being lynched, just like Blacks (Guglielmo 2000, 11).

The New Orleans lynching of eleven Italian immigrants in 1891 for the murder of the city's police chief is the largest mass lynching in the history of the United States. Of these men, labeled in the press at the time as Mafiosi, three had been acquitted, three had received a mistrial, and five had not yet been tried (Gambino 1998, ix). The history of lynching Italian immigrants is crucial for our understanding of Italian identity in America. They were subject to lynching because of their "blackness". But they also posed specific threats to cultural differences and were targeted because they did not share the standard prejudices of American whites against Blacks. For one thing, they dealt with Blacks economically⁶ as tradesmen (DeConde 1971, 117, 121-126; Gambino 1998, 109-111, Foerster 1919, 408). As greengrocers, they sold to Blacks. They were also willing to live among them. As a result, they were identified in Louisiana

⁵ In 1911, the US House Committee on Immigration openly debated whether southern Italians should even be seen as full-blooded Caucasians (Guglielmo 2000, 36), but it was decided that they not be denied their nationalization rights. Even in its craziness, the Klu Klux Klan saw them as hopelessly inferior, but never questioned their whiteness.

⁶ Italians also did not share the American pattern of Christian antisemitism.

as Black dagoes⁷. Teddy Roosevelt, always the mouthpiece for a certain America, noted after the New Orleans mass lynching that it was “rather a good thing” and he made this statement at a party in the presence of “various dago diplomats [...] all much wrought up by the lynching”; as one Southern prosecutor put it, “[t]he Dagoes are just as bad as Negroes” (qtd. in DeConde 1971, 123). The South was so inhospitable to Southern Italians that even Italian officials back home in Italy facilitating emigration told them to avoid going to the South at all costs. But the North was not much better. After the mass lynching, the Senator from Massachusetts Henry Cabot Lodge called for no more open gates. He claimed that the US needed to protect Americans and it was time for “intelligent restrictions” (Cosco 2003, 14)⁸.

Even with the prospect of such discrimination, Italians and Jews kept on coming because they were still better off in America than in Italy or in eastern Europe. They had greater access to certain basic rights in the US. Once they were citizens, they could vote and could exercise some control over the discriminatory treatment they received (as opposed to home). They were free from compulsory military service. There was a modicum of rule of law and some accountability for politicians as opposed to the endemic corrupt politics in Italy and the pogroms in Russia. In America, these immigrants enjoyed a level of freedom and benefited from their official whiteness. They might be deemed racially inferior, but they were privileged, because of their legal status of whiteness in America: they could vote, own land, serve on juries and were not barred from marrying other Europeans. Inter-marriage, in fact, was prevalent and there was a measure

⁷ They were listed on payrolls in that state as neither white nor Black (Cosco 2003, 16).

⁸ In response to the lynchings, W.E.B. Du Bois noted: “The Italian government protested, but it was found that they [the victims] were naturalized Americans. The inalienable right of every free American citizen to be lynched without tiresome investigation and penalties is one which the families of the lately deceased doubtlessly deeply appreciate” (qtd. in Roediger 2003, 260-261). Du Bois would later advocate against immigration restrictions (in the introduction to *The Gift of Black Folk* 1924, published by the Knights of Columbus). He sarcastically would say: “Now everyone knows a black man is inferior to a White man (except, of course, Jews, Italians and Slavs)” (qtd. in Roediger 2005, 262).

of assimilation. Since Jews were legally equal to others, remaining a Jew became a matter of choice rather than a condition imposed on them (Chametzky 2001, 21). Jews were, therefore, active in forming organizations to strengthen their community life and reflect their growing secularism. The Reform movement within Judaism had made it possible for their primary identification to be as citizens among other citizens and they could “leave their religion at the synagogue door” (Chametzky 2001, 21). Antisemitism still existed, but in the US it was of a social nature and not foundational, manifesting itself in housing, schools, universities, and jobs. Italians and Jews certainly did not suffer as Blacks did. But they were discriminated against and it was the racism directed against them that made it possible to establish the massive racist restrictions on immigration in 1924 with the National Origins Quota System.

Already in 1882, the US Congress had passed its first general federal immigration law placing a head tax on arriving aliens. This law excluded convicts, lunatics, idiots and those likely to become public charges. It reflected the nativist feelings already at work in American society and was largely a statement rather than a restriction, since in the case of Italy the government did not give passports to criminals. What they did do, however, was allow the *padrone* system⁹ to flourish. So, in 1885, the United States enacted the Contract Labor Act in order to prohibit the importation of laborers under contract.

Henry Cabot Lodge, the aforementioned Boston Brahmin senator, was a key figure in the restrictionist movement. As early as 1887, he sought to impose literacy tests as a condition for immigration. In 1894, he sponsored such a bill. It was an ideal

⁹ *Padrone* means “boss” or “manager”. The system of that name described the contract labor system that functioned in Italy through which poor Italian laborers contracted for work in America to pay for their voyage. Upon arrival, they were picked up by emissaries of their new bosses and enlisted in something akin to indentured service. It was in this manner that they could be immediately transported to the South to work the fields and to the West to work in the mines. They replaced the Black laborers who had fled such poor working conditions and had moved to the industrialized North. The Italian immigrant thus was made to replace the Southern Black whose position under Jim Crow was only incrementally better than their enslaved forebearers.

ruse to weed out the Italians and the Jews without impacting on the much more favorably regarded immigration of northern European groups. The bill stipulated that the immigrant needed to read and write English or the language of their own country. It was actually quite insidious, since the Jews spoke Yiddish or Hebrew – not the language then of any country – and the Italians spoke dialects that were often too different from written Italian¹⁰. Although passed by Congress in 1897, Lodge's literacy bill was vetoed by President Grover Cleveland. In the very year that Congress had passed this bill, it is worth noting that Italians immigrants provided three quarters of labor used in New York City's construction industry and that by 1900 they comprised 100% of those entrusted with building the New York City subway system (DeConde 1971, 87)¹¹. The Jewish situation was different. There was already a settled population of Jews in America, who had partially or completely assimilated and thrived. The more successful and assimilated Jews had established numerous charitable associations to help their immigrant co-religionists adapt to their new lives, find employment, and thrive.

Emma Lazarus, the highly educated daughter of a wealthy Jewish merchant family in New York, can be seen to represent the earlier arrived and fortunated assimilated Jew. She was born in New York into a wealthy Sephardic family who traded in sugar. Her grandparents had been in the States since the American Revolution. Her Jewish identity was not insular. Schooled at home by private tutors, she was an accomplished poet and moved in the literary circle of Nathaniel Hawthorne's daughter, Emily Dickinson's proctor, and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Her poetry was influenced by Hebraism, Hellenism and the values of Puritan America. The influx of the Jews to America inspired

¹⁰ When US restrictionists began discussing literacy tests, the Italian government responded by putting money into education over the next several decades and the illiteracy rates in Italy dropped in the early decades of the 20th century from 70% to 23%.

¹¹ By then the padrone system which earlier controlled two-thirds of Italian labor in New York City had faded as Italians became more acclimated: it had been only a temporary evil system (DeConde 1971, 87).

Lazarus to connect with her Jewishness and, over time, she became an ardent Zionist. She began to study Hebrew and worked for the Hebrew Emigrant Aid Society as an advocate. She was proud of both her German high cultural roots and her Jewishness. She translated both Heine and Hebrew poetry. In her poem “Venus of the Louvre” Lazarus (who would die young at 38) identifies with the dying Heine who had visited the statue on a trip to Paris before his own death. Lazarus shared with the German Jewish poet a vision of the ephemerality of life and the eternity of art. “In the Jewish Synagogue at Newport”, Lazarus describes how the oldest synagogue in America revealed to her, as to any onlooker, the continuity of Judaism. She suggests that this historical perspective can find full expression in the lives of Jews in America. However, in the decade following the unveiling of the Statue of Liberty with Emma Lazarus’s poem, “The New Colossus”, calling on America to embrace the “poor, huddled masses yearning to breathe free”, the restrictionists escalated their efforts, since they did not truly believe in the Statue of Liberty’s call to harbor:

The Wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless tempest-tossed to me.
I lift my lamp beside the golden door.

In addition to Lodge’s Anti-Immigrant League (1896), there was the re-establishment of the Klu Klux Klan, with its unveiling taking place in Georgia¹². There was also the virulent antisemitism of Henry Ford and his newspaper the *Dearborn Independent* in Michigan. Besides, Ford was responsible for the publication and dissemination in the United States of the Russian antisemitic forgery, *The Protocols of Zion*. At this time, a restrictionist organization, the American Protection Association, was particularly active; it promulgated both an anti-foreign and anti-Catholic platform and fomented considerable nativist agitation. In 1894, it was joined by another restrictionist organization, the Immigration Restriction League of Boston, which

¹² The Klan had initially been founded in Indiana and thrived in the Midwest as well as in the South.

was founded specifically to target Italian and Jewish immigrants based on the perceived racial differences between them and earlier settlers to America. The leading light of this organization was Henry Cabot Lodge, who had for almost two decades been writing and speechifying on keeping out these unwanted populations. Now, the Restriction League of Boston openly espoused racist action against all but the Anglo-Saxons as a credo and campaigned to reintroduce the imposition of the literacy test.

Teddy Roosevelt assigned Senator William Dillingham of Vermont, a well-known restrictionist, to head a Special US Immigration Commission and filled it with other restrictionists. This commission gathered evidence and travelled to poor villages, particularly in southern Italy. It compiled 42 volumes of testimony and statistics that became known as the *Dillingham Report*. This report included the Commission's *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* (1911) as well as the esteemed ethnographer Franz Boas's *Changes in Bodily Form of Descendants of Immigrants* (1910). While the *Dillingham Report* classified groups by race, with the Anglo-Saxons as superior and the newcomers as inferior, prone to crime and worthy of expulsion, Boas's research showed how immigrants were moving toward the American mean both physically and intellectually. Nevertheless, the *Dillingham Report* favored restrictions on immigration and recommended once again the imposition of Lodge's literacy test to keep "undesirables" out¹³.

¹³ It also officially distinguished for the first time the racial difference between northern and southern Italians. This point was made in the appended *Dictionary of Races or Peoples* and it was based on the distinction made by the research of Italian race theorists. The people from northern Italy were cool, deliberate, patient, practical, and capable of progress in political and social organization. The southern Italians, on the other hand, were excitable, impulsive, impractical, and little adaptable to highly organized society. The *Report* also drew from Sergi's work that identified southern Italians as descended from Africans. They were not fully Negritic, but they had a significant infusion of African blood. The *Dillingham Report* effectively sounded the alarm that southern Italians would bring this Negro blood into America. More significantly, perhaps, the *Dictionary of Races* added an ethnical character to the discussion by following Niceforo's focus on southern Italians' predilection for criminality. The *Dictionary* attributed to southern Italians the following traits: they enjoyed brigandage, were prone to engage in vendettas, and readily associated with the Mafia. They had imported these tendencies to America and introduced them as dangers to an otherwise democratic citizenship. The *Report's* nativist arguments were

For his part, Henry Cabot Lodge continued his WASP vendetta against immigrants by repeatedly sponsoring discriminatory literacy bills. In 1912, another such bill was vetoed by President Taft. Then, in 1917, Congress again put forward the literacy bill. This time, it was vetoed by President Wilson. It was not because these presidents were enlightened and unprejudiced individuals. Wilson was one of the most bigoted and racist presidents we have ever had. It is just that they were politicians who needed to get elected and all those immigrants already here (and who were citizens) could vote. But, this time, Congress overrode Wilson's veto and finally enacted the long sought-after literacy bill. Four years later (1921), the first immigration quota law was passed. The Emergency Immigration Act allowed immigration to turn back boatloads of immigrants from America's shores¹⁴. This was around the time that Sacco and Vanzetti were on trial. This Emergency Quota Law, signed by President Harding, introduced ethnic quotas on Jews and Italians. In 1923, however, the Johnson-Reed Bill adjusted this quota to 2% and instead of basing it on 1910, a year of high immigration, they chose instead to use the census of 1890, just before the great wave of immigration from Italy and eastern Europe had really begun. With this trick, immigration from Italy and eastern Europe was virtually shut down. It was the triumph of racism over the immigrants (Cosco 2003, 177). President Calvin Coolidge signed the Johnson-Reed Bill into law. By Presidential Proclamation, from 222,500 Italians entering the country in 1921, by 1923, only about 3,800 per year could enter. The passing of the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 had some unforeseen consequences. That same year, Mussolini claimed that since Italians could no longer emigrate to America, Italy needed colonies. On the passing of the Johnson-Reed Act, W.E.B. Du Bois noted in *The New*

fueled by the belief in the Italian American's ethnic proclivities and tainted blood. It was very effective in negatively stereotyping and condemning these immigrants. The *Report* did not *exclude* southern Italians from citizenship, but it contributed to preventing large numbers from subsequently entering the country in order to become citizens.

¹⁴ This was the same quota system that curtailed refugees from the Nazis finding a safe harbor in the United States in the years preceding and during World War II.

Negro (1925) how it decimated the total immigration from Europe but sought specifically to exclude the Latins and Jews. He then confessed that American Negroes were “silently elated” because the newly favorable labor market finally allowed them to punish the South by fleeing it to work in the North and leave the South bereft of a work force:

As long as the northern lords of industry could import cheap, white labor from Europe they could encourage the color line in industry and leave the Negroes as peons and serfs at the mercy of the white South. But today with the cutting down of foreign immigration the Negro becomes the best source of cheap labor for the industries of the white land. The bidding for his services gives him a tremendous sword to wield against the Bourbon South and by means of wholesale migration he is wielding it. But note again the extraordinary bedfellows involved in this paradox; Negro laborers, white capitalists and “Nordic” fanatics against Latin Europe... (Du Bois 1925, 412)

Repercussions of Racism in Canon Formation

So, where does this history of discrimination against Italians and Jews bring us? Does it shed light on the nature and the reception of Italian American and Jewish American literature in the American literary canon and in curricula? There are several initial points that bear mentioning. Firstly, for anyone who has read these literatures and is therefore in a position to acknowledge their worth and significance to American literature, one is struck at how little they are read and valued today. They are currently marginal to the corpus of literature studied in English/American Studies, Multiculturalism, World Literature and Comparative Literature. Within the context of multiculturalism, which as a pedagogy promotes tolerance to other cultures, these immigrants’ literatures, as responses to intolerance, are not tolerated. The lack of recognition they receive may be due, perhaps, to the fact that they play no role in the type of tolerance espoused by multiculturalism, which I have shown elsewhere functions more as a gesture toward inclusion based on the formulae of diversity management, rather than any real desire to engage the variety of Otherness within American society (Figueira 2008).

Ethnic literatures enter the academy usually to show that institutions are not biased, even if they are woefully not inclusive in terms of their demographics. One can disregard a non-diverse faculty or student population, if there exist courses on the books that show an interest in marginalized groups. Such literatures, if studied at all, are often housed in small units devoted to ethnic studies, where traditional minority professors are often warehoused and traditional minority students are encouraged to go – to study themselves rather than some more marketable field. Ethnic literature can also appear as a subfield in a large English department, in order to rejuvenate and make more relevant a sclerotic curriculum – as well as to highlight in a visible manner (since in many places the English Department represents the Humanities) an institution's commitment to diversity. In both locales, Jewish and Italian immigrant fiction can play no political role and, therefore, do not garner much institutional respect. It is all about location, location, location. I read Jewish American fiction in middle and high school because I lived among Jews in New York who agitated for the inclusion of their ethnic literature in public education. Although Jewish American literature was highly regarded, particularly after Bellow won the Nobel Prize (1976), none of my Jewish friends went off to college to study it. But I now realize that I had also never been taught or even encountered the work of Italian American authors while in school, although there were also many Italian Americans around. Italian American authors did not exist, according to the curricular planners; they were not recognized in the canon of American literature to the extent that Jewish American literature was (at least in New York).

A common prejudice, that is often articulated by Italian Americans in their literature, is that Italian Americans do not value education. The case can also be made that Italian American literature holds the place that it does and its authors the profile they do because of the anti-intellectualism of Italian Americans, as opposed to the Jews and their relationship to learning and book culture. While this generalization certainly bears some truth, it has been really overdone. I do not know if Italian Americans value or valued reading less than other poor

and uneducated groups, but this image of the Italian immigrant does not match my personal experience. What I do know is that, as Henry James has taught us, the Italian immigrant is viewed in America as very different from the Italian. One gave us the Renaissance, the other was only good to dig ditches. I learned early on to shy away from anything Italian, if I wanted to be accepted in academia. Studying Italy or anything Italian was for WASPs and real Italians, not for hyphenated ones. As an Italian American trying to go to universities beyond my class status, I knew well enough that, to be taken seriously in the university, I needed to stay away from anything that could be deemed something that I was genetically predisposed to study¹⁵. I had to prove myself; I could not be pigeon-holed or neutralized as an ethnic, unworthy of a place in an elite institution of learning in America. Granted, studying Sanskrit was a bit excessive on my part, but no matter. I did not dare study anything smacking of my own ethnicity until I had proven myself. Being told in high school I was destined to be a hairdresser, at Vassar that I could be a model, since exotic types “were in”, or being mocked by a dean at the University of Chicago as “the Puerto Rican girl who wants to learn Sanskrit” was enough for me! Just as the Ashkenazim differed from the Sephardim, so too did Italian Americans differ from Italians¹⁶, *those* people so loved by Henry James, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller, and all those Harvard Italophiles.

¹⁵ This intellectual prejudice against Italian Americans is also directed against Italians. I remember that when I was teaching Comparative Literature (specifically an undergraduate course in World Literature) I was approached because I had chosen to introduce the class to Pirandello and opted out of teaching Ibsen. One cold winter day, when I had risked my life on the ice to cross campus to teach, I was confronted after class by what I can only describe as a big blond mid-western farm girl who actually accused me (her words) of having an “anti-Scandinavian animus” against Nordic authors. I was equally guilty because I was teaching a “no name Eyetalian”. I tried to explain that in such classes one chose to teach what one best knew. But really, it was too cold and I was not paid enough for such nonsense.

¹⁶ I laugh whenever I see a spread in some magazine of the actor George Clooney’s villa on Lake Como. Is there any greater symbol of the current-day American love of Italy? He even touts good “Italian-style” coffee in advertising. Then I juxtapose this image to that abomination of a song, popular in the early 1960s by his aunt, Rosemary Clooney, “Mambo Italiano”, that trades in all the most offensive stereotypes about Italian Americans.

Granted the neglect of Jewish American and Italian American literature today can be partially explained by the politics of canon formation and the role of identitarianism within the university and in academic publishing. As I have examined elsewhere, the fate of all ethnic groups are implicated in the concerted effort on the part of institutions to undercut Affirmative Action with reformulations of “disadvantaged” groups and the creation of the phenomenon of the model minority (Figueira 2008). While it is fairly safe to claim that there is residual racism against Jewish Americans and Italian Americans (as seen in the way they are consistently portrayed as compared to their non-ethnic counterparts)¹⁷, Jewish Americans and Italian Americans are not model minorities politically or socially. There is also the issues of packaging and marketing the images of these groups.

While Jewish American literature and Italian American literature have both sought to package themselves in readily accessible form in anthologies¹⁸, there is a marked difference in how they have gone about it. I teach Jewish American literature from an anthology entitled *The Jewish American Anthology*, with an extensive scholarly apparatus. Two Italian American textbooks I have used in my classes sport titles such as *Don't Tell Mama* and *Wop!* The Jewish anthology does not include the humor of a TV comedienne, such as Fran Drescher (although Woody Allen is always included as an *auteur*)¹⁹, but the Italian anthology presents the work of Ray Romano, another television personality, alongside di Donato and DeLillo. The anthologies promoting Italian American literature are popular in tone, rather than scholarly. There are not sufficient historical contextualizations in introducing the authors or their time periods, as one finds

¹⁷ One thinks of convicted criminals such as John Gotti, Bernie Madoff, or Jeffrey Epstein. Their personae as Italians or Jews are never absent from discussions of their identity as it relates to their criminality. There is also the “sinister” Jew or Italian who is involved in politics, such as Rudy Giuliani or Jared Kushner. Italian American Supreme Court judges do not fare well either.

¹⁸ Anthologies have become important in the teaching of multiculturalism and World Literature, since they are the easiest and preferred way of marketing the world's literature in a excerpted (fragmented) form and in English translation.

¹⁹ The only other place Mr. Allen is considered as a serious author is in France. But, then again, they awarded Jerry Lewis the *Legion d'Honneur*.

in the Jewish anthology I use. From a scholarly point of view, they are less serious. More importantly, they trade in the same stereotypes of Italian Americans with which we are familiar (“Drop the gun and don’t forget the cannoli”) and that support discriminatory attitudes. Sadly, even some of the scholarly work on Italian American literature panders to these same prejudices. The scholarship of Jewish literature does not focus on the Jewish gangster, why should the Italian?

Neither Italian Americans nor those presenting their literary production have helped its cause by allowing the American public to trade in negative stereotypes. Thanks to their history of persecution and the efforts of organizations such as the Jewish Anti-Defamation League, Jewish Americans have been vigilant in protecting the image of Jews. The Italian American equivalent, in the form of the Italian Anti-Defamation League, has been largely ineffectual. Anything, whether it be the media, popular culture or academia, that fosters the image of Italians as *cafoni* will ensure the continued marginalization of Italian American authors and Italian American Studies as a discipline. For all its rhetoric of inclusion, multiculturalism is not as multi- or as cultural as it would have us believe. Suffice it to say that Jewish Americans and Italian Americans do not profit from the exoticism that makes other ethnic literatures, such as Hispanic American and Asian American literature, a much more present component in the literature classroom. Asian American literature which, as yet, has not attained the literary value as the largely neglected literature of Jewish Americans and Italian Americans, is omnipresent. It is taught in American classrooms on every level, while the classics of Jewish American and Italian American literature are nowhere in view.

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Part I

Italian American Literature

Chapter 1

Marina Camboni

Going Native: Identity and Identification in Carole Maso's
Ghost Dance and Robert Viscusi's *ellis island*

...the need for an italian resonance in the United States of America.

(Robert Viscusi, *ellis island*)

It's memory so she can change it – warp it into the lines of infinity if she likes it, stretch it into submission.

(Carole Maso, *Defiance*)

Subject, person, migrant

According to French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we are born pre-determined but in life we have a small chance to become free (Bourdieu 1988). By this he meant that, to attain some freedom, we must not so much acknowledge that we are born into a society that precedes us and contributes to the shaping of our identity, but that we are constructed through what Judith Butler calls regulatory schemes and symbolic ideals (Butler 1991, 10, 18). The conflictual, limited space between our pre-determined, intersubjective identities and our own hopes, desires, and predispositions, then, is where the process of becoming ourselves as persons takes place. In that space, our own identity is procedurally created through multiple identifications and performative re-enactments.

Since, however, we are not merely *social* but, as Aristotle wrote, also *political* animals, i.e., human inhabitants of the *polis*, “the most sovereign and inclusive” of all human associations, “directed to the most sovereign of all goods” (Aristotle *Pol.* §

1252a; Barker 1958, 1)¹, it is through the political and normative framing of the social that our identity, difference, and legibility are molded. Even our own brains, according to neurobiologist Antonio Damasio, are shaped by an “incontrovertible correlation between the private and the public” (Damasio 1999, 13; see also Damasio 2010, 223 ff.).

Western political thought instituted the symbolic conditions that articulate the framework in which everyday politics takes place and makes sense in our culture. Among these, it is the symbolic dichotomy of inclusion/exclusion, with its connected definition of thresholds and borders, that overwhelmingly shapes our lives. Both Bourdieu and Butler point to the intrinsically conflictual nature of individual and collective freedom and identity formation, framed as it is by the “inclusion-exclusion” dichotomy. Carried out on the socio-political level, this conflict fosters the emergence of hegemonic institutions and practices. However, as Roberto Esposito claims, following Claude Lefort, in a democratic system conflict also provides evidence of fluidity and multiplicity as well as historicity and revisibility of the

¹ Aristotle’s *polis* includes only a limited group of privileged males, excluding artisans, women, and slaves. However, the Greek definitions of the *polis* and its material embodiments have provided the West with the historical origins of political democracy. As a consequence, we must take into account the fact that the democratic social/political structure the Greeks envisioned was rooted in the presence of slavery, the exclusion of women from the public sphere, the conflictual opposition to the barbarians, and the exclusion of foreigners from the privileged circle of citizens. For a synthetic account, see Errede 2019, 1. For the influence of Aristotle on the political thought of Great Britain and the United States, one can read the introductions by Jowett (1885) and Barker (1958) to their translations. Jowett maintains that Aristotle’s *Politics* and the Lacedaemonian constitution exercised a significant influence. In the liberal British world of late nineteenth century, moreover, “for the liberty, equality, and fraternity of the French revolution we are beginning to substitute the idea of law and order; we acknowledge that the best form of government is that which is most permanent, and that the freedom of the individual when carried to an extreme is suicidal. *But these are truths which may be found in Aristotle’s Politics*” (Jowett 1858, xiii, emphasis added). Seventy years later, in his Preface, Barker claims that Aristotle’s “*Politics* is a book needed by the ‘general reader’ of all the Anglo-Saxon world. It inspired the political thought of Aquinas; that in turn inspired that of Hooker; Hooker in turn inspired Locke; and the thought of Locke, with all its ancestry, has largely inspired the general thought both of Britain and America in the realm of politics, but also in the Dominions and India” (Barker 1958, p. iv).

regulatory schemes put in place by hegemonic groups (Esposito 2020, 204 ff.)².

We need, then, to acknowledge the existence of regulatory schemes as well as their symbolic framing of our own identity and place before we can try to establish any critical distance. One such constructed identity is that of the “foreigner”, in its various manifestations and gradations as immigrant, exile, refugee, expatriate, tourist, or enemy. The foreigner is the outsider, the one who does not belong in the *polis*, the one who crosses its borders. The immigrant, on the other hand, is the type of foreigner which the *polis* constructs and deems most dangerous to its self-sufficiency and identity. Even the mere presence of the immigrant in a specific land, town or nation, calls into question the politics of inclusion/exclusion and borders.

As a settler colonial nation, the United States, according to Patrick Wolfe, operates through a logic of elimination which works as an additional conceptual framework, a structure rather than an event (Wolfe 1999). Premised on the subjection of indigenous peoples, the United States is a nation whose colonial settlers instituted its political order and power relations. In this context, immigrants are “those who are appellants [...] facing a political order that is already constituted” (Veracini 2011, 173). It is only consistent with this structure that immigrants, like the Italians and the Jews, have been racialized or identified with the “Others” in the United States: the native inhabitants of the land; the reified African Americans; and women, destined to generate and regenerate the members of the *polis*, but excluded from it.

Since identity is not a status but a process, it is within and against the political institutions and cultural schemes that define our identity that we have to make space for our own individual and collective existence and sense of identity. However, as John Dewey wrote one hundred years ago in his famous *Democracy and Education*, no one has a chance of attaining even a tiny bit

² First introduced by Antonio Gramsci, the category of hegemony has been adopted by post-Marxist critics, who describe a hegemonic relation as that in which “a particular social force assumes the representation of a totality that is radically incommensurable with it” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001, ix). This is also the sense in which it is used in this essay.

of freedom without communication and identification, for “one has to assimilate, imaginatively, something of another’s experience in order to tell him intelligently of one’s own experience” (Dewey 1980, 9). To sum up with a line of epigrammatic sagesse from Robert Viscusi’s *ellis island*, “if i can explain it to one of them maybe i can understand it myself “ (Viscusi 2011, 271)³.

Identifying with another, communicating, and understanding the complexity of the self and the conflictual structure of society, are thus all part of the conscious process that helps the individual move out of the “subjection” of the *subject* and become a human, historically and geographically located *person*. It is the embodied *person* who is capable of critiquing the roles that the *polis* assigns to different individuals within a society. At the beginning of Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina*, in reaction to her male psychoanalyst, Marguerite thinks: “The hell with minor roles, she wanted to be a person as much as he” (Barolini 1999, 6). Through Marguerite, Barolini underscores both the structuring of identity, the partiality, and gendering of social roles or masks, and the fact that in a patriarchal society only the male-gendered individual is entitled to personhood and to full human dignity and rights.

The role (or mask) is the political pre-dicted and pre-ordained space of action, often superimposed on a socially and culturally-defined identity, all symbolically represented as inherently fixed, timeless and naturalized. As opposed to concepts of legal *persona*, identity and subject, which have a distributive value⁴, the idea of “person” applies to unique human beings⁵.

³ Book 46, sonnet 1, line 4. Viscusi’s epic poem is composed of fifty-two books each comprising twelve sonnets of fourteen autonomous lines. From now on quotations of its verses will be referenced with the numbers of book, sonnet and line, as follows: 46.1: 4. *e i* followed by a numeral refers to the prose letter at the end of the volume.

⁴ I refer to Rosi Braidotti’s definition of identity as “a bounded, ego-indexed habit of fixing and capitalizing on one’s selfhood”, as well as to her conception of subjectivity as “a socially mediated process of relations and negotiations with multiple others and multilayered social structures” (Braidotti 2011, 4).

⁵ I am applying here Paul Ricoeur’s differentiation between the “I” as subject of language and action, and the “real person” (Ricoeur 1990, 68). The debate on the concept of “person” extends over various fields. For an overview in political philosophy see in particular Esposito 2007 and 2014.

The “person”, as defined by Maria Zambrano – a philosopher and a lifelong political refugee from Franco’s Spain – “is an individual gifted with consciousness, who is aware of her/himself, and conceives of herself as a supreme value” (Zambrano 2000, 118)⁶. For this reason, I must add, it is the “person” who can be the subject of ethical values and the originator of unanticipated actions, as well as the carrier of dignity. For the “person” is the human being who is both traversed by natural and socialized time-space and the bearer of new socialized space and of historical time. According to Zambrano, the person is traversed by the life process, she is “a future yet to be discovered, not [...] a present reality” (118). Thus, it is the person who is involved in the process of becoming.

When I use the term “person” in this essay, I mean a unique human being – woman or man – in relation to others, the world and the self, as well as its embodied concretization in time and history⁷. Rather than a mask, the term “person” stands for the individual who defines and redefines herself through processes of internal, social, and political conflict and identifications. To be, or to become a person, is to create the critical space that will activate a self, which is, at least in part, the author of one’s story. This is exactly what literary works offer us: the representation of the terrain where appropriation and criticism of power, and identity construction, allow us as readers to access the symbolic order and from that space question and reframe it through imagination and identification with whomever or whatever offers possible alternatives and a future to our limited lives.

⁶ This and all following translations from texts in Italian are mine.

⁷ This last aspect implies, as Paul Ricoeur points out in *Soi-même comme un autre* (1990), both the person’s assumption of agency, and an ethical stance towards the self, the other, and society.

Ghost Dance *and* ellis island

To connect the previous, more general, considerations to Italian immigrants in the United States and to the two literary works that are the object of my analysis, it is important to remember that the Italians who emigrated to the United States entered not only “a nation founded upon processes of colonization, dispossession, and slavery, and therefore deeply fractured by race-based hierarchies of inequality” (Guglielmo 2003, 2), but also a highly conflictual terrain shaped by the real and symbolic dichotomy of inclusion and exclusion in which they had to find their own space.

The two works I investigate here, the 1986 novel *Ghost Dance* by Carole Maso and *ellis island*, the long poem by Robert Viscusi published in 2011, offer distinct patterns and strategies for traversing US settler colonial structures and confront pre-determined ethnic identities. In their different ways, they also build the space for the limited freedom in which not just an identity, but a distinct human person and a society of interrelated individuals and communities can be shaped in the American context. Consequently, two features will be foregrounded in these two texts: the construction of a personal and American self through identification with the natives and the land⁸; and the internal relationship whereby the personal and ethnic, the historical and the universal are joined in a constellation which has the single human life and its aspirations at its center.

Both *Ghost Dance* and *ellis island* are highly experimental allegories. As allegories, they transfigure personal and historical experiences via a symbolic narrative which illuminates a time that, as Viscusi writes, discovers “yesterday as tomorrow” (Viscusi 2011, 27.12: 7). At the center of their protagonists’ quest is life’s will to overcome death in all its forms by exploring

⁸ There is at least one case in which the fictional impersonation of American Natives becomes the vehicle for a complete change of personal identity: the dark-skinned Oscar de Corti, born to Italian immigrants in Louisiana, who became Iron Eyes Cody. He did not limit himself to playing Native American characters in a number of Hollywood films, but claimed in his autobiography that he was born in the Oklahoma Territory to a Cherokee father and a Creek mother (see Conte 2011, 24).

new directions for human identities and human societies through conflict and contamination. In both works, the act of re-memoration becomes a re-visioning through which events cease to be happenings of a singular or ethnic experience in order to access a universalized ethical dimension. Both texts belong as much to Italian American literature as they do to American literature and to world literature.

Ghost Dance and *ellis island* offer distinct representations and interpretations of the political and cultural structures that settler colonialism put in place over time. As they “scrutinize and question dominant and ethnic ideologies and the mind-sets their cultures induce in others” (Anzaldúa 2002, 541), both works contribute to the larger reflection on migration and power relations. However, *Ghost Dance* and *ellis island* can also be seen as specifically Italian American in their denunciation of the hegemonic colonial narrative beginning with Columbus’s discovery of America, and in their class-conscious repeal of Columbus’s feat as an identity myth and Columbus himself as the hero who validates the Italian presence in the United States.

In *Ghost Dance* and *ellis island*, Italian immigrants identify with the colonized and with other racialized groups rather than with the colonizers of the American continent. Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s long poem *Americus* fully embodies this class-conscious sense of ethnic belonging. His *Americus* is a contemporary Italian American re-enactment of Dario Fo’s *Johan Padan*. Just as Fo’s eponymous unwitting colonizer was unwillingly transported to the New World in the belly of Columbus’s ships, so *Americus*, Ferlinghetti’s alter-ego, reaches America hidden in his mother’s pregnant body (see Fo 1992; Ferlinghetti 2004). But it is Viscusi who manifestly gives voice to the ambiguous status of Columbus in his *Oration upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus*, where Columbus progresses “from hero to liability for the Italian community”⁹. Aligning himself with the natives and with the other minorities who protest the

⁹ I am quoting Kathryn Nocerino’s words in the back of the book cover. See also the list of alternative heroes – Sacco and Vanzetti above all – whom Diane di Prima invites to celebrate on Columbus Day in “WHOSE DAY IS IT ANYWAY? The Poet Mulls over Some of the Choices”. This 1988 poem is her contribution to an

celebration of the mainstream narrative of “the conquest” of America on the occasion of its quincentenary, Viscusi reads the conquest as the story of the hegemonic classes who in America appropriated the land of the natives, displacing them into pens called reservations, and in nineteenth-century Italy forced the poor farmers to emigrate to America and sell their labor:

the italians went to america in steerage
that means they slept down below
[...]

the americans loved columbus in those days
he was the right kind of italian
not like these dirty dagoes
[...]

the americans preferred columbus
our man wore a telescope in his pants
who bought america from the indians
and gave it to the bankers.

(Viscusi 1993, 2)

The story Viscusi celebrates is one that brushes hegemonic “history against the grain”, and unveils the bias in the documents of the self-defined civilized European conquerors and their present heirs, as well as the political and ethnic conflict that gave rise to the celebration of Columbus Day (Benjamin 1968, 257). In a recent *New York Times* op-ed article Brent Staples, a member of the newspaper’s editorial board, thus synthesizes the origins and the ambiguous status of the Columbus Day celebrations:

The federal holiday honoring the Italian explorer Christopher Columbus [...] was central to the process through which Italian-Americans were fully ratified as white during the 20th century. The rationale for the holiday was steeped in myth, and allowed Italian-Americans to write a laudatory portrait of themselves into the civic record. [...] Few who march in Columbus Day parades or recount the tale of Columbus’s voyage from Europe to the New World are aware of how the holiday came about or that President Benjamin Harrison proclaimed it as a one-time national celebration

anthology that challenges the representativeness of Columbus for the Italian American community.

in 1892 – in the wake of a bloody New Orleans lynching that took the lives of 11 Italian immigrants. The proclamation was part of a broader attempt to quiet outrage among Italian-Americans, and a diplomatic blow-up over the murders that brought Italy and the United States to the brink of war. [...] The Columbus Day proclamation in 1892 opened the door for Italian-Americans to write themselves into the American origin story, in a fashion that piled myth upon myth. [...] they rewrote history by casting Columbus as “the first immigrant” – even though he never [...] immigrated anywhere (except possibly to Spain), and even though the United States did not exist as a nation during his 15th-century voyage. The mythologizing, carried out over many decades, granted Italian-Americans “a formative role in the nation-building narrative”. It also tied Italian-Americans closely to the paternalistic assertion, still heard today, that Columbus “discovered” a continent that was already inhabited by Native Americans. (*The New York Times*, October 12, 2019)

Ghost Dance

Uniting in its title both family and national ghosts and the barbarous extermination of the Sioux at Wounded Knee in 1890, Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance* re-writes in a cinematic and fragmented mode the migratory experience across three generations. The novel’s narrator, Vanessa Turin, and her brother Fletcher are the grandchildren of four immigrant grandparents: two Italian, one Armenian and one German. No relationship exists between the grandparents, who only connect through the marriage of Michael, the dreamy son of the Italian couple, to Christine, the psychotic, poet daughter of the German-Armenian. The couple’s two children, Vanessa and Fletcher, testify to the failure of the different versions of their grandparents’ American dream.

Impressed by the Sioux stories that their Italian grandfather tells them and traumatized by the sudden death of their mother in a car accident, Fletcher and Vanessa follow different paths. Vanessa overcomes the self-destructive consequences of drug addiction by re-imagining a haunting family history as well as by recovering the artistic and lesbian legacy of her poet mother¹⁰. Vanessa also entangles memory and history by re-living

¹⁰ For an analysis of the mother-daughter-writer relationship, see DeSalvo 1997. On the mother-daughter and lesbian themes in *Ghost Dance* and in Italian American

the stories her grandparents and parents told her. In her narration, she gives shape to the journey that will lead the Armenian grandfather back to Turkey and the Italian grandfather to the Black Hills and to a cultural identification with Native Americans and class identification with African Americans.

Ghost Dance not only manifestly joins the Native American and the immigrants' stories, but as a symbolic dance of ghosts it opens both the past and the novel itself to a number of possible interpretations. The circular, repetitive form of the dance points to the circle of violence, dispossession, and domination around which colonial and US history has developed. It also explores the theme of the identification of the Italian American immigrant with the Native American. While evocative of Dante's allegorical descent down the circles of Hell prior to salvation, no salvation is expected in *Ghost Dance*, not even through art. The artist can only circle around and, at most, make visible the depths of violence and loss that unite the personal, national and universal traumatic experiences of evil.

I wish to focus particularly on three significant scenes in the novel, each condensed into a specific event. The first centers on Angelo Turin, the Italian grandfather, and his destruction of his vegetable garden; the second, on his son Michael and Kennedy's assassination; the third, on the extended family's visit to the 1964 World's Fair in New York.

My grandfather lifts his ax. When it is poised above his head, my father, just a boy, freezes the scene. [...] his father is cutting down the beautiful tomato plants, grown from seed, hacking them down to the ground. [...] Is this what my father means when he says there are things it is better to forget? Is this what is forgetting – his own father out in the garden chopping the tomato plants into pieces, insisting that they are Americans now, not Italians? Did his father announce that there will be no more Italian spoken in his house? No more wine drunk with lunch, as he burned the grapevines? Did he tell his wife there would be no more sad songs from the old country? How much she must have wept, hugging her small boy to her breast! (Maso 1986, 74)

Maso's quasi-cinematic sequence makes us see Angelo's actions through the unbelieving eyes of his traumatized young son. The scene is also, vicariously, perceived by the third-generation narrator, Vanessa¹¹. She is the one who proves that a past traumatic event never really passes. Rather, it leaves psychic traces that, through memory, propagate from generation to generation. The superposition of the gaze of the narrator and of her child-father, moreover, not only conflates time, direct and narrated experience, but enhances the role of the third-generation narrator as the one who can critically traverse both her father's and her grandfather's lives in the United States. If for her child-father, Michael, his father's axing the plants is an act of senseless destruction and a trauma, for the narrator grandchild it is equally an act of survival. She is able not only to register her grandfather's social emotion of the shame that led him to submit to the assimilationist monologism and monoculturalism of the US, but also to detect his resilience¹².

In her eyes, Angelo Turin's symbolic cutting of the umbilical cord that united him to his mother country signifies something more than his reaction to his double loss: the Italian immigrant's loss of land, community, language and cultural identity; and the loss of worth as an immigrant to the United States, which threatens his very self as a human being¹³. It also stands for

¹¹ On *Ghost Dance* as a third-generation narrative, see the section devoted to "Carole Maso and the Art of Myth" in Gardaphé 1996; and the chapter "The Third Generation Narratives of Lisa Ruffolo, Mary Caponegro, and Carole Maso" in Pipino 2000.

¹² I use "superposition" in the quantum mechanics sense. While the tomatoes and the vineyard point to Angelo's southern Italian origin and peasant culture, his loving cultivation of the plants in his little plot of land on American soil symbolizes his dream of an edenic coexistence of Italian and American cultures. In this sense, the axing scene can be considered as representing the experience of resettlement in the new country: a transplantation transformed into uprootedness and frozen in the granddaughter's imagination, but from which she abstracts the knowledge capable of re-orienting the future. On this thematic, see Todorov 1998 and Ricoeur 2003, 124. For a definition of "social emotions", see Damasio 2010, 133-138).

¹³ What Hannah Arendt writes in "We Refugees" can also apply to economic immigrants such as Angelo, who are not unlike the Jews in Nazi Germany, politically and legally persecuted and forced out of their country: "We lost our home, which means the familiarity of daily life. We lost our occupation, which means the confidence that we are of some use in the world. We lost our language, which means

Angelo's refusal to remain stuck in the fixed role of the ethnic immigrant, which he is allowed to play in his new country. Both as an ethnic Italian and as an outsider, he is deprived of the possibility of growing and changing. Even worse, he is continuously subject to obfuscation, namely, the risk of becoming a thing – like the African American slaves – or a number, one of the mass of immigrants feeding American capitalist economy¹⁴. Angelo wants to become American in order to participate in the common dream of the future. He has hope. And hope is, according to Maria Zambrano, an “interior movement of the self as person” (Zambrano 2000, 72).

Michael, Angelo's young son, is not mature enough to understand the full implications of his father's action. Michael, “the skipped-over generation” (Maso 1986, 88), is trauma incarnate¹⁵. He is the first victim of his father's rejection of Italian culture and language. Living without a story with which he can identify, and refusing to tell what he knows about his family to his children he will bury his life in silence and music, aligning himself with other victims of violence (79). In his daughter's memory, President Kennedy's assassination, a national event and a collective trauma, is acknowledged and appropriated through its reverberations in her own father's traumatized psyche. It will be indelibly associated with her father's “great sadness” and the way it affected her own life: “I grew up regretting in a mild way the death of our handsome president but mourning the realization that my father was not a happy man and that he probably had never been. I have linked in my mind, unfairly,

the naturalness of reactions, the simplicity of gestures, the unaffected expression of feelings. We left our relatives [...] and that means the rupture of our private lives” (Arendt 1994, 110).

¹⁴ Tellingly, the opening words of Michael Carosone's MA thesis are: “I hated being me practically my entire life. I hated being Italian-American practically my entire life. I hated the negative stereotypes associated with being Italian-American” (Carosone 2007, 2). On human and relational reification, see Honneth and Esposito 2007. For a recent, articulated overview of Italian immigration in the United States and the conflictual processes of integration, see, in Connell and Pugliese 2018, especially the essays by Alba, Carravetta and Vellon.

¹⁵ For definitions of individual and collective trauma, see Fassin and Rechtman 2009, 16.

the death of President Kennedy with my father's great sadness because I really never noticed it before that day" (75-76).

Maso's connecting a traumatic public historical event to private feelings of sorrow offers an important interpretive key to the second episode I selected, which focuses on the day an adult Michael takes his parents and children to the 1964 World's Fair in New York. Many things happen at the Fair that will change the family's lives. In the Vatican Pavilion, Michelangelo's *Pietà* is exhibited. Once there, Michael spends most of his time circling around this monument to loss, compassion, mourning, and motherly love. But Vanessa, his daughter and "a partner in sorrow" (121), cannot figure out "what about this large sculpture, behind glass, lit in blue, moved my father to tears that day, standing between his parents, hugging them to his side on the moving conveyor belt we all stood on" (124). In the tears Michael sheds, not only are personal, ethnic and national loss mourned together, but the narrative as a whole must be interpreted as Maso's attempt at making sense of the affective function of Michelangelo's *Pietà*. Indirectly pointing to Pietro di Donato's novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939), or to Allan D'Arcangelo's painting *Madonna and Child* (1963 – see figure 1), the *Pietà* at the Fair also enhances the ethnic as well as the symbolic and universal value that Maso assigns to Michelangelo's work of art.

In the passage quoted above, Michael embraces Angelo. In this way Maso explicitly connects the names of her two characters to that of Michelangelo, thus challenging both the racialized definition of Italian immigrants and the opposition of popular to artistic culture¹⁶. Moreover, through her alter-ego Vanessa, Maso conveys her belief that the work of art is the very *locus* which can make private and public emotions converge, weaving together the personal and the political.

¹⁶ Maso's inclusion of Michelangelo's sculpture in the novel also underscores both Italian American identification with a Catholic president and the role Italian Renaissance representations of the Madonna and Child play in the Italian identitarian imaginary. In Allan D'Arcangelo's *Madonna and Child* (1963), painted the year of Kennedy's assassination, his loss is mourned through Jacqueline Kennedy and her daughter represented as Madonna and Child. Even the cover of the recently published



Figure 1. Allan D'Arcangelo, *Madonna and Child* (1963), Whitney Museum of American Art, collection.whitney.org

The family visit to the *Pietà* is not the only happening of the day that moves Maso's story forward. For, indeed, after leaving the Vatican Pavilion, grandfather Angelo and grandchild Fletcher find themselves involved in the civil rights protest of a

Routledge History of Italian Americans reproduces the immigrant nativity scene in John Cadel's *The Migrants*, a painting in the permanent art exhibit at the Italian Cultural Center at Casa Italiana in Stone Park, IL.

group of African Americans and in a massive sit-in forcing the shutdown of Ford's Progressland Pavilion (126). Initially only a spectator, the grandfather crosses the line and sides with the protestors when he hears a disgruntled white visitor shout "Get the gas ovens ready!" (127). Arrested by the police, he and Fletcher join the African American captives in the police van¹⁷.

This is grandfather's great traumatic experience. Having seen injustice, Vanessa tells us, he understands that with all the progress exhibited at the Fair, Americans "had invented a system of hatred and fear so elaborate and subtle and efficient" that it was "impossible to crack" (129). Becoming aware of the racial discrimination against African Americans, Angelo comes to understand the discrimination he himself has experienced. He realizes then that the *persona* whose right is predicated by American laws – and the dream of equality and happiness that it marketed – is a fiction. It does not include every real person in the land, because it is rooted in liberal capitalist ideology and is capable of reducing even humans to things. As Roberto Esposito writes, the Latin or legal concept of the *persona*, which in principle should imply the universalization of inalienable rights, has been used to exclude some human types from the benefits that others enjoy: "To make them *personae* – things to be used and destroyed. Such is the case of the slave and of the immigrant" (Esposito 2014, 16).

Rebelling against the Anglo-American White society with which he wanted so much to identify, Angelo refuses to be yet another victim and returns to the dream that had guided him out of Italy, a mix of desire and necessity, of hope and imagination. This time he roots his dream in the material land, rather than in its human history. It is at this point that he comes to the conclusion that primitive man was better (Maso 1986, 129). Reinterpreted by his granddaughter, his primitive man, however, is neither the opposite of the "civilized" Anglo-American man nor the primitive Native with whom the immigrant Jews identified. If

¹⁷ Angelo Turin's relation with the African American community is important, but only briefly touched on in Maso's novel. On the complex relationship Italian Americans entertained with African Americans in the United States, see Guglielmo and Salerno 2003.

the Jews referred to the biblical myth of the lost tribe to imagine a historic, pre-Columbian kinship with the American Natives, envisioning the American land as the historical end of their exilic wandering, Angelo's and Vanessa's primitive man stands for the absolute human. It is not really "primitive" because still in contact with the vitality and resources of the human body and the nourishing resources of the American land (see Koffman 2019). The body and the land, place and geography rather than history and time, are the *loci* where the Italian in America can reconnect to what Damasio calls "the *deliberate* seeking of well-being" (Damasio 2010, 29), which makes it possible to change personal and collective history again.

Having left his land of origin and given up the plot of American land where he had cultivated his dream of Italian-American co-existence, Angelo turns once more to the land for survival. He decides to learn from those whose life had first been nourished by the land, the American Natives. In his periodic pilgrimages to the Sioux reservation in the Black Hills of South Dakota, Angelo learns from the natives not only his Indian name, but something that was important in his previous life: how to ask for rain, the absence of which is the nightmare of every farmer. To communicate with his Native friends, Angelo uses his hands, recovering the body language that was part of his Italian culture, and that is not primitive but universal.

The true heirs of this Italian American grandfather's apprenticeship with Native Americans are his two grandchildren, Fletcher and Vanessa. Angelo not only passes on to them the stories he was told but makes them share in Native American death-related beliefs and practices. Both Fletcher and Vanessa will follow in his footsteps. Fletcher becomes a pacifist who fights for social justice and a harmonious relationship with earth, animals and universe. He continues to visit the Sioux in the Black Hills after his grandfather's death. However, failing to win respect for the land and justice for the workers, he is finally overwhelmed, sucked into madness or despair, and disappears forever from his sister's life¹⁸. Vanessa is the only remaining de-

¹⁸ Fletcher is the one who believes in change, who tries to save the land from

scendant of the two immigrant families¹⁹. She can narrate because she has gone beyond her father's trauma and silence, and by interweaving her family's and her nation's history, she has gained the critical distance and authoritative voice of someone who can continue her grandfather's vision. She claims access to all the different identifications, real and imaginary, that shape her as a person. She has also come to understand that the United States of America *is* her *home*, because "there is no other place" where she can "feel at home". The transatlantic liner that brought her grandfather to the American shore has changed the course of his and his descendants' lives (Maso 1986, 274).

But Vanessa has also learned that one must find a way to live side by side with sorrow, and with evil. Speaking in the first person of her experience at the Fair, Vanessa exclaims: "It seemed impossible to me that, in this awesome, shining world of light, evil could exist at all" (129). What for her grandfather was an American evil, for Vanessa is a more universal, human evil. For her, the *Pietà* with its dead Jesus and mourning Mary, rooted in the pagan Mediterranean mythical traditions, is not only part of her Italian heritage but a symbol of what both the US and the world badly need. Embodying the ethical and universal values that great art promotes, the *Pietà* stands not only for motherly love and suffering – the role women have been forced to play in the social drama of a competitive society, but for the universal values of piety, compassion and love for the victim, whether poor white, Native American, African American, woman, child or immigrant. This is what the US needs. This is what the world needs.

those who exploit it and destroy all life. "This is our home", Fletcher says, "and we must ask for it back – back from Hooker-Chemical, back from Johns-Mansville. This is *our* home" (Maso, 50).

¹⁹ Vanessa is given "many books about the Indians" (66) by her Italian grandfather.

ellis island

In its own way, Viscusi's *ellis island* is also a ghost dance. For, indeed, this epic poem grew out of what can be defined as a revelatory experience during a visit to Ellis Island, when the author perceived "a thickness of feelings and memories that hovered around [him] in the air" (Viscusi 2011, 320). If memories brought back his Italian immigrant grandmother and mother, the thickness of feelings made him aware that Ellis Island was "a location in the universal vortex of displacement" (320).

If Italian diasporic migration to the United States and the rest of the world may offer the paradigm of contemporary transnational modernity (Gabaccia 1999), Viscusi's epic is the cultural text from which to infer the paradigm for migration. Indeed, *ellis island*, "one focus of an elliptical journey whose other is naples or rome", can be considered the allegorical embodiment of the mass migration of Italians to the United States (Viscusi 2011, 51.2: 1). The text revisits such experiences of migration as a paradigmatic model for what has "now become the typical life to be endured and decoded a million, a hundred million, times over" (Viscusi 1995, 102).

Walt Whitman represented poetry – a synthesis of all art forms – as "that furious whirling wheel [...] the centre and axis of the whole", through which we may "investigate the causes, growths, tallymarks of the time – the age's matter and malady" (Whitman 1892, 156). As if echoing Whitman's dynamic image for poetry and historical life, in the second poem in *ellis island* Viscusi writes: "you have never seen a *human wheel turning* / as it rolls heavily down the avenue of transformation" (Viscusi 2011, 2.7: 1-2, emphasis added). Viscusi transforms the *whirling wheel*, Whitman's dynamic image for poetry, into a *human wheel*, which is change incarnate. Viscusi's human wheel of mass migration is "our age's matter and malady"; for this reason, each poem, each contemporary work of art is also "a tremendous blues of dispersal", whose "echoes keep changing languages in the colonnade" (2.6: 13-14). Viscusi's *ellis island* recreates the world that begins with dislocation. Within the closed space of his allegorical *island*, a liminal place

which underscores the in-between status of the migrant, one can perceive how diasporas and migrations not only happen in time but, as a whole, produce, as in Maso's *Ghost Dance*, a palimpsest of times where affinities and similarities as well as connecting nodes are made visible.

ellis island embodies the symbolic meeting place for those who are on the move, who have lost a home and cannot, or do not, want to find an alternate abode. While borrowing its name from a rock in the Bay of New York (Viscusi could have named his poem *Lampedusa, Italy*, for that matter), the poem stands for what the American Ellis Island was not, since it was the "site of entry into and deportation from the United States" (Pease 2002, 153). It stands for today's world, for the multiple beings, stories, languages that enter in contact and interact all over its round geography, for those who cannot say "I" without acknowledging the co-presence in their person of multiple, but different "I"s. Thus, as large in imagination as the Statue of Liberty is tall, Viscusi's *ellis island* stands out as the gathering place of all human beings who not only claim life as their right but refuse to stay put and die in silence.

While the node of different migrants/migrations meeting at the Ellis Island end of geographical space enhances the image of the overlapping and contact of ethnic groups within a small, bound location – and Ellis Island could be a metonymical substitute for America or Europe – the hidden trope in Viscusi's poem is that Ellis Island is also the node tying together the disparate threads wiring each individual or group to its land of origins. Thus, migrants can be represented as threads, carriers of interrupted stories and connectors of lands, languages and cultures. As connectors, the migrants become the agents and protagonists of a story of complex, conflicting, cultural circulation and transformation.

What once more characterizes Italian immigrants in their human and ethnic mixing in *ellis island* is their identification with the American Natives rather than with the Anglo-Saxon majority. As with Maso, in *ellis island* it is primarily the association of home, land, and human and nonhuman life that presides over the identification of the native Italian with the Native American. Two lines in the poem are at the core of Viscusi's association of

Native Americans and Italian immigrants: “what they tell you about native americans also characterizes many native italians / they live close to the sky and speak plainly with animals as sentient beings” (Viscusi 2011, 51.12: 8-9). With his evocation of Saint Francis, who chose poverty and spoke to the animals on equal terms, Viscusi uses an Italian representative figure to point out how much the awareness of the continuum of life in the human, animal, vegetable and cosmic worlds associates Italian immigrants and Native Americans. However, Saint Francis’s renunciation of wealth, his poverty and humility, points to Viscusi’s denunciation of contemporary consumer capitalism and the capitalist structures and frame of mind that dominate contemporary US and Western politics and culture. He also indirectly underscores the fact that the poor can generate fear as well as attachment to class and race privilege in those who identify themselves with hegemonic exclusionary politics.

As in *Ghost Dance*, a shared experience of pain coming from “social judgments teeming with pain given and pain received” and the awareness of “living inside a mask” (45.12: 6, 8) characterize the immigrant Italian. Both the pain and the awareness join Italians and Native Americans in the United States of America, as in the following lines from poem 35.5, where we witness an Italian immigrant in a symbolic Whitmanian process of becoming undressed:

the concept of the naked italian grows from the italian wearing clothes
in america as vespucci pointed out everyone quickly grows brown and naked
poor italians become naked too in america but they accept their naked bodies
ignazio silone says that cafoni what we call poor italians exist everywhere
slave and choctow midwife chieftain horsetraders recognized cafoni as
brothers (35.5: 1-2, 6, 8-9)

If style and fashion represent an Italian trademark and a point of honor and identity, then Viscusi shows the shortcomings of basing one’s worth on attributes of historically limited value. He claims for Italians in America, and for all immigrants everywhere in the world, recognition as human beings and persons with individual life projects.

“Person” in the American Grain

Ghost Dance and *ellis island* cross the borders of a single ethnic narrative to project a story of stories. They tell us that *becoming American* is not as relevant as *becoming a person in America*; and that the self as person, conquered via the free imaginary identification with others, is both multiplied and fragmented. Just like Angelo in Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance*, Viscusi’s immigrant needs to ground his/her future identity on the recognition of a human ground zero where s/he might embrace both the past and the present. It is the complex situation in which immigrants find themselves that requires a qualitative change in their lives, if they want to build a future. That process can only happen if they understand that they are complex persons living in a complex, tendentially entropic society that requires new techniques for both revising and overcoming former simple but oppositional symbolic representations of identity as well as ideological and physical borders.

Overemphasizing a Derridean *melancholia* (Derrida 2001), Maso’s *Ghost Dance* finds in the loss of human lives, of hopes and dreams the relation uniting colonization and immigration, and in America the place where multiplication of possible identities is enmeshed in the loss of the feeling of wholeness and security which a closed world could provide. Any sense of identity, despite the plurality in identification offered by a context such as the US, is invariably haunted by a sense of loss – a loss of wholeness and security experienced in worlds that eventually tend to close in on themselves. Through Vanessa’s character, moreover, Maso critiques not only American evil, or the evil we are experiencing today, but universal, absolute evil. In this way, she directs our attention to the real source of sorrow, what Maria Zambrano defines as “the crime” on which Western history is rooted: its destruction of the living being who is the person (Zambrano 2000, 80-81). That is the loss that her *Pietà* mourns. The palimpsest of traumatic crises that the three generations of Italian Americans in Maso’s novel experience, then, compounds that feeling of a blocked future, “a death feeling or even a certainty of death” (27), that takes over in

critical times, and that often presses for a return to an imaginary past. An evil taints all modern democracies, Maria Zambrano writes, and re-emerges in critical moments when “the past and the future fight one another” (23). The past, however, is very often an imaginary past that seems to offer better choices than the present: it becomes a refuge, but usually obscures its negative aspects.

Viscusi’s *ellis island*, on the other hand, in its representation of migration as present-day human experience, foregrounds the empowering dynamics of migration. Viscusi tells us that if in displacement there may be loss, the choice that originates the migrant’s journey of dispersal also signals an inner life force and hope in the future. Viscusi’s epic, then, is a work in which the epigraphic wisdom framed in a line and sculpted like a proverb provides the hard-earned knowledge of migration. His migrant is a subject in movement, real and imagined, a person attached to other persons not in the close-knit community of a town, village or nation, but connected through movement, contact, and the impossibility of complying with the imperative of unity. It is this impossibility of fitting into identity narratives created within one’s land of origin and the individual nation-state as well as those one is assigned in the land of arrival that necessitates the hybridization and multiplication of languages. For the migrant, as for the Italian American, “*jesus himself speaks a kind of british african american italian american*” (Viscusi 2011, 45.2: 12, emphasis added), and no story is whole. Rather, it is a collection of fragmented stories that together form the mental map of the migrant subject of the twenty-first century – a century where, waiting for them at the doors not only of the United States but of many other countries “*the goddess liberty announces the completion of the ocean outside*” (1.2: 6, emphasis added). By defying physical death as much as the death of a past self, by crossing borders and cultures, the migrant reaffirms the desire to project life into the future. But it is the difference and novelty every migrant outsider carries into the land of arrival that presides over the closing of borders. The nativists in every country feel the danger that new immigrants introduce to their received and entrenched identities.

Both *Ghost Dance* and *ellis island* express the universal values and the distinctive Americanness of Americans of non-Anglo ethnicity. By re-claiming the land as common ground, Maso and Viscusi also contribute a deeply Italian imagination and symbolism to a rich American tradition that grounds identity in the land. They participate in what Donald Pease calls “a cultural form of US citizenship” (Pease 2002, 138). William Carlos Williams’s denunciation of the Spanish and English conquests of the Americas foregrounds Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance*²⁰. Whitman’s equation of American identity with the land, and Melville’s *Moby-Dick* with its island-whale, and the mixed crew of its world-ship, perhaps form the constellation in which Robert Viscusi’s *ellis island* belongs.

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²⁰ Maso was born in 1956 in Paterson, NJ. She claims that her own work was inspired by William Carlos Williams, the author of the modernist epic *Paterson* (1946-1958), as well as of the famous collection of essays *In the American Grain* (1925).

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Chapter 2

Mary Jo Bona

Adria Bernardi's *Openwork* and Italian Women's Diasporas¹

Stitch into your crimson dress, a rose, a bowl, a code.
Stitch into your beautiful dress a sentence of your own –
a room into which one day you will walk.

(Carole Maso)

The voice of *la sarta* (the seamstress) begins and ends the narration of Adria Bernardi's excavational *Openwork*. The author's governing metaphor of sewing serves as a bulwark against the destabilization that occurs with migration and a counternarrative to institutional forms of oppression by Church and State in post-*Risorgimento* Italy of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rather than selling her treasured tablecloth, Imola Bartolai, the protagonist in *Openwork*, decides to send it to New Mexico. This act of transfiguration is a testimonial to her cognizance that the fabric text secures a gesture of permanence in a world transformed by migration and ceaseless scattering.

Speaking from a mountain village on the border of Tuscany, Imola's intimate acquaintance with the activity of cloth-work recalls her mythical ancestor, Clotho, a spinner invoked during times of crisis. Like Hester Prynne before her, Imola's handwork ultimately intertwines with her daughters' migratory destinies, assuring their welfare in adulthood by liberating them from lives

¹ Permission is granted non-exclusive and no fee to reuse one chapter from *Women Writing Cloth: Migratory Fiction in the American Imaginary*, Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016 (all rights reserved).

defined by poverty and maternity. That the Roman equivalent of Clotho, *Nona* (“ninth”), was originally a goddess called upon in the ninth month of pregnancy is no coincidence in Bernardi’s *Openwork*, for Imola’s work as a wet nurse aligns her with village women forced by civic and religious authorities to abandon illegitimate infants. Cloth-worker and wet nurse Imola’s post-*Risorgimento* story will cross and intersect with the other voices throughout the novel, most presciently the voice of her American interlocutor, Adele, who will strengthen their bond through writing. Imola’s losses extend beyond her multiple miscarriages, and into New Mexico, where her beloved brother is one of the 263 miners killed in the 1913 Dawson coal mining explosion, a loss from which Imola never fully recovers. Through repetition and layering threads of connection between the voices in *Openwork*, Bernardi deploys the trope of cloth-work to interrogate prevailing conventions about women and power. For migrating women, sewing repairs damages of disconnection by evoking the village *sarta*, who taught them to express artistic vitality and secure economic autonomy through the labor of their hands.

Bernardi’s *Openwork* represents the activity of sewing as a radical act, re-threading emigrants to their *paesi*, their hometowns. The novel recalls the diaspora of Italians during the decades of southern and eastern European migration to the Americas (1880-1920), but in its dedication to nontraditional forms of narration Bernardi’s storytelling is neither a privatized revelation of experience nor a traditionally represented story of immigration. Taking her cue from the ancient storytellers of oral traditions, Bernardi performs the role of *le cantastorie* (professional women storytellers), serving as an “intermediary between listener and story, between past and present”; storyteller and writer Gioia Timpanelli explains that while spoken stories are rooted in the “language, the culture, the place that held them”, they also “travel slowly or swiftly, finally belonging to everyone who has an ear for the words and the heart for the story” (Timpanelli 1999, 131). Such storied movement allows for the emergence of a third space between old and new worlds, enables communication between distinct worlds – the mountainous vil-

lages of northern Italy and Midwestern America – diminishing traditional distinctions between space, time, and culture².

Bernardi also engages in what Linda Hutcheon calls historiographic metafiction, problematizing the nature of “representation in historiography”, and, as feminist writers have demonstrated, asserting “a communicational bond between teller and the told within a context that is historical, social, and political, as well as intertextual” (Hutcheon 1989, 50-51). *Openwork* functions as excavation work as Bernardi fuses storytelling traditions, family lore, and archival research to uncover possible origins underlying the pain inhering in a northern Italian border community and its dispersal to the United States and *tutto il mondo* (all the world). Disclosing larger historical narratives that have shaped the destinies of powerless people, Bernardi offers alternative documentation by recovering and reimagining the memories of heretofore silenced voices. As part of an intertextual strategy to link communities separated by geography and century, Bernardi employs co-narration in the final section of *Openwork*, establishing a communal bond between Adele (a mouthpiece for Bernardi), and Imola. Offering her interlocutor an alternative narrative, Imola’s story elucidates the underlying reasons for the continued suffering and malaise of Italian Americans in the aftermath of migration.

While reconstructing the diasporic experiences of Italians, Bernardi links them to transnational identities that cross borders, enabling both permeable boundaries between geographical spaces and porous connections between families, generations, and places. *Openwork* portrays lives beyond the obligatory three-generational saga so omnipresent in American migratory

² Extending the work of Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja’s term “Thirdspace” is useful to my analysis of Bernardi’s conflation and expansion of spatial dynamics in *Openwork* as she goes about linking generations, continents, and voices unknown to each other. Soja explains Thirdspace as a theory in which “real and the imagined (both and also) can be described and inscribed in journeys to ‘real-and-imagined’ places” (Soja 1996, 11). In addition, Ramón J. Guerra’s focus on teaching “story” as a component in Sandra Cisneros’s *Caramelo* persuasively parallels Bernardi’s strategy in *Openwork* in which “the emergence of a new, jointly informed space between these distinct worlds requires communication through, over, and past the traditional ‘borders’ of time, space, and culture” (Guerra, 151-152).

narratives; the seven intersecting voices that speak are related less by blood and more by locale and friendship. Like the titular term, “openwork”, Bernardi signifies spatial openness by inserting blank pages, triple spacing, and by eliminating quotation tags. Such strategies, I argue, not only simulate the method of needlework to which Imola is dedicated, but also serve as Bernardi’s attempt to mend ruptures triggered by the activity of migration, which caused traumatic responses reproduced in generations that did not even experience the event³.

While acknowledging Bernardi’s prodigious talent, an anonymous *Kirkus* reviewer concludes that the author attempts “to do too much”, mistakenly suggesting that “the narrative threads fail to tie together” (Anon. 2006). Eric Miles Williamson’s summary of *Openwork* advances a potentially misleading impression when he describes the novel as “an Italian immigrant family saga spanning a hundred years, beginning in the hills of Italy, moving to the coalmines of New Mexico, and then to Chicago” (Williamson 2008, 3). Abolishing traditional linear narrative, Bernardi’s generational structure unburdens itself from what Williamson astutely calls “period particulars” (23), so endemic to multigenerational sagas. As a result, *Openwork* frees itself from “the genealogical tyranny” described by Ilan Stavans as endemic in Latino writing and no stranger in works about Italian America⁴. In a counternarrative that both engages and dilutes generational discourse, Bernardi’s *Openwork* obliquely critiques traditional migration narratives, especially of the Italian American variety, with focus squarely on multigenerational

³ In her analysis of Freud’s third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth describes a behavior of repetition compulsion that occurs as a result of a trauma, emerging as the “unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind”; I argue in this essay that those characters who did not experience migration first hand nonetheless bear witness to that past and embody that “trauma, or ‘wound’” (Caruth 1996, 1, 3) through inflictions on both body and mind.

⁴ For an analysis of the genealogical constructions of many Latina/o narratives, see Stavans 2003. Many writers of Italian America portray the transnational scope of Italians’ migrations by constructing their narratives along generational lines. A brief list includes: Garibaldi Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), Helen Barolini’s *Umbertina* (1979), and Tony Ardizzone’s *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu* (1999). For a useful analysis of the fundamentally generational construction of ethnic trilogies in American literature, see Boelhower 1985.

family adjustment. It offers rather an innovative interpretation of both Italian migration historiography and women's voices through the language of hands.

Despite suffering from bouts of catatonia, the sound of Imola's voice comes as no surprise in the final section of Part Three of *Openwork*. Yet Bernardi's experimental narrative technique throughout the novel makes it, as reviewer Williamson declares, "no easy read", as the character who opens the book in nineteenth-century Italy "speaks across space and time to Adele, who lives a hundred years later. The section is [...] like a fugue of voices and places and perspectives, echoes of Woolf and Joyce, rolling and roaring to its conclusion, the present in the past and the past in the present" (24). Interned in one of the oldest institutions in Italy, the Ospedale San Lazzaro, a psychiatric institution for the mentally ill, the poor, and the homeless, Imola's wounded voice takes precedence over the claims and interpretations of the medical authorities and her neighbors, who misinterpret her cries as those of delirium and dementia. As Cathy Caruth explains, the infliction of an injury on another also reflects the "moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*" (Caruth 1996, 2). Though she has not migrated to another country, Imola's multiple migrations down the mountain on behalf of her wet-nursing duties and her loss of three brothers and three children to migration, establishes Imola as the voice of the "wounded storyteller" (Frank 1995, XI), who needs the body of another to witness and retell her own story.

That body is Adele's, and Imola appeals to the young woman, whom she has predeceased by decades. "Intermittent and insistent and harsh", Imola's voice demands that her interlocutor *scriva pura* (lit. "write pure"), and, recognizing as a wounded storyteller that she must navigate her space and time differently, Imola uses the language of travel and the imagery of sewing to guide her charge: "There are no direct roads. Throw away the map. There are only so many broken threads snapped apart on teeth" (Bernardi 2007, 299-300). Perhaps those narrative threads fail to tie together in a tidy package, but Bernardi interrogates traditional narration in *Openwork* to heighten aware-

ness of the limitations of *la storia* to uncover painful memories exacerbated by a larger historical narrative that controlled and surveilled women's movements⁵. As Elaine Scarry explains, "whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language" (Scarry 1985, 4).

Bernardi's *Openwork* explores the paradoxical nature of narrativity by attempting to voice "the thing that happens [...] when the women just stop talking" (Bernardi 2007, 181), employing imagery of cloth-working eloquence to examine the silence. Recording Imola's interior thought ("Let her finish. She's not done working the cloth. Get it. Bring her a needle"), Adele establishes a bond that defies a purely diagnostic reading of Imola's suffering; rather, like the legend of *La Llorana* of Mexican folklore, Imola's dolor travels; her screaming voice moves, "it needs to travel a long, long way" (297, 298)⁶. Imola repeats her injunction that Adele write, lest she lose the story/thread, which must migrate successfully:

We will never know all the details. All we know are bits and pieces. Each telegram carries a different story. Do you think I know how we are all connected to one another? how I am connected to you? [...] Between here and there are all the connections. Do you think someone else is going to put those babies back in my arms? (299-300)

By expanding the parameters of reality, conflating past and present, and clothing Imola's anguish with language, Bernardi opens up a view of women's migration shaped by the cloth-worker's art, in this case Imola's method of openwork. This term refers to the ornamental or structural work of embroidery or metal, containing numerous openings and usually set in patterns. I argue in this essay that Bernardi produces what Ellen McCracken describes in her analysis of Sandra Cisneros's postmodern display of ethnicity, an "ethnographic

⁵ The Italian word, *storia*, is translated as history, but can also suggest a story or tale, as in such phrases for bedtime stories, "una storia prima di dormire" or "storia della buona notte".

⁶ *La Llorona* (the Weeping Woman), is a mythical figure of Mexican folklore. For feminist literary revisions of the legend, see Saldívar-Hull 2000.

counter-narrative” (McCracken 2000, 10). But instead of recuperating memory through linguistic spectacle (as Cisneros does), Bernardi unearths two linked activities associated with traditional women’s work in nineteenth-century Italy: wet-nursing and sewing. I further contend that Bernardi’s representation of Imola’s handwork increasingly serves as a response to the oppressive system of infant abandonment in Italy. By forcing women to leave their babies at the foundling wheel, Catholic Italy stigmatized illegitimacy as harshly as the Puritan divines of Hester’s Prynne’s seventeenth-century era (and fictionalized in the nineteenth century so memorably by Nathaniel Hawthorne in *The Scarlet Letter*). For Imola and her cloth-working sisters, literary and historical, artistic production ultimately functions as an analogue to storytelling, which allows for both imaginary and actual voyaging.

Migrant Woman Worker of the World

From the earliest travel stories of thirteenth-century Venetian explorer, Marco Polo, Italians have always moved⁷. Donna Gabaccia investigates Italy’s unique history of migration by asserting that this country’s patterns of movement “rarely created a national or united *Italian* diaspora. But it did create many temporary, and changing, diasporas of peoples with identities and loyalties poorly summed up by the national term, Italian” (Gabaccia 2000, 5-6)⁸. Migrations from Italy “have

⁷ In chronicling the history of storytelling traditions in Italy, Gioia Timpanelli explains that “St. Francis’s *Fioretti* (lit. ‘little flowers’, but also suggesting “good deeds”) is one of the first travel stories to be written in the vernacular. It announces, in its way, the genre of travel stories that formally begins with the account by the Venetian explorer and merchant Marco Polo (1254-1324) of his marvelous journey to China and culminates in the travel journals of the great Renaissance explorers, above all the logbook of Christopher Columbus’s voyage to the land he thought to be Cathay” (Timpanelli 1999, 136).

⁸ The use of the term “diaspora” is a highly contested one with regard to Italian migration history. In his argument against using the term as a feasible paradigm to explore the migration of Italians, historian Stefano Luconi concludes that the “nature of the push factors and the contents of the expatriates’ orientation toward their homeland make diaspora a concept that is hardly appropriate for an understanding of the exodus from Italy and the dispersion of that country’s population in foreign lands”

been among the most important of the modern world. [...] The numbers leaving Italy after 1876 surpassed the population of the newly unified country in 1861” (3). For Italian men who migrated without women, familial and regional loyalties remained intact, since they could (and many did) return to their *paese* (village), reinforcing a local identity uninflected by claims of nationhood. As Gabaccia asserts, “migration thus helped keep alive the localism Italian nationalists sought to overcome” (73). Yet when women left Italy (with higher percentages of migrant women from the *Mezzogiorno*, areas south and east of Rome)⁹, “it reflected a decision to settle more permanently abroad. Women’s migration facilitated reproduction in a new homeland and signaled the beginnings of permanent incorporation in new nations” (8)¹⁰.

Viewing Italian migration as “a potential diaspora reveals the deep historical roots of what [is called] transnationalism”, “a way of life that connects family, work, and consciousness

(Luconi 2011, 145). Despite the tendency to characterize diaspora as a “homogenizing paradigm”, as Luconi asserts, I am in agreement with Donna Gabaccia’s argument that, for Italian migrants, “theirs was no involuntary or sudden scattering into an exile without end. Italy’s diasporas more resembled that of the ancient sea-going and entrepreneurial Greeks (merchant diasporas) than that of enslaved Africans or persecuted Jews”; Bernardi’s *Openwork* persuasively illuminates Gabaccia’s argument that the term “diaspora” “forces us to look simultaneously at the many places to which migrants traveled, and at the connections among them” (Gabaccia 2000, 6, 9).

⁹ In explaining the pattern of high percentages of male labor migrants in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta note two, conflicting, patterns of interpretation: “One emphasizes the demands of a segmented labor market and growing demand for specifically male workers in receiving countries. The other stresses the conservatism of Latin patriarchal culture: men seek to control female sexuality by limiting them to a narrow, physical community (usually the village)” (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 1998, 165). Reflecting on recent scholarship that combines gender and transnational approaches to Italian migration, Gabaccia and Iacovetta caution against “easy generalizations about Italian women’s work patterns”, noting that codes of female honor and shame were “malleable and class-specific”, and that their mobility as “strictly controlled” was belied by “a growing demand for female labor during the 19th century” (173, 166). See also Tirabassi 2002, Reeder 2002, Corti 2003.

¹⁰ “No other people migrated in so many directions and in such impressive numbers – relatively and absolutely – as from Italy. And few showed such firm attachment to their home regions, or returned in such large proportions” (Gabaccia 2000, 60).

in more than one national territory” (Gabaccia 2000, 11). The narrative focus and structure of *Openwork* parallel the migratory dimensions of working-class families in villages of mountainous northern Italy. Such migrations might best be called “village-based proletarian diasporas” because improving their economic lot was “uppermost in the minds of most labor migrants”, including women (Gabaccia 2000, 60). For northern Italian women, work opportunities allowed them to migrate to nearby cities, “such as Biella, Turin, and Milan”, a fact that Bernardi exposes in *Openwork* as the daughters of villagers migrate to Florence to take jobs in domestic service, including Imola’s two daughters (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 1998, 160). Imola’s regular migrations down the mountain comprise part of the work she performs as a wet nurse, ensuring her mobility and aligning her fundamentally with the idea of travel, as her place-name, Imola, a city near Bologna, suggests. That Imola’s husband, Achilles, gives their daughters the place-names of Licia and Lidia, “strong names to be out in the world with” (Bernardi 2007, 5), attests to a recognition that migration was an ordinary way of life for Italians for centuries.

In her oral history of Italian immigrants, many of whom came from the province of Modena in the north-central region of Emilia-Romagna, Bernardi interviewed nearly fifty men and women of Italian heritage from the working-class community of Highwood, Illinois, a suburb thirty miles north of Chicago and flanked by the affluent communities of Lake Forest and Highland Park. Bernardi’s *Houses with Names* is the historical precursor of her novel, *Openwork*, and her research supports that of feminist labor and migration historians. In her overview of Apennine society, Bernardi describes a pattern of migration that is transnational in scope and *diasporic* in intent, shaped, as Jennifer Guglielmo explains, by “both work opportunities and local economies in Italy and beyond” (Guglielmo 2012, 56). *Houses with Names* introduces these topographical facts:

In the 1890s the emigrants left the mountains to find seasonal work. They went to the plains and the big cities. [...] The women, too, left the mountains to work. Young girls left their homes each winter to work as maids and nursemaids in the big cities of Livorno, Florence, and Pisa, and

in southern France. By World War I the word “emigration” was synonymous with depopulation. (Bernardi 1990, 1)

Recent studies of alpine communities have “eliminated old portraits of traditional communities closed from the outer world, or languishing in backwardness, immobility, and stasis”; migration was “part of the normal and traditional way of life in mountain communities – something the scholars have long recognized, but only in the case of men” (Corti 2002, 141, 135).

As *Openwork* demonstrates, Imola’s work as wet nurse and cloth-worker is not subsidiary to the family’s economy. Sewing bridal linens by trade, Imola teaches sewing to her daughters and the neighborhood girls, who then transfer those portable skills to another country and onto the next generation. Italian women, both north and south, migrated “in large part because their families needed their labor to survive” (Guglielmo 2012, 59). Imola’s remunerated work more than shores up the family during lean times; it sustains them six months out of the year as they cannot rely on her seasonally migrating husband’s “money to arrive, while he was out seeing the world” (Bernardi 2007, 6). As David Kertzer explains, in Apennine peasant culture, migration was a “major feature of mountain life for centuries. [...] The frequency with which men were away due to seasonal and other forms of migration gave considerable authority to the women left behind” (Kertzer 1986, 266, 267).

Part One of *Openwork*, “Child Carrier”, focuses on the intersections between work and mobility. At the outset, Bernardi introduces the trope of needlework to serve as a transnational symbol of mobility that both facilitates and enhances the family’s survival, especially for Imola’s daughters, whom she enables by making certain they become literate in both arts: sewing and reading. Though Imola remains unlettered, defined by medical authorities as “a farmwife with no instruction” (Bernardi 2007, 303), her training skills prove to be both financially and aesthetically life-sustaining for her daughters, who covet the “little cloth book”, and “want to have a thick sample book, just like hers, pages with every kind of stitch”: before taking her arduous trip down the mountain, Imola wakes before dawn to work on a trousseau (*corredo di sposa*, bridal linen) for an im-

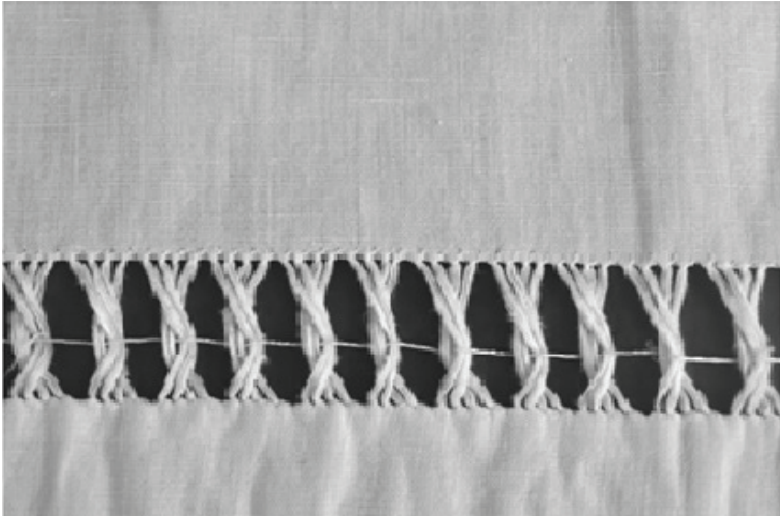


Figure 1. Detail, openwork on linen towel by Teresa Piacentini Saielli, ca. 1915-1920. Photograph and loan of image by kind permission of Adria Bernardi.

patient bride – “the mother’s even worse” – and sews the edge of a sheet, using a variation of the “cobbler stitch. One stitch over four threads. Pull. Leave four. The pattern makes small windowpanes” (5).

Bernardi’s representation of Imola’s activity of sewing innovates on the well-known iconography of the poor seamstress. In this tableau vivant, the author introduces a pervasive visual type of the seamstress from the nineteenth century: the lone needlewoman. Similar to her sewing sisters in Victorian England, Imola works under harsh conditions, and like the majority of women needle workers she is neither alone nor single. Eagerly craving to learn new stitches from their mother, Lidia and Licia are guided by Imola’s lessons, being taught the value of cloth itself, its status as a repository for “dedicated human labor”, and its “endless variety and related semiotic potential [which] can evoke ideas of connectedness or tying” (Weiner and Schneider 1989, 2). Bernardi thus reinforces the prestigious status of

Imola's cloth-work by rhetorically suggesting its infinite variety: "feather stitch, vapor stitch, fish-bone. She can teach any kind of needlework, but what she's most proud of, what she's vain about, is her pulled thread needlework. Her grandmother, Emilia, taught her tricks no one else up here knows" (Bernardi 2007, 5). Evoking a relationship between textile and text, Bernardi suggests that this mountain village woman will use her hand-working skills as a source of power, securing viable futures for other young women, safeguarding their survival and preserving their creativity.

To evoke ideas of connectedness across space and time, Bernardi not only frames the beginning and ending of *Openwork* with the voice of *la sarta*, but also implements what Marie-Laure Ryan calls the "stack", a narrative technique that models "the mechanisms of the crossing of boundaries" (Ryan 2002, 371). Three separate but interconnected paragraphs appear outside the pages of *Openwork*, which might also be called a prologue, from the Greek, *prologos*, literally meaning "before speech". Applying this paratextual convention of a three-paragraph prologue permits the author to incorporate "historical documentary value" (Hutcheon 1989, 82) into her fiction. Displaying both didactic and semiotic purposes, I suggest that this three-paragraph prologue functions as an extra-diegetic before-story, but simultaneously, it is "inevitably touched by the fictive, the shaped, the invented" (82). The first paragraph is condensed and from page 5 of the novel proper, from which I quoted, while paragraph 2 is signed by Bernardi and serves as her autobiographical statement. Paragraph 3 offers a geo-historical overview of the village-based diasporas of migrants from the mountain towns of Tuscany, "connected through memory, though not by blood, [sharing] a story that begins with emigration" (Bernardi 2007, n.p.).

Bernardi's autobiographical second paragraph bears further scrutiny as it imitates the motion of needlework by threading itself to the blocks above and below it, three pieces united by the sense of coherence in cloth. The author heightens the magic of transmitting the cloth-working past through a literalization of the transatlantic voyage itself, the trunk: "The trunks were

rarely opened, and when they were, the white linens were unfolded and displayed as if they were precious and fragile, barely to be looked at. When you touched the rough linen, you could hear water running in a river in mountains” (n.p.). An inheritor of cloth, Bernardi recognizes that the material reminder of her grandmother’s trousseau is an inalienable possession best illustrated through the language of fabric to signify cloth’s variability and intricacy: “Sometimes the linens were of cutwork, in which shapes are cut into the ground cloth or whitework, in which white stitchery makes raised forms. [...] But it’s the openwork that speaks to me most because you can see through it and it’s made from the ground cloth itself. It’s a pity I never learned the stitches” (n.p.). As Annette Weiner explains, even if the inalienable possessions inside the trunk will never be exchanged, “the possession exists in another person’s mind as a possible future claim, and its potential source of power” (Weiner 1992, 10). Every time the trunk is opened, Bernardi’s inheritance arrives again, suggesting that such a gift can never be fully appropriated, but perhaps only handed down. Figure 1 shows a detail of openwork sewn by Bernardi’s great aunt, work that was completed in the commune of Riolunato, within the province of Modena, and in the Italian region of Emilia Romagna. For the author of *Openwork*, trousseau is treasure.

The spatial representation of the three block paragraphs in *Openwork* serves two interweaving purposes: to give the appearance of squares of cloth in deference to Imola’s trade as a seamstress; and to express the mobility of Italian migrants through a simulation of the picture postcard, invented during the period of the second great migration. Bernardi assures this connection spatially within the prologue and thematically through Imola’s fascination with the postcards she collects from Africa, France, and New Mexico, the migratory destinations of her three brothers: Bartolomeo, Pellegrino, and Egidio. Invoking her siblings on the day she travels down the mountain, Imola thinks, “[a]nd if she falls off the face of the earth, who will remember her?” (Bernardi, 2007, 12). To summon her brothers, Imola repeatedly views their postcards as a reminder of her longing for them, as a “commemoration of the Absent”, to quote Derrida, but also,

as Galit Hasan-Rokem explains, to recognize “the irreversibility of the migratory move [which is] thus metonymically alleviated by the countermovement of the postcard in the opposite direction” (Derrida, qtd. in Hasan-Rokem 2009, 507, 511)¹¹.

As emigration decreases face-to-face contact, postal communication becomes a compensatory mode of storytelling. Stowing the postcards in a soup tureen as carefully as linens in a trunk, Imola has her husband read the messages on the postcards, but she is the one who scrutinizes and interprets the pictorial representations of a different landscape and domestic space: “She lifts and slips the postcards from New Mexico. [...] A single mountain rising straight from the plain? Where are the trees? Two Indian girls stand rigidly in front of a hut, a girl on each side of the door. The door is a piece of *cloth*” (Bernardi 2007, 86, italics mine). What may be a reference to the traditional hogan of New Mexico’s Navajos is serendipitous, since such dwellings did not have interior divisions; thus Imola’s regular postcard inspections diminish the distance from her favorite brother and establish an interethnic dynamism across continents¹².

The village messenger, Zacagnèr, reads the telegram sent to Imola, informing her of the mining explosion in Dawson, New Mexico, on October 23, 1913. Imola’s attempts to halt time after this news simulates a form of postal non-arrival: instead of viewing the packet of postcards brought to her after her brother’s death, she stores the cream-colored envelope in her

¹¹ On the relationship between Jewish mobility and the picture postcard, see Galit 2009. On the nature of sending and reception, see Derrida 1987. For an excellent history of the evolution of the postcard, see Staff 1979.

¹² I am aware of the stereotyped images of Native American Indians in popular culture, including on postcards, whose popularity often reinforced primitive images in their portrayal of residential spaces and personal apparel. According to Patricia C. Albers and William R. James, since the late nineteenth century “thousands of pictures depicting Indian females have been printed on postcards. [...] Of the hundreds of pictures of Navajo that have been printed on postcards, over half show women weaving rugs, standing in front of hogans, or posed against natural attractions. [...] These pictures are detached completely from the experiences of those who participated in their production. The images convey depersonalized and ahistorical messages” (Albers and James 1987, 37, 38, 39). As Sandra Cisneros also illustrates in *Caramelo*, Mexican Americans were similarly stereotyped in southwestern popular culture. For an excellent analysis of how the picture postcard contributed to “socially marginaliz[ing] and spatially disenfranch[ing] Mexican Americans”, see Arreola 2006, 114.

tureen. Functioning as *memento mori*, these photograph cards narrate a working-class tragedy of harrowing proportions for migrant workers, including Egidio, who is killed in one of the worst mining catastrophes in United States history¹³. In order to suggest both the simultaneity and the unreality of time, Bernardi uses co-narration in the final section of Part One, “Imola – Antenore”. Inserting the en-dash between their names reinforces shared sorrow. Childhood companion from the same mountain village, Antenore migrates to Dawson, New Mexico, only to leave it and become a union organizer on behalf of unprotected miners across the country. Like his politics – he remains the unreconstructed voice of radicalism – Antenore’s response to hearing of the death of his *paisan* is emotional and dynamic: “He has to go down to Dawson. He has to go pull him out. [...] He is sobbing. That idiot never knew when to come out” (Bernardi 2007, 119). A continent away, Imola’s response to the messenger’s news is equally visceral. Bernardi’s co-narration demonstrates their interchangeable reactions:

Antenore’s mouth deforms. It twists. It drops so low on his face that the skin stretches thin.

Imola drops to her haunches; her knees gouge her breasts. Black disks drop in front of her eyes. The stone is cold against her back. Zacagnèr extends a hand. She rises. The mountain wobbles.

(Bernardi 2007, 115-116)

Imola commemorates her brother’s death on November 1, All Souls Day. She bears witness to her brother’s life cut short by owners’ indifference toward workers, viewing photograph postcards of immigrant coal miners, the first, portraying men gathered on steps: “the second is smoke billowing out of the mine’s entrance. The third is officials wearing bowler hats. The

¹³ Marking the hundredth anniversary of the Dawson coal mine disaster, a 2013 Associated Press release writes that “most of those killed were recent immigrants from Italy, Greece, and other countries”; according to Liping Zhu’s detailed overview of the exploitative conditions of the putatively “model company town” owned by the Phelps Dodge Corporation, the company that owned the mine was “more interested in costs and profits than anything else [and] kept its safety measures to a minimum” (Zhu 1996, 60). See also Meltzer 1982 for an analysis of the ploys the company town took to deceive workers “into believing that they had no need for industrial unions” (28).

fourth is of a coffin propped up inside a wooden box, the coffin surrounded by [thirty-two] men, including Antenore, gripping the rim of the casket” (122-123). Such photographs not only document proof of death and the likely narrative course for migrant coal miners in the United States, but also connect Imola’s mourning to a one-month pregnant sister-in-law, whom she will only meet via postcard and the postal service: “Clara stands at the head of the casket, barely tall enough to see over the pillow made of flowers. She is looking down” (123).

Transfixed by these faces – “All the eyes are looking into mine” (124) – Imola’s mourning process is marked by its repetition. Unable to accept the loss of her beloved brother, Imola’s bouts of immobility and stupor are her body’s response to “learning to live with lost control” (Frank 1995, 30). Imola’s empathy enables her to express what Arthur Frank calls the “*dyadic* body: [...] even though the other is a body outside of mine, ‘over and against me’, this other *has to do with me, as I with it*” (35). Imola’s compassion towards others will allow her to place her body within a “community of pain” (36), using her needlework skills to mend fissures. In different ways, Imola shares a fabric text with Clara and Adele, both of whom must develop strategies to repair the damage experienced by migrant workers of the world.

The Stretch Between

Imola’s voice is inevitably absent in “Part Two: The Stretch Between” of *Openwork*. Part Two nonetheless explores the aftermath of migration and its effects on the bodies of women. As promised in the third stack of her unpagged prologue, Bernardi explores a conversation “across a century [...] connected through memory though not by blood [...] that begins with emigration” (Bernardi 2007, n.p). Imola’s absence is felt by five voices, though only Antenore and his wife Desolina actually migrated from the mountain village and considered Imola their neighbor and friend. Yet the anguish that Imola experiences is reiterated by the voices of generations that follow, including the voice of Adele and of her parents, Ray and Rina. Her voice ine-

narrable, Imola's pain continues to be inexpressible for her; likewise, for the Italian immigrant women of Highwood, Illinois, a felt experience of pain is triggered by memories of migration, which may or may not have been personally experienced. It becomes Adele's task to narrate, as Elaine Scarry explains, "the passage of pain into speech" (Scarry 1985, 9) since her relatives can only express pain through their bodies.

A paradigmatic case in point is the narrator's description of Adele's paternal grandmother, Desolina, whose migration experience traumatizes her. Impatient with her grief, Antenore recognizes that his wife's behavior is marked by ceaseless work and sorrow: "Why won't she stop working? He's always made enough. [...] And when she takes the day off, she goes to the cemetery. If he believed in sin, he would say this is the greatest sin: to take a calendar page and turn every day into a day of mourning" (Bernardi 2007, 169-170). Bernardi's description of Desolina's visit to the cemetery eerily echoes Imola's response to hearing news of her brother's death. Desolina's "face stretches in a hundred directions. Her mouth sinks into the jawbone. She drops to her knees. She takes irregular breaths. She rocks back and forth" (216). Chanting the names of her dead, Desolina's incantation obliterates designations of time and space, for only her sister, Teresa, is buried in America:

L'è mort la me mama,
 L'è mort e' me papa.
 L'è mort la povra Imola.
 Lucrezia.
 Le me sorelle.
 La Teresa.
 (216)

Replicating an ethic of care exhibited by her sewing mentor, Desolina's regular trips to the cemetery (including All Soul's Day) requires the gardening shears stowed in her pocketbook, as she "snips the straggler grass [...] brushes the cut blades off the stone", labor and lament conjoined (216). Despite limited resources, Italian emigrants left their homes voluntarily, but their suffering has been equated by writers of Italian America with a trauma that damages beyond repair. Desolina's perpetual suffer-

ing is causally related to her migration experience, from which she never recovers. Losing both parents as a youngster, Desolina is sent by indifferent family members to work as a maid in Lucca. Her premature migration down the mountain accentuates her orphaned status. Written on her body as trauma, Desolina's adult pain is "excruciatingly articulate", extending across generations, time zones, and countries: "It was a piece of wire, a piece of thread [...]. It seared from underneath, upward into her skin: she will never see those people again. With inadequate language, her body became words. Her body is like the bodies of other women, her friends and neighbors" (207). Like textiles woven with gold and silver thread, the bodies of migrating women suffer physical pain as though fine wires were threaded through them. Such *desolazione* is paradoxically shared by the other Italian women in Highwood (including Adele's maternal grandmother, Adalgisa, and her mother, Rina), all suffering from physical and mental pain passed down to children, who replicate their suffering.

Like the tapestry of the mythological princess of Athens, Philomela, so too does *Openwork* reveal stories of women's pain. That the nightingale into which Philomela was transformed is a migratory bird parallels the recurrent movement of Italian women in this novel, whose survival depended upon their ability to change their circumstances. Such is the case for Imola's work as a wet nurse, which instigates her three-day trip down the mountain with two infants in tow (her own and her neighbor's). Although too young for the job, Desolina is hired to help Imola on this long and potentially treacherous excursion¹⁴. Before the journey, Imola thinks: "The girl will be another pair of

¹⁴ On the dangers of travel for wet nurses, Valerie E. Fildes references Rachel G. Fuchs's work on abandoned children in nineteenth-century France. Like Italy, France employed a high proportion of wet nurses, developed extensive networks "of women who nursed these abandoned children", and had built founding hospitals in large towns with wet nurses mainly coming from the surrounding countryside – Fuchs does a good job describing the treacherous traveling conditions for these wet nurses: "Roads were often deplorable, and sometimes no more than rudimentary paths, so that nurses and their charges bumped along for twelve to fourteen hours on each day of the trip" (Fuchs, qtd. in Fildes 1986, 224). Bernardi's description of Imola's trip is equally exhausting and dangerous; see especially Bernardi 2007, 7-8 and 40-41.

hands. [...] Desolina has never cared for a baby, let alone two, screaming in a closed-up carriage" (4). A child herself, Desolina inchoately prepares herself for a future that will comprise migratory labor, as she will be sent to perform domestic duties in Lucca, where her older sisters work.

Each character's memory of this trip is modified by her position vis-à-vis two nursing infants: Imola as wet nurse, whose throbbing breasts feed both infants, and her son's crying makes them ache all the more (40). Desolina is the abandoned child, whose interpretation of those infants' cries emerge from a hunger which cannot be appeased: "he knows his mother is holding another baby, is giving *his* milk to another baby, the tiny one, who is nursing, and it fills the plump baby [Desolina is] holding with wild rage" (214). In her analysis of Anglo-Irish wet-nursing as portrayed in Maria Edgeworth's *Ennui*, Bonnie Blackwell quotes an early observer of the practice, St. Augustine, who wrote: "an infant in the grip of jealousy: he could not yet speak and already he observed his milk-brother with a pale envenomed stare" (Blackwell 2002, 371). From the Old Testament story of the foundling, Moses, whose "discovery [...] and subsequent search for a wet nurse [...] shows how wet nursing was regarded as essential for the survival of abandoned babies" (Fildes 1988, 4), tales of infant abandonment abound in literature, "ranging from sacred texts to fairy tales" (Kertzer 1993, 11)¹⁵. Imola pays enormous attention to both blood and milk infants. Though her birth baby may intuit maternal deprivation, both children ultimately suffer from what Freud would describe as the loss of their primary love object in the mother: one gets sent to France for adoption; the other gets sent to North Africa, "building roads across the desert – eleven years old" (Bernardi 2007, 179), after Imola falls too ill to care for her biological children.

¹⁵ I am grateful to Valerie Fildes for her groundbreaking history of the wet-nursing industry, and to David I. Kertzer's specific focus on infant abandonment and the establishment of a system of control over women's reproduction in Italy. And, to the following literary critics, for their analyses of wet nursing practices portrayed in English and French literature: Bonnie Blackwell, Julie Costello, and Mary Jacobus.

The portrayal of a wet-nursing figure achieves important aims in *Openwork*; it connects Imola back to professional storytellers who serve as “important guardians of the history of the place where they lived” and were deemed “professional bards” (Timpanelli 1999, 132)¹⁶. Bernardi’s portrayal also suggests a connection between the well-established system of infant abandonment, which registers, as Blackwell asserts of wet-nursing, “the long-term effects of the system of ‘ruptured nurture’” (Blackwell 2002, 354). Post-*Risorgimento* migrations also produced an experience of ruptured nurture, giving partial credence to the proverb “*tutto il mondo è paese*”, all the world is one home place (Gabaccia 2000, 174). As proverbs go, however, this one does not fully account for the ongoing anguish of Italians decades after their migration to America, the rupture of migration permanently affecting generations that follow.

The Dolorous Breast and the Politics of Wet-Nursing

In a stopover at an inn near Barga, Imola dines with other travelers, including female migrant laborers, whose job opportunities take them to urban areas, like Genoa, to work as domestic servants. When asked her purpose behind travelling, Imola spins a tale from yarns of folklore available to her, weaving a story of twin princes to be crowned midsummer in Monaco (Bernardi 2007, 44). Aware of the stigma attached to illegitimacy, Imola protects the privacy of Marta, the neighbor whose child she is transporting, since she has also been obligated by Church authorities to be discreet. The outlandish quality of Imola’s tale loosens the tongues of the other patrons, who follow suit by threading their stories of disguise and royalty into Imola’s magical tale, replete with themes of deliverance and redemption. This

¹⁶ In her discussion of the Sicilian folklorist Giuseppe Pitré (1841-1916), who is considered one of the great collectors of regional tales, Timpanelli explains that Pitré “never forgot the woman who had told him folktales as a child. It was to this great teller, Agatuzza Messina, a quilt maker in Palermo, that he first went to collect Sicilian stories, discovering that her narration had ‘not lost one whit of its original purity, ease, and grace’” (Timpanelli 1999, 140). The twin activities of cloth-working and storytelling function here and in *Openwork* as a mutually reinforcing social fabric.

social exchange becomes a thread that unites isolated travelers. As incredible as Romulus and Remus, “two foundlings taken in by an unlikely wet-nurse” (Kertzer 1993, 11), Imola’s tale allows her to situate herself firmly in the position of the *ideal* wet nurse, who will guarantee her baby’s safety.

Imola descends from a family tradition of wet-nursing as both her grandmother and mother were engaged as *balie* (wet nurses). Working as a *balia* in Prato, Imola’s grandmother lived away a year at a time to support her family’s economic needs, but the system did not allow her to bring her own nursing child: “The nuns paid her to do needlework” (Bernardi 2007, 9). Thus Imola is deeply aware of the prevalence of foundling hospitals in northern Italy, and of the symbol of their institutional control, the wheel, *la ruota*, “wooden cylindrical concave boxes [...] which were in a windowlike aperture in the wall of the hospice and served as cradle turnstiles” (Fuchs, qtd. in Kertzer 1993, 101)¹⁷. Informed by her grandmother that the “hospital was a death box” (Bernardi 2007, 8), Imola is sensitive to the high rate of infant mortality. As Mary Jacobus explains, leaving one’s children at the foundling hospital was a “form of socially condoned infanticide” (Jacobus 1995, 211).

Essential qualities of effective wet-nursing remained unchanged “from society to society, from the ancient world to the 20th century”, and basic requisites included “certain qualities of stature, size, colouring and behavior, in addition to plenty of milk” (Fildes 1986, 168). Valerie Fildes combed through a plethora of sources (including books on medicine and midwifery), and under the rubric of “behavior”, the ideal wet nurse

¹⁷ In *Wet Nursing*, Valerie Fildes includes plates of foundling wheels at the Paris hospital for abandoned infants, Hospice des Enfants Trouvés (Fildes 1986, 150, 221). See also Mary Ann Dailey’s “The Fate of Innocents”, which includes an illustration of the *Ospedale degli Innocenti* (Hospital of the Innocents) in Florence, Italy: “behind the metal grating is the *ruota dei proietti* (foundling wheel). [...] On the portico above the window is a bust of Cosimo I de Medici, Grand Duke of Tuscany. [...] The fresco above the window depicts two cherubs holding a scroll with the Latin inscription from Psalm 26: ‘*Pater et mater reliquerunt nos, Dominus autem assumpsit*’ (Our fathers and mothers have abandoned us, but the Lord has taken us)” (Dailey 2011, 69). In 2007, the Casilino Polyclinic, a Roman hospital, reinstated an advanced version of the foundling wheel after babies were found in garbage bins. See newspaper articles responding to this occurrence, Povoledo 2007 and Pullella 2007.

needed to possess qualities no woman could ever consistently uphold, though two assets are important to mention here: she should not be “sad or timorous, [and she should be] free from passions or worries” (169). The majority of wet nurses throughout history lived in rural areas and were compelled by the stress of poverty to adopt this trade; thus it seems more likely their worries were unrelenting. The night before her wet-nursing journey, Imola thinks: “when she lies down, she counts one less night of sleep in her life” (Bernardi 2007, 7). The assertion that women from the country were preferred wet nurses “because they were healthier and had more milk, although she should not be regularly engaged in heavy, toiling work” (Fildes 1986, 169), belies the actual lived realities of women such as Imola, who manage “the children, the animals, the land, the house, the needlework, half the year” (Bernardi 2007, 6), while her husband seasonally migrates.

In her history of wet nursing, Valerie Fildes discusses the provisions made for unwanted infants, “particularly bastards and females [...] in various cities and states in Europe. [...] In many (predominantly Catholic) countries [where] foundling hospitals were established [...]. The first [was] said to have been founded in 787 A.D. in Milan [...] and the majority run by the Church” (Fildes 1988, 144)¹⁸. Mostly established by religious orders, the “early foundling hospitals [...] almost all relied upon wet nurses to feed their charges” (44). The fact that the network of resident and country wet-nurses remained “relatively intact until the early twentieth century”, and that “Italy was noted as having high concentrations of wet-nurses, particularly in the north and central regions” (207), is especially significant to a contextual understanding of the novel *Openwork*. The system that regulat-

¹⁸ While Milan paralleled other Italian cities in the “number of abandoned illegitimate children”, it was “unusual in its number of abandoned legitimate children. [...] In 1875, for example, ninety-one percent of all such children born in the province of Milan were abandoned at the Milan foundling home”. Among other industrializing Lombard cities, Milan shows large-scale abandonment of legitimate children left “on the foundling home doorstep [which] became a way of life for a large segment of the urban population in Milan. By mid-nineteenth century, the *popolino* (the ‘little people’, or poor) regarded it as their right, and neither Church nor state did much to stop them” (Kertzer 1993, 79-80).

ed infant abandonment in Italy, according to David I. Kertzer, was fundamentally a “system of control over women” in which nineteenth-century Church and state authorities attempted to regulate “families, reproduction, and sexuality” (Kertzer 1993, 3, 6). Kertzer argues that Italy’s “obsession with female honor and its close identification with women’s sexuality” was the “engine that drove the abandonment of illegitimate children in Italy. [...] In the eyes of the elite, of Church and state, women had to be constantly protected by men and under their authority” (Fildes 2002, 25-26)¹⁹. Following Italian Unification, Kertzer explains, “from the official perspective of both Church and state, the child had no parents”, and the midwife, “her traditional autonomy lost”, was compelled to act in concert with authorities (Kertzer 1993, 42, 41)²⁰.

An entrenched social institution and a highly regulated industry, wet nursing in Italy was undergirded by a “thick network of informers: landlords, neighbors, employers, and various officials” (53). *Openwork* illustrates this phenomenon throughout Imola’s wet-nursing journey. At yet another subsidiary way station, Imola cleans the baby and asks permission

¹⁹ I am aware of the pitfalls of interpreting Imola’s wet nursing activities solely through codes of female honor and shame. Gabaccia and Iacovetta warn against “easy generalizations about peculiarities of Italian culture; the concept of women’s shame and the view that women’s mobility was strictly controlled need more scrutiny” (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 1998, 166). *Openwork* bears this out: Imola refuses to heed her husband’s advice that she leave her son, Egidio, with his sister during her absence, and she uses her own economic independence and her power as a nursing mother to refuse him when he persists, “Are they so well off they can pass up the money? His jaws clenched. [...] She managed without him for six months; he can manage without her for three days. She said this. He looked at her in disbelief. He liked the sweet wife better” (Bernardi 2007, 6). For an analysis of the origin of the cultural codes of honor and shame in traditional Mediterranean societies, see Schneider 1971.

²⁰ “As the primary figures at the grassroots level dealing with women’s sexuality, mid-wives were compelled by church, and, later, state authorities to monitor illicit pregnancies. Rather than keeping women’s secrets, midwives were now forced to divulge those secrets to the authorities, a dramatic change from their traditional role as women’s confidant and protector” (Kertzer 1993, 40). The Church condemned images of midwives on ecclesiastical embroidery during the era of the *Opus Anglicanum*, “the generic name for ecclesiastical embroidery produced in England from approximately 900 to 1500 [...] and exported all over the continent” (Parker 2010, n.p.; see illustration 32, *The Pienza Cope*, detail).

to tuck in his swaddling a protective token from its mother, “a tiny piece of red coral” wrapped in a “linen handkerchief [...] with loose slipstitches” (Bernardi 2007, 51). A slip stitch is also called a blind hem since it is almost invisible on both sides, a kind of openwork Roland Barthes describes as a “discontinuous visibility” (Barthes 1967, 129). One imagines Imola having embroidered this handkerchief, connecting birth and milk mother to the baby without appearing to have done so. Imola is discouraged from tucking the talisman inside the baby’s wrappings by a woman acting as an intermediary between wet nurse and final destination; this woman tells Imola that she does not know where the baby’s last stop will be, the emphasis on secrecy and concealment exacted by officials of the industry. When Imola persists in questioning, “How did they locate this baby?” the intermediary responds with facts in accordance with a well-regulated business: “There are networks. Doctors and priests. Many babies from the mountains are sent away. The distance isn’t as great as you might think” (Bernardi 2007, 51).

For Imola, the distance is as wide as a chasm. From her unofficial perspective as a maternal breast-feeder, Imola is parent to the children she has suckled, despite stigmatization of illegitimate children by Church and civil authorities. Her compensated work never prevents her mourning the loss of children whom she nursed for a fee, for they were treated with the same devoted attention as her own. Imola’s *seni dolorosa* – painful breasts – lament those children who are all but guaranteed to perish “within a few months” inside a “formal governmental system” (Kertzer 1993, 10). In a final rendering of her thoughts at San Lazzaro, Imola recalls the faces of babies from her mountain village, her own and others; whether she nursed them or not, their faces appear “like faint photographs. Intaglio. But translucent. Like figures stamped on tiny holy medals” (Bernardi 2007, 296). Much like Hester’s embroidered “A”, Imola’s intaglio is threaded into her body, a design incised or engraved in a material. It is no wonder the first request Imola makes at the asylum is for needle and thread: an Italian Penelope, Imola believes that if she just keeps sewing, the babies will not be lost.

For as dowry seamstress for her community, Imola knows that working the cloth affects a material satisfaction that signifies what has been lost to infant abandonment and migration: the children of Italy²¹.

Openwork and the Language of Hands

In her analysis of the reciprocal relationship between women and sewing, Rozsika Parker uncovers a “contradictory and complex history of embroidery”, destabilizing fixed definitions of art and artist “so weighted against women” (Parker 2010, 215). While *Openwork* portrays traditional links between embroidery and femininity, it also examines the subversive potential of cloth-work, with Imola’s tablecloth serving as a testimonial to survival and resilience in the face of gender and class oppression. As Parker explains, “there is a long tradition of embroidery as commemoration of the dead” (192), including more recent examples, ranging from a tablecloth embroidered by Jewish refugees in 1945 Sweden to the Names Project of the 1980s, which produced the AIDS memorial quilts.

Refusing to exchange through commerce what she discerns is a coveted item, Imola instead sends the tablecloth to her brother’s widow in the desert. As Jane Schneider clarifies, embroidered trousseaux were deemed “wealth objects with significant liquidity in wide spheres of exchange” (Schneider 1980, 324). As prestige goods, cloth-work such as lace, embroidery, and needlepoint, sold well at markets. Traveling as far as Barga (in the province of Lucca) “to sell the linen that she and her mother had worked”, Imola knows that the products of their hands would sell at higher rates in the city (Bernardi 2007, 46). So desired an item of exchange, “a lady with pearl buttons on her boots”,

²¹ “Whatever our view of the Church – as the origin and enforcer of men’s power over women, as an institution of elite control over the masses, or as a source of moral inspiration and social concern in another epoch – we must recognize that it did not leave its theological and moral dictates to moral suasion. Rather, the Church, in partnership with the state, established a thorough network of social control, designed to enforce its surveillance over pregnant, unwed women and the illegitimate children they bore” (Kertzer 1993, 37).

travels up the mountain to persuade Imola to sell her *magnum opus*, the creature-embroidered tablecloth (303). She refuses. This time, she will not be compelled to utilize her body to turn a profit, and, like her wet-nursing capability, her artist's hands become an "alternative form of nourishment" in place of an absence. Like the biological mothers for whom she has substituted, Imola replaces scarcity with sustenance, embodying in her artist's hands the etymological meaning of the word "foster", which means "to feed or nourish" (Costello 1999, 179-180)²². As Annette B. Weiner reminds us, the kind of possessions that people "try to keep out of circulation is far more theoretically meaningful than assuming that exchange simply involves the reciprocity of gift-giving" (Weiner 1992, x).

Imola intuitively recognizes that her tablecloth is a sacred cloth, and, by sending it to Clara in New Mexico, she both reproduces kinship relations and honors sibling intimacy. As Weiner explains, the reproduction of kinship is legitimated in each generation through the transmission of inalienable possessions, "be they land rights, material objects, or mythic knowledge" (11). *Openwork* reproduces kinship connections across continents with the embroidered tablecloth signifying the quintessential Italian woman's communal art. Imola teaches the art of embroidery to her daughters and the village girls, most presciently Adalgisa, Adele's maternal grandmother, to whom I shall return below. This fabric gift travels, and migrates to another country. In this regard, cloth-work functions, as Weiner and Schneider explain, to "harness the imagined blessings of ancestors and divinities to inspire or animate the product" (Weiner and Schneider 1989, 3). To defeat loss, Imola sends her enormous tablecloth to a weeping widow, keeping her brother's memory alive through this cloth rendition of Noah's Ark,

²² I am thankful for Julie Costello's observation of the Irish wet nurse, who "turned her body into bread so to speak", functioning as "a producer (the word foster derives from the Old English 'fostrian', which means 'feed' or 'nourish') despite her lower-class status. [...] While the nature of this transaction – the nurse's ability to substitute for the biological mother – suggests a sympathetic model of intercultural relations, the wet nurse also becomes an uncomfortable reminder of the tenuousness between outside and inside, self and other" (Costello 1999, 179-180).

a transnational symbol of migration. As Gladys-Marie Fry said of slave women denied the opportunity to read or write, they “quilted their diaries, creating permanent but unwritten records of events large and small, of pain and loss, of triumph and tragedy in their lives” (Fry 2002, 1)²³.

Imola's iconic tablecloth encapsulates and transcends familial and national borders, embroidering differences without subjugation. Creating a large tablecloth which symbolizes the enormity of the migration experience, Imola's method of openwork embroidery represents the activity of sewing as a radical act, fundamentally re-threading transplanted migrants to their *paese* as the cloth-work preserves tradition while it alerts them to an understanding of diaspora that crosses borders and opens connections between generations and places. While focusing specifically on the Sicilian trousseau, Jane Schneider's observations regarding the development of such needlework embroidery in the hands of artisanal and better-off peasant families in the nineteenth century significantly reveals an awareness of changing class formation and future mobility, features also portrayed in *Openwork*. Asserting that needlework activity did not have its roots in an “unchanging past”, Schneider examines the expansiveness of the trousseau, “ensembles known as ‘beds’ (*letti*)”, which comprised sheets, pillowcases, bedspreads, white wear (*biancheria*), tablecloths, napkins, towels, doilies and intimate apparel: these embroidered beds “became the staple of non-aristocratic trousseau in Sicily just as the mass migrations got underway” (Schneider 1980, 323, 324). Analyzing class formation and “emulation of elite behavior”, along with an emphasis on female purity, and an awareness of the commercial value of embroidered sheets, Schneider challenges the hypothesis that “embroidery and lace-making evolved as a kind of make-work that ensured continuity in the division of labor by sex” (337). Clearly Imola's work as a sewer of bridal linens is more aligned with

²³ An applied tapestry harking back to traditional Dahomey tapestries in west-ern Africa, Harriet Powers's *Creation of the Animals* is an exemplary historical example of a post-bellum African American quilt and parallels in its breadth and intention Imola's tablecloth in Bernardi's fictional *Openwork*. See Fry 2002.

a remunerated profession than with a simulation of the “urbane civili”, the elite classes.

Of significance to *Openwork* is Imola’s insistence that her daughters learn how to sew, profoundly aware of the fact that the “pressure of poverty stood in the way of learning to sew – let alone embroider” (340). Early migration to Florence to work as maids may have prevented Lidia and Licia from learning their mother’s art, but Imola secures their status and mobility by teaching them to sew and assuring their literacy. Recognizing that the girl-children’s future status as honorable women depends upon their ability to sew, Imola allows neither poverty nor consanguinity to prevent her from also teaching the village girls her craft, aware of this imperative: “having done no embroidery was worse than a social stigma [...] clearly proletarian women [who did not sew] had no honor, whereas women who embroidered did, and their embroidered trousseaux symbolized not only this crucial fact, but the layers between them and proletarianization” (340). By teaching handwork skills to the village girls, Imola evokes a relationship of connectedness through working the cloth together. Embroidered cloth is both a kind of protective symbolism, serving as a “thread for social relations”, however fragile and soft, and also a “binding tie” between neighbors and friends (Weiner and Schneider 1989, 2, 3).

Openwork submits that milk is thicker than blood. Bernardi’s portrayal of Imola as wet nurse and needle worker enables the author to draw attention to the peasant woman’s historical role in nurturing generations of Italian children. Adalgisa’s story illuminates the intersecting activities of wet-nursing and cloth-working as it is her brother whom Imola nursed before he was “handed over”. Like Moses abandoned but destined to be found, “this poor child is lucky, too. His mother found a buyer; she found someone to take him in” (Bernardi 2007, 9). The four-year old sister, Adalgisa, never heals from the loss of her unnamed brother. Suffering a form of maternal abandonment by proxy, Adalgisa’s primal wound is insistently remembered. Referencing Freud’s term “traumatic neurosis”, Cathy Caruth’s description of the repeating nature of trauma encapsulates Adal-

gisa's suffering: "the repetition at the heart of catastrophe [...] emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (Caruth 1996, 2). Given wine to drink by a guilt-ridden family to assuage her, Adalgisa remains addicted to alcohol in adulthood, well after marrying, migrating to America, and bearing her only child, Rina, who is Adele's mother. A laundress by trade, Adalgisa continues to work because she loves "ironing the linens with the fancy needlework", the repetition comforting to someone who reenacts daily her unbearable loss: "She was never told his name. You sent my brother away, but someday I will meet him. Adalgisa, four years old, said this" (Bernardi 2007, 138, 139). Through the activity of cloth-work, Imola provides the young girl with a mitigating strategy that softens through creation, simultaneously aware that a brother's departure can never be sufficiently eased: "It was not her mother who took her onto her lap or who taught her how to do needlework. It was Imola who taught her. [...] They worked on an enormous tablecloth that had all the creatures of the earth in it. She learned alongside Lidia and Licia. Satin stitch. Double window. Open trellis filling" (139-140). A communal undertaking, cloth-work transcends norms of reciprocity as women become the creators and "controllers of highly valued possessions – a currency of sorts made from 'cloth'" (Weiner 1992, 2-3). Imola's silent rebellion is revealed through the work of her hands. The specific needlework technique of openwork can be read as Imola's textual response to the closed system of the foundling wheel and its institutions, intricate networks of social control that regulated the lives of childbearing women. When Adele's father, Ray, encourages his wife to shed her *coprimiserie*, the misery coat, he fails to remember her genealogy. The child of a traumatized, immigrant mother, Rina's own response to child loss echoes not only that of Adalgisa but also that of all the women of the mountain village in northern Tuscany. Burdened and connected by the grief of her elders, Rina suffers severe postpartum depression after her baby dies from a heart defect; "She wanted *that* baby. *And have you all for myself, alone and apart*" (Bernardi 2007, 276). Rina's institutionalization for depression ushers Adele into a narrative world

that replicates her female ancestors' past, including a portrayal of her maternal grandmother's needlework instruction: "Pull the threads of the cloth together, she says. These three. Not too tight" (272). Given space, Adele will return in adulthood to the mountain village of her ancestors. Like her artistic precursor, Imola, she will work with bits and pieces, "between here and there" (299, 300) to tell this story.

Bernardi represents the nineteenth-century foundling hospital and twentieth-century motherhood as metaphorically co-eval, signifying a relationship between institutions separated by continent and century. As Adrienne Rich explains, "for most of what we know as the 'mainstream' of recorded history, motherhood as institution has ghettoized and degraded female potentialities" (Rich 1986, 13). Bernardi effects a transformation in thinking with regard to kinship and motherhood in her concluding paragraphs of *Openwork*. Adele remembers herself to Imola, regardless of their relationship: "Who are you to me? Great-grandmother? Grandmother? Mother? Aunt? Sister? Daughter? Cousin? Friend? Neighbor?" (316). Even now connecting the pieces, the adult Adele evokes Licia, Imola's daughter, who cared for her during the summer of Rina's absence, showing Adele the original "cloth book with all her stitches" (317). A mother of two children, Adele experiences a revelation in the most quotidian of spaces, the parking lot of an Italian grocery store. There, she meets her Aunt Erminia, who, admiring her toddlers, says: "*Licia ti ha portato la fortuna davvero*" (Licia has really, in actuality, brought you fortune) (317). Unbeknownst to Adele, it was Licia who paid her college tuition, making possible this fortuitous encounter, and, perhaps also, the adoption of her two daughters: "Erminia put her hands to her cheeks and exclaimed, Oh your beautiful Chinese babies! You started to correct her about how you wanted to talk about your daughters. But before you could get it out of your mouth [...] she bent over to kiss Luisa on the forehead. Loud, a repeated kiss. Then she reached up to kiss Amelia. Loud" (317). For all their differences, the foundling wheel, the private home, and the orphanage are institutions that have demonstrably challenged if not distorted mother-child bonds. *Openwork* shows

that despite the confining nature of systems designed to restrict the maternal, women will create gestures of permanence to counter institutional forms of oppression. The stack paragraphs that frame *Openwork* function also as Chinese boxes, preparing us for the embedded narrative inside a narrative that voices various perspectives. Conceptually recursive, *Openwork* crosses boundaries, presenting seven voices as “self-sufficient” texts, generating a “semantic universe and its own textual actual world which may or may not be presented as a reflection of the primary reality from which the text is transmitted” (Ryan 2002, 367). Adele/Adria imaginatively and actually wends her way back to a border mountain town of Tuscany in homage to her grandmothers’ friend and neighbor, *la sarta*. Custodian of an Italian future in America, Adria Bernardi honors the potential of cloth-work to mend what seems are irreparable fissures. Beyond its utilitarian value as a source of economic support, cloth-work’s aesthetic value as represented through openwork embroidery illuminates the enduring nature of social ties.

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Chapter 3

Leonardo Buonomo

Ethnicity, Gender, and Culture in Garibaldi M. Lapolla's
Miss Rollins in Love

Published in 1932, *Miss Rollins in Love* was the second novel by the Italian American author, educator, and culinary enthusiast Garibaldi M. Lapolla, whose name and contribution to the literature of the United States regrettably remain largely unknown outside Italian American scholarship. *Miss Rollins in Love* attracted little attention and, like the two other novels Lapolla published in his lifetime, *The Fire in the Flesh* (1931) and *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), soon disappeared from the literary scene. Lapolla's novelistic output had been preceded by *Better High School English through Tests and Drills* and *A Junior Anthology of World Poetry* (both published in 1929), the latter co-edited with well-known poet and scholar Mark Van Doren. Together with *Required Grammar in the New York City Public Schools* (1937), these textbooks attest to the profound love of language, and the unfailing commitment to pedagogy, which marked Lapolla's career as a high school teacher of English and principal in the New York City public school system. His passion for good cuisine and desire to educate his fellow Americans about Italy's rich culinary tradition (well before it became fashionable), found expression in the 1953 cookbooks *Italian Cooking for the American Kitchen* (for which he also provided the illustrations) and *The Mushroom Cookbook*.

Born in 1888 in Rapolla, in the Italian region of Basilicata, Lapolla emigrated to New York City with his parents in 1890. A gifted student, Lapolla made the most of the educational oppor-

tunities available to him (earning a BA and an MA at Columbia University), and in his early twenties embarked on what would prove to be a very distinguished career as an educator. Particularly sensitive to the unique obstacles that first- and second-generation Italian immigrants encountered in American schools due to their social and cultural background, Lapolla championed a more practical approach to teaching the English language. His teaching philosophy, inspired by the work of the progressive educator John Dewey, also emphasized the importance of instilling early on in students a love of reading and literature (Belluscio 2017, 49-57; Lawrence 1987b, 117). Had he only been an educator, which was already contrary to the more popular image of the illiterate southern Italian immigrant in America, Lapolla (who died in 1954), would certainly merit more attention than he has received. The true tragedy of his obscurity, however, lies in the fact that he was an equally accomplished fiction writer, who captured the voices, manners, and ambience of the Italian community in Harlem at turn-of-the century and in the early twentieth century¹. In his novels, Lapolla delved into complex questions of cultural assimilation and identity construction that continue to be relevant in the United States today and wherever people of different origins and backgrounds co-exist.

Long out of print after their initial appearance, *The Fire in the Flesh* and *The Grand Gennaro* were first re-issued in 1975, a period which witnessed the emergence of Italian American studies as a discipline. The previous year had seen the publication of Rose Basile Green's ground-breaking *The Italian-American Novel*, in which Lapolla was finally acknowledged as an important figure in the history of Italian American literature. Since then, Lapolla's literary worth has been increasingly recognized, albeit primarily by specialists working in the field of Italian American studies. Not surprisingly, critical attention has focused on *The Grand Gennaro*, widely regarded as Lapolla's greatest achieve-

¹ In his analysis of *The Grand Gennaro*, Richard A. Meckel notes that, unlike "New York's main Italian community – that situated between Pearl and Houston streets in lower Manhattan – Italian Harlem was something of an isolated enclave, far from both the city's central commercial district and from the patchwork of immigrant ghettos that abutted it" (Meckel 1987, 130).

ment. In the words of Martino Marazzi, this novel was, “the culmination of unmistakable artistic maturity” (Marazzi 2005, 190). Appropriately enough, *The Grand Gennaro* was the first of Lapolla’s three novels to be made newly available when it was reprinted in 2009, with an informative introduction by Steven Belluscio. Belluscio also edited and wrote introductions to re-issues of *The Fire in the Flesh* (2012) and *Miss Rollins in Love* (2016).

Ignored in 1975, and left for last among the more recent reprints of Lapolla’s work, *Miss Rollins in Love* is long overdue for a critical reappraisal. When it was first published, *The New York Times*, in a somewhat condescending review entitled “A Schoolmarm in Love”, described *Miss Rollins in Love* as “a disappointing successor” to *The Fire in the Flesh* (“A Schoolmarm in Love”, 1932, 50). However, no less a critic than Giuseppe Prezzolini, in an overview of Italian American authors published in 1934, described *Miss Rollins in Love* as being “more delicate and more subtly delineated” than its predecessor (Prezzolini 1934, n.p., my translation). Many years later, Rose Basile Green echoed Prezzolini’s assessment. Comparing *The Fire in the Flesh* to *Miss Rollins in Love*, she argued that the latter novel captured the Italian American setting, “more aesthetically without sacrificing authenticity” (Green 1974, 74). Prezzolini and Basile Green concurred (as do the very few critics who have discussed the novel more recently), in identifying the school microcosm and the Italian American milieu as the two significant sources of inspiration for Lapolla.

Set in New York City after World War I, *Miss Rollins in Love* tells the story of a young high school teacher of Latin, Amy Rollins, who resumes teaching after the death of her invalid mother, for whom she had been the sole caretaker. No help had come from her sister Anna, married and living elsewhere, nor her brother Philip, a shell-shocked World War I veteran in need of psychiatric care. In the course of the novel, Amy receives the attentions of three men, Stephen Bennett (a lawyer), Messrs. Crabbing and Mortimer (both schoolteachers), whose interests she does not reciprocate. On the contrary, she develops strong feelings for and a powerful attraction to one of her stu-

dents, Donato Contini, who is equally drawn to her. Recognizing Donato's gifts as a student and a budding artist, Amy goes to extraordinary lengths to encourage him and "rescue" him from the dangers of the tough environment in which he lives. When he runs afoul of the law and ends up in a reformatory, she manages to obtain his release by providing him with a place to stay as his legal guardian, since both his parents have died by then. As his guardian, mother figure, and eventually lover, Amy is instrumental in creating the conditions for Donato's breakthrough as a sculptor. When Donato subsequently falls in love with a wealthy heiress who can further advance his career, Amy makes the ultimate sacrifice: she encourages the new relationship and refrains from telling Donato that she is pregnant with his child. By the end of the novel, Donato has become an internationally renowned sculptor and Amy has relocated to New Mexico, where she looks after their son, Donato Jr., and her recovering brother Philip.

Despite plot elements that seem to hark back to the Victorian era (a woman's renunciation and seemingly innate commitment to the care of others), *Miss Rollins in Love* stands out in early Italian American fiction for its multifaceted portrait of a modern heroine. When we meet her at the outset of the novel, Amy Rollins is a young woman who lives on her own in New York City and finds fulfillment in her work. While Amy's reluctance to enter into a relationship is attributed in part to her "inhibitions" (echoing the half-digested Freudianism of the time), Lapolla shows that she also values her independence and is not swayed by the idea that a woman's ultimate goal is marriage. Her palpable discomfort when dealing with the three older men who set their sights on her appears to stem in part from the threat that they would pose, as potential husbands, to her desire for freedom and the ability to remain in control of her life. This need is probably one of the reasons why, as she admits to herself early in the novel, she is attracted to younger men. It is also significant to note that she is not of Italian ancestry, and independence may well be attributed to her non-Italianness. At the end the novel, Amy may have lost the love of her life and is an unwed mother, but she is a far cry from the stereotype of a fallen woman. Hav-

ing turned her interest in plants and flowers into a profession, she creates a new life for herself in New Mexico as a working woman and a contented single mother (an absolute rarity in the period in which the novel was published).

While the trope of the benevolent and enlightened white Anglo-Saxon benefactor lifting the immigrant out of poverty was hardly Lapolla's invention (it dated back, at least, to Horatio Alger)², he did add an interesting twist to it by making the older parental figure a female and the young immigrant a male. As Rose Basile Green has suggested, Amy functions as an idealized personification of the American dream (74). She is, I would argue, America as it *should* have been in the 1880-1920 period, a nation capable of recognizing worth in, and willing to learn from, the newcomers from other lands who had flocked to its shores. It is certainly no coincidence that Amy teaches Latin and loves to share her appreciation of great Latin authors with her students. She is an American who reveres the classical heritage and tries to instill in her class the same reverence for those very cultures from which most of her immigrant students originally hailed. In Donato, whose parents emigrated to New York from Sicily, she finds a particularly responsive pupil. In some important respects, he differs from the typical portrait of the second-generation Italian American as penned, for example, by John Fante in the same decade in which Lapolla's novels appeared. In the first place, Donato has parents who, despite their precarious economic circumstances, value education over purely utilitarian pursuits³. Secondly, there is no trace in Donato (as opposed to so many of Fante's second-generation young heroes) of cultural and ethnic self-loathing. Not only does Donato appreciate the classics, acknowledging them as part of his heritage, but he also becomes heir to his father's artistry as a puppet maker. Later, as a sculptor, Donato is inspired by his family's (and, by extension, his community's) immigrant experience. Finally,

² See, for example, Horatio Alger's novel *Phil, the Fiddler* (1872).

³ By contrast, in Lapolla's first novel *The Fire in the Flesh* the protagonist Agnese is openly hostile to her son's desire to improve himself through study. On Italian American diffidence towards literacy and institutionalized education, see Covello 1967, Lawrence 1987b and Gambino 2003.

although we may safely assume that Donato and his family are Catholic, the religious component of their background and identity is conspicuously underplayed. Considering that religious affiliation played a fundamental role in the cultural self-definition of turn-of-the century Italian immigrants (in the case of southern Italian immigrants, religion certainly trumped nationality as an identity marker) and that Italian artistic heritage is intimately connected with Catholicism, Donato's marked preference for secular subjects is noteworthy. The removal of Catholicism from the Italian American milieu also sets *Miss Rollins in Love* apart from Lapolla's other novels, where worship and the representatives of the Catholic Church figure prominently, though not always in a positive light. Lapolla's portrait of a young artist who is seemingly free from the influence of Catholicism may derive from his progressive Socialist leanings⁴. However, it seems particularly significant that he made Catholicism nearly invisible in a novel centering on education and artistic expression, the two endeavors to which he devoted his own life.

Reading *Miss Rollins in Love* today, we are inevitably confronted with the controversial nature of the relationship between Amy and Donato, even before it reaches the stage of physical intimacy. There is some imprecision about the difference in age between the two characters. At the outset, Amy is said to be "past twenty-eight" (Lapolla 2016, 36). A few chapters later, we learn that Donato is "not yet eighteen", but looks "older than his years" (127). However, towards the conclusion and *after* he has become Amy's lover, Donato is referred to as being "ten years younger" than her, and she is by then thirty-one (242). What is certain is that Donato is Amy's student, a role which opens up important questions of ethics, propriety, authority, and responsibility as far as her actions are concerned. It is a measure of the extent to which attitudes have changed over the years, that neither the anonymous *Times* reviewer nor Prezzolini made any mention of this issue when the book was

⁴ Lapolla even ran for public office on a Socialist ticket and, as principal during the 1950s Red Scare, defended teachers who had been targeted by the House Un-American Activities Committee (Belluscio 2017, xiv-xv).

first published. Nor, for that matter, did Olga Peragallo in 1949 (in her *Italian-American Authors and Their Contributions to American Literature*) and Rose Basile Green in the mid-seventies. It is open to speculation whether Amy's and Donato's relationship had anything to do with *Miss Rollins in Love* not being re-issued in 1975 alongside Lapolla's two other novels. About one third into *Miss Rollins in Love*, Lapolla makes it clear that, upon acknowledging her feelings for Donato, Amy becomes keenly aware that she is treading on perilous ground. Interestingly, however, she is not worried about the possible repercussions on her own career and reputation, but rather about the "the effect upon the boy. 'He's just a child, Amy...,' she shuddered thinking about it, shuddered, and then placed her hands over her eyes, and shut out the world" (101-102). Conscious of the power she derives from her maturity and, more importantly, her role as a teacher, Amy seems to fear the possibility that she might exercise undue influence on her pupil. At the same time, however, the idea of educating, molding, refining Donato fuels in no small measure the fascination she feels for him. It is an opportunity that would have been denied to her in her interactions with older men, given the gender dynamics of the time. At the core of the relationship between Amy and Donato, there is also, quite clearly, a very powerful mutual physical attraction. Amy may be inhibited with other men, but she responds intensely to the exceptional physical beauty of Donato. Indeed, even though we are made aware that the latter also finds Amy very attractive, the focus is overwhelmingly on his appearance, and this emphasis, in part, is due to the fact that we follow the narrative primarily from Amy's perspective.

Although intermingled with her attraction to him, Amy's interest in Donato's well-being and her capacity to recognize his talent stand in sharp contrast to the attitude of some of her colleagues and superiors, who exhibit both in word and action unmistakable signs of bigotry. Amy's school is a microcosm of early twentieth-century America, namely an increasingly diversified space, in terms of ethnicity and culture, wherein authority and power are almost exclusively in the hands of the dominant white Anglo-Saxon majority. Also, in line with the gender hi-

erarchy of the time, the imposition of discipline and the infliction of punishment are the prerogative of the male members of the staff. If Donato's Italian origins evoke for Amy a world of beauty, art, and culture, as well as a link to her beloved classics, others in her school unhesitatingly associate Italian immigration with organized crime and judge Donato accordingly. We see this difference at play early on, when Amy comes to Donato's defense after he has been accused of theft by Mr. Sidon, a teacher entrusted with the handling of particularly serious cases of student misconduct. Faced with the unjust accusation of being, in Mr. Sidon's words, the leader of "a nest of incipient thieves and gangsters" (69), Donato finds himself unable to defend himself verbally and resorts to violence, in a scene reminiscent of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd*. It is Amy who becomes his spokesperson and manages to save him from the dire consequences of his action. When he is alone with Amy, Donato shares with her a painful chapter of his family's past which he had tried to keep secret. Some years earlier, Donato's older brother Giulio, himself a gifted student, had been enticed away from school by the prospect of making quick money. Sucked into the crime scene, Giulio had been involved in a robbery that had resulted in the death of two men. Even though he was not directly responsible for the murders, Giulio had been sentenced to death and was executed on the electric chair at the age of nineteen. Devastated by this tragedy, Giulio and Donato's heartbroken mother died shortly afterwards. It was only after taking a leave of absence from school to be close to his grieving father Emanuele that Donato decided to resume his studies, "for [his] father's sake" (271). The implication of these words is that the tragedy of Giulio's death had reinforced Emanuele's view that education was his surviving son's only way out of the degradation and dangers of Italian Harlem. Interestingly, however, a subsequent flashback to Emanuele's struggles as an immigrant reveals the ambivalence of his own attitude towards his adoptive country. While Emanuele believes that his younger son can be rescued by American educational institutions, he is also convinced that America, not Italy (nor, more specifically, Sicily), is responsible for his family's predicament. Contrary to the widespread

view of southern Italian immigrants as importers of crime (a view that partially fueled the introduction of the 1921 Emergency Quota Act and the 1924 Immigration Act)⁵, Emanuele is convinced that it was on American soil that his sons were exposed to pernicious influences. Specifically, Emanuele blames America for undermining his patriarchal authority and inspiring rebelliousness in his sons, thus making them more vulnerable to the lure of street gang life. By evoking Emanuele's memories and recriminations, Lapolla suggests that the neighborhoods in which immigrants were confined were fertile grounds for inter-ethnic conflict, in which those left behind by the dominant culture preyed on each other. For example, we learn that when Giulio and Donato, as young boys, had taken to roaming the streets of East Harlem in search of vulnerable people to rob, their favorite targets were Jewish peddlers. Lapolla also uses the story of Emanuele to denounce America's corrupting emphasis on money as the ultimate measure of worth. A case in point is the failure of the café Emanuele tried to run with his wife and where (in the backyard) he staged his marionette shows. Initially very popular, the café progressively lost customers who were enticed away by the sale of alcohol that its competitors, thanks to their kickbacks to the police, were able to serve in defiance of Prohibition. Having witnessed the devastating repercussions of his father's law-abiding conduct, the young Giulio had vowed to make money at any cost.

In the pages he devotes to Emanuele's marionette theatre, Lapolla is at his very best, demonstrating in vivid, richly evocative prose an ethnographic understanding of Italian popular culture and traditions. Lapolla leaves us in no doubt that for Emanuele the marionette theatre is never simply a way to supplement his income. It is an art form, a vehicle for expression, and a way to reconnect with his culture of origin. What Emanuele stages in his little theatre is, essentially, his own identity.

⁵ The aim of these laws was to limit drastically the influx of immigrants from southern and eastern Europe who were widely believed to be racially inferior to so-called native-stock (i.e. white Anglo-Saxon) Americans and to have contributed to the spread of crime in urban areas (Jacobson 1998, 82-85; Mangione and Morreale 1992, 316). For a discussion of these laws, see Figueira's essay in this volume.

Through his skill as a wood carver, his expert handling of the marionettes, especially his vocal dexterity, Emanuele conjures up the historical and literary heritage, myths, and folklore of Sicily⁶. Although Donato's ability as a carver does eventually surpass that of his father and becomes the basis of his future success as a sculptor, Emanuele's gifts as a storyteller and voice virtuoso remain unmatched:

It was the voice of twenty people at one time. It covered the whole range of emotions. It was plaintive with distressed maidens and stentorious with overbearing knights, champion or defender. It whispered and it bellowed; it spoke words of love and it rose to tumultuous pitches of anger... And as the marionettes stepped out in front of their long spit-like handles manipulated by Don Contini from invisible spaces in the rear, they dispelled the present world and conjured back the Middle Ages and the back streets of Old-World towns where macaronics and fanfaronades were the order of the day. (107)

Sadly, the world that Emanuele magically evokes in his theatre, though popular with children, is too far removed in time and place to ever attract a sizable audience in the most modern of cities. Other forms of cheap, mass entertainment appear to be much more in tune with American tastes and the pace of the metropolis: "Somehow the feeling spread that all this was puerile, belonging to an older time, to another society. It was too laughable. Were there not the movies and the peep-show arcades? It was all a thing of the past. Better be back in Messina, they told Don Contini and broke his heart" (107). Incapable of adapting to the demands of his new life, Emanuele feels diminished, emasculated, and reacts to the undermining of his

⁶ On the importance of the marionette theatre for Italian American communities, see Aleandri (2006, 250-251). Lawrence Oliver has pointed out that Antonio Parisi, the man credited for introducing the Sicilian marionette theatre in the United States, was, "a native of the Contini's home province, Messina". Parisi, Lawrence further notes, "established the first marionette theatre in Boston in 1888, moving it to New York's East Harlem in 1896, where young Garibaldi Lapolla might have attended" (Oliver 1987a, 10). In 1911, in the Washington D.C. *Evening Star*, George Jean Nathan wrote the following of Parisi: "Parisi is probably the only dramatist in America who improvises a different drama every night in the year and by his extemporaneous plays make large audiences weep and laugh in a manner that might make Broadway's plodding dramatists jealous" (Nathan 1911, 13).

paternal authority by subjecting his two sons to savage beatings whenever they misbehave. Tellingly, when he visits Giulio the day before his execution, Emanuele complains “of his decision to come to America” (109), as if to imply that America has led Giulio astray, and that it is a country where (as its history demonstrates) children rebel against their parents. Remarkably, this is the only scene in which any mention is made of Emanuele’s religious faith, but it is expressed in a familiar form, the only way he can express his bitterness and resentment: “[he] blasphemed the saints, called for God’s wrath on the judge, the jury, the attorneys” (109).

It is Donato, only fifteen at the time of Giulio’s execution, who after the death of his mother rescues Emanuele from the depths of despair. Significantly, he shakes his father out of his grief-induced stupor by suggesting one day that they check the conditions of the – by then long neglected – marionettes. Donato whispers the words “Let’s see what they are doing” (Lapolla 2016, 111) as if the marionettes were living creatures. In a way, that is what they are, because father and son, with their shared passion and skill, have the power to make them come to life. Carved, painted, costumed and made to enact stories out of the Italian chivalric sagas (based in part on Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* and Torquato Tasso’s *Gerusalemme Liberata*), the marionettes provide a common language and a strong cultural bond between father and son. They also provide an escape from the squalor of their surroundings: “the two mean rooms in which he and his father lived, [...] the ugly disgusting street with its immense crowds, its dirty stores, the countless pushcarts that lined it night and day and, like a herd of animals, left their refuse behind to pollute the air” (113).

The other space where Donato can exercise his imagination and satisfy his need for meaningful communication is the school, because of the closeness that develops between him and Amy. In his mind, Donato associates the beauty that he and his father call into existence when they work together, with what he experiences when he is with Amy: “The light in the eyes of Miss Rollins had been like lightning in a dark storm. He had seen the high towers of magic cities and the broad plains of the

country beyond them. [...] Miss Rollins had in some manner, like a creature in the magic stories that the marionettes told, laid a charm upon the days and the nights” (115). If Donato’s father may remind us, at times, of a Geppetto-like figure (he even talks to his marionettes), Amy is a cross between the fairy in Collodi’s *Pinocchio* and a muse, because she awakens Donato to a new sense of himself as an adult and inspires him to be the artist he is meant to be: “The dreams became truth, and the experiences of the day the dreams. He had worked harder than ever at his modeling and hoped to have shown her the head on which he was working” (115).

Admittedly, Donato is not even remotely similar to a wooden puppet, but throughout the novel he is almost obsessively compared to a statue that has miraculously come to life. In his first novel, which told the story of a young woman’s illicit affair with a priest and her subsequent, scandalous pregnancy, Lapolla had clearly drawn inspiration from Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. It appears that Hawthorne was again in his thoughts when he wrote *Miss Rollins in Love*, because the character of Donato shares more than one trait with Donatello, the handsome Italian protagonist of *The Marble Faun*. To begin with, their names are practically the same, since Donatello is a variant of Donato⁷. Moreover, Donato’s surname Contini recalls the word *Conte* (“Count”), which is precisely the aristocratic title that Hawthorne’s Donatello bears in *The Marble Faun* (he is the Count of Monte Beni). In *The Marble Faun*, the three characters who gravitate around Donatello – Miriam, Kenyon, and Hilda – are simultaneously fascinated, amused, and puzzled by his uncanny resemblance to the statue of the Faun originally attributed to Praxiteles (now believed to be a Roman copy) and housed in Rome’s Capitoline Museums. Repeatedly, Donatello is described as the flesh-and-blood twin to the marble statue, to the point that his friends half-jokingly wonder if the young man, underneath his curly hair, has pointed

⁷ Given Donato’s chosen art form, his name may also be a nod to the Italian Renaissance sculptor Donatello (1386-1466), whose real name was Donato di Niccolò di Betto Bardi.

ears like his inanimate counterpart. Similarly, in *Miss Rollins in Love*, Amy notices early on, and progressively becomes fixated with the idea, that Donato looks like Praxiteles's marble statue of Hermes⁸. Tellingly, the first time she asks herself whether the pleasure she derives from teaching has something to do with Donato, she mentally pictures him as the "slender Italian boy with a figure like the Hermes of Praxiteles" (60). Shortly afterwards, when she finds Donato unexpectedly waiting for her in her room at school, her gaze lingers lovingly on him, as if she were admiring a work of art:

Donato had thrown up the shades and windows both, and stood with them behind him. Outlined against them, he looked a young god stepped out of a classic temple [...]. Especially clear in the light were the well-defined lines of his features. Nowhere was there bulge or depression. The forehead molded itself out of the massed curls of his light chestnut hair, the nose carried the line surely to a point where the eye of the spectator must seek for the lips and the chin, both well-proportioned to the rest and demanding no extra attention. The mouth alone, because it was never entirely shut tight nor open sufficiently to reveal the teeth, seemed always to quiver with expression and so drew ever the slightest extra attention to itself. (64)

Just as Amy opens up vistas for Donato onto a world of beauty, knowledge, and possibilities, so too does Donato for her, as a Hermes-like messenger from, and the living embodiment of, the classical world she loves. Indeed, his sheer presence seems to have the power to summon that world, transcending the limits of time and space: "She looked at him, and something like a shadow from a world beyond passed over her. The marvelous slim body of the boy, the chestnut curls almost amber in color, the grey eyes turned upward intently – why, he was, he was the Hermes on the stand, grown to human size, become human" (100).

⁸ The statue, known as *Hermes Carrying the Infant Dionysus*, is housed in the Archaeological Museum of Olympia, in Greece. Some experts believe it might be a superb copy of the original.

Significantly, one of Amy's most rhapsodic musings about Donato occurs while she is walking in the company of Mr. Crabbing, a mean-spirited, miserly colleague of hers. A caricature of American close-mindedness, insularity, and philistinism, Crabbing makes Amy even more conscious of Donato's gifts. When she notices that Donato is watching her, Amy has the distinct sensation that he comes from some other place and brings with him something she craves:

How hateful [Crabbing's] voice was, baritoneing so complacently while within her flitted the ghosts of a hundred desires. [...] And why could she not take her eyes away from the figure on the summit of the street, perched like a god, but like a god puzzled by a new landscape, the landscape of a world not of his making? Why did he sum up for her in a living person all the ecstasy she had had in the swing and imagery of the Latin poets? (119)

It comes as no surprise that Crabbing, increasingly aware of the special bond between Amy and Donato, should couch his jealousy and resentment in xenophobic language, calling Donato, at one point, the "worst type of foreigner" (131). As portrayed by Lapolla, the young Italian American is indeed a foreigner, but only in the sense that what he embodies, what he can contribute with his person and artistry, is *foreign* to the American society of the time. Ironically, this Italian American is uniquely capable of revitalizing American culture by drawing from his national and family heritage in order to create new and original American art. Like the writers of the American Renaissance, Donato believes that while artists in the United States should study, and learn from, European art, they should absolutely avoid slavish imitation. When Amy suggests a visit to the museum (almost certainly the Metropolitan Museum), Donato launches into a tirade against derivative American art that carries echoes of Ralph Waldo Emerson's *The American Scholar*: "The American pieces are childish imitations of the Greek [...]. Have we no symbols of our own? Haven't we ideas, people around us?" (Lapolla 2016, 159). Central to Donato's ethnic and cultural make-up is his family's emigration from Italy to the United States, with all its socio-economic implications, and the Contini family's story, in turn, is central to, and representative of, American history and culture. Thus, the art that Do-

nato eventually creates, and which wins him fame and fortune, is all the more American precisely because it comes out of, and reflects, the immigrant experience⁹. With titles such as *The Immigrants at Ellis Island* and *The Marionette Director*, Donato's most acclaimed pieces not only portray immigration as one of the most formative components of American society, but also pay homage to his father, thereby vindicating the latter's decision to relocate his family to the United States.

With his art and his ancestry, Donato brings new vigor to America at the very moment when the country was closing its doors to immigrants, especially to those who, like Donato's parents and Lapolla's parents, came from southern Europe. At a time when American politics and the media portrayed southern Italians as racially suspect (i.e. not entirely white) and, therefore, not capable of being assimilated, Lapolla ends his novel with the birth of a child born out of the relationship between Donato and the "all-American" Amy, and his subsequent marriage with Angel Smith, an heiress from Kansas (not only is she from America's heartland, but her surname is quintessentially that of the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant). For all its melodramatic twists and turns – Amy keeping her pregnancy a secret from Donato so as not to stand in the way of his marriage and career – the novel's denouement reads like a parable of American national and cultural identity. In other words, Lapolla would seem to suggest that it is on the progress, creativity, and renovation embodied by Donato Jr. – and, perhaps, the future offspring of Donato's marriage with Angel – that America's continued enrichment through contact and exchange with bearers of other traditions, sensibilities, and perspectives depends.

⁹ According to Lawrence Oliver, Donato's character may have been based in part on Jewish American painter and sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880-1959), whose "art career and aesthetic views parallel Donato's" very closely. Like Donato, Epstein was the son of immigrants (in his case, from Eastern Europe) and grew up in New York City. Early in his career, he depicted Jewish immigrant life in a number of sketches. Intriguingly, one of his idols was the fifteenth-century Italian sculptor (and Donato's namesake) Donatello (Oliver 1987a, 15-16).

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Chapter 4

John Wharton Lowe

Humor as Counterpoint and Engine in di Donato and Binelli

In 1892, Giuseppe Verdi, Italy's greatest living composer, was persuaded by his collaborator, Arrigo Boito, to embark on a final opera, a comedy, one based on their beloved Shakespeare's *Falstaff*. As Verdi wrote, "What a joy! To be able to say to the Audience, 'WE ARE HERE AGAIN!!'" (Phillips-Matz 1993, 700). They came to refer to Falstaff as "Big Belly", and after the opera's premiere at La Scala in 1893, Verdi, now 79 years old, sent an autograph score to his publisher Ricordi, and inserted a note: "The Last notes of *Falstaff*. Everything is finished! Go on, go on, old John... Go on down your road as far as you can...Entertaining sort of rascal eternally true, beneath different masks, all the time, everywhere!!" (718-719). In a letter to the conductor Edoardo Mascheroni, he wrote of both his joy in the opera's success and of his sadness at concluding his career: "What 'we', what 'art'... We? Poor supers with the job of beating the bass drum until they say to us 'Shut up over there'. *Tutto nel mondo è burla!*" (720).

The United States premiere of *Falstaff* was mounted at the Metropolitan in 1895, where it had been eagerly awaited by Verdi's Italian immigrant countrymen. Although the play that inspired it was English, Boito's libretto and Verdi's music made it their own, as did that "big belly" of Falstaff's which was the subject of so many Italian jokes dealing with excess, be it a greedy priest, a thieving merchant, or a wily robber. The opera's success at home and abroad put Verdi in excellent humor, and he wrote, again to Mascheroni: "What marvelous comedies are

born all the time in the theatre and outside it too” (721). And indeed, Italian literature and culture offer one of the world’s richest repositories of humor of all sorts, from high to low, as Henry Spaulding’s delightful anthology *Joys of Italian Humor* (1980) demonstrates.

A text by one of my favorite Italian authors, Leonardo Sciascia, offers a convenient bridge between Italy and Little Italy. “The Long Crossing” concerns a group of Sicilian immigrants who gather to board a boat one night, *en route* to America. The man who has engaged their passage, “some sort of traveling salesman”, promises to land them on a New Jersey beach, thus avoiding immigration: “the cunning ones [...] had borrowed from the moneylenders with the secret intention of defrauding them, in return for the hardship they had been made to endure over the years by the usurers’ greed” (Sciascia 2000, 18). After a voyage of eleven days, they are put ashore, as promised, on a beach. But the first car that passes looks like a FIAT. No problem: “They use our cars for fun, they buy them for their kids like we buy bicycles for ours” – but then the road sign reads SANTA CROCE CARAMINA – SCOGLITTI”:

I seem to have heard that name before... Perhaps one of my family used to live there... before he moved to Philadelphia... we don’t know how the Americans read it, because they always pronounce words in a different way from how they’re spelt... I shall stop the next car... all I’ve got to say is “Trenton?”... they’ll point or make some kind of sign... The Fiat came round the bend... the driver braking... “Trenton?” the man asked. “Che?” said the driver. “Trenton?” “Che trenton della madonna”, the driver exclaimed, cursing. The passengers look at each other, thinking, “seeing that he speaks Italian, wouldn’t it be best to tell him that crops failed... my father went to Santa Croce Carmarina to work. There was, after all, no need to hurry back to the others with the news that they had landed in Sicily. (23)

Of course, those who actually landed in America might well have felt they were in Sicily too, especially if they wound up in one of the many Little Italy neighborhoods, where for some time life, lived in a tightly knit ethnic enclave, continued to resemble the one they had left behind. Part of the baggage they brought with them that proved to be life-sustaining was their comic conventions, tales, modes of discourse, and wise sayings, products

of an oral culture that continued to circulate as long as the wick of memory flared. Comedy was being created on the streets of New York at this time too, and in its theatres.

Edward Harrigan, American actor, manager, and playwright, was born in 1844 in New York on the Lower East Side, the son of an Irish immigrant who had originally settled in Canada, and a Virginia-born mother. As a result, most of his characters were Irish, but many others were black, German, Chinese, and yes, Italian. After a life at sea, Harrigan wound up in San Francisco and was lured to the stage, playing in minstrel and variety shows. Soon, discovering ethnic sketches were popular, he began mining his Irish/Southern roots for material. On tour in Chicago, he met a talented sixteen-year-old singer, Anthony Cannon, who excelled in playing female roles. Harrigan renamed him Tony Hart and together they formed a vaudeville team, specializing in ethnic sketches. After moving to New York in 1872, they established their own theatre by 1876. They portrayed virtually every type of ethnic American culture in these early years, specializing first in “Dutch” (German) acts and minstrel blackface sketches – in one, Harrigan portrayed Uncle Tom to Hart’s Topsy. Eventually Harrigan moved up to full-length comic plays with music; his first great success, *The Mulligan Guard Ball*, 1879, led to an entire series of “Mulligan” plays with repeating characters, with most plays set in the multiethnic “Mulligan’s Alley” on the Lower East Side. Harrigan wrote all the plays, most of the lyrics to the songs, and usually played an Irish hero opposite Hart’s drag characterization of either the heroine or the leading black female figure. The team split in 1885 after their theatre burned down. Harrigan then leased the Park Theatre and produced a string of Hart-less hits such as *Old Lavender* (1885), *The Leather Patch* (1886), *The O’Reagans* (1886), *Pete* (1888), and *Waddy Googan* (1888), a play about Italian Americans. James Dormon has speculated that Harrigan’s Italians are not that clearly focused because the southern Italian exodus was fairly recent; as Harrigan said in an interview: “someday there’ll come a man [who] will [...] do things with the Italians as I did with the Irish and the Negroes. But not yet. We aren’t well enough acquainted with them yet” (Dormon

1992, 32). Although Harrigan painted sympathetic portraits of Italian women, he relied on stereotypes of stiletto bearing, rough Italian men – often members of the Mafia – to provide menace in his plays. An Irish bartender in *The Leather Patch* states: “I carry me life in me hands behind me bar. I’m patronized by Italians who carry stilettos and nagurs with razors...” (18). Of course, he keeps a shillelagh himself for such encounters.

Harrigan also showcased stereotypes of Italian dialect. In *Last of the Hogans*, the Irish gang imitates the Italians as they brandish their razors, yelling “Cutta. Soona. Quicka”, in yet another reference to the ever-present stiletto (33). Harrigan also favored hard-working junk dealers, organ grinders, or fruit stand operators, all of whom demonstrate exuberant humor and a fondness for song, a staple in all of Harrigan’s plays, for which he and John Brahm wrote hundreds of songs. The tenement setting featured by Harrigan is akin to what Bakhtin calls the public square. Everything is made public – especially personal *peccadilloes*. As Bakhtin asserts, it is “necessary to liberate all these objects and permit them to enter into the free unions that are organic to them, no matter how monstrous these unions might seem from the point of view of ordinary, traditional associations” (Bakhtin 1984, 169). His comedies had a hopeful energy to them, in that rather than bemoaning, as Henry James did when he visited the Lower East Side, the apparent Babel that America had become, these plays celebrate the carnivalization of culture, where no one language – since all are in dialect form – constitutes a standard. Here we find a play of all immigrant utterances, with each one constituting both masks and signs. Harrigan appropriates dialects, yes, even commodifies them, but at the same time he legitimizes them and, to a certain extent, refuses to hierarchize them.

Harrigan’s plays, like many classics of Italian American literature, are often situated around feasts or celebrations, and eating and drinking play prominent roles in both the plots and the modes of characterization. Ingestion of food or drink is in keeping with the premise that the characters are “becoming”, since eating and drinking are manifestations of the unfinished nature of the body and its interaction with the world. As Bakh-

tin further indicates, this consuming of food and incorporating it into the body suggests an incorporation of the world, a joyful triumph, in fact, over the world. Eating the bounty of America symbolizes becoming America. A joke could also be read as a kind of eating – an incorporation of something orally, blending it with an unexpected opposite. Bakhtin notes that a festive occasion inevitably suggests looking into better days to come, and that no meal is ever sad (286).

How does the above discussion relate to comic literature actually written by Italians? Their written record began immediately after they arrived in the States. Their greatest numbers came during what has been called the “Mediterranean-Slavic” period of immigration (1890-1914), when over twenty million people arrived, of which five million were Italian. From the beginning, Italian Americans wrote mostly about the family and alienation, and this focus has not really changed over the past century. The best known of these authors include Paul Gallico, Bernard De Voto, Mario Puzo, and Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Within and outside of academia, Italian writers themselves have recently begun to champion authors such as Pietro di Donato, John Fante, Jerre Mangione, and Tina Di Rosa. Helen Barolini’s novel *Umbertina* (1979) and her path-breaking anthology, *The Dream Book* (1985), brought about a second renaissance for Italian American writing through its women, which continues largely to this day. That movement was vastly accelerated through the equally path-breaking critical work of Mary Jo Bona, Edvige Giunta, and others who helped us understand new novelists such as Josephine Hendin, Mary Cappello, and Diana Cavallo. With a few exceptions, however, these writers and critics do not often employ, or discuss, humor.

As Rose Basile Green notes, many early Italian American novels paralleled other ethnic American traditions. They depicted immigrant heroes adapting the American model of self-help to achieve upward mobility, often by ruthlessly exploiting other members of their group. An example of such a narrative would be Garibaldi M. Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), which echoed other ethnic classics in a similar vein such as James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912)

and Abraham Cahan's *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917). These books had been conceived as more serious versions of the popular WASP volumes of Horatio Alger, and books by more prominent figures, such as William Dean Howells's *The Rise of Silas Lapham* (1885). Christie Davies points to an opposite tradition in jokes about Italians, specifically Sicilian-born Mafia figures, who come off as brave, ruthless, loyal, and organized. Indeed, Ronald Reagan got in trouble telling one such joke:

How do you tell the Polish one at a cock-fight?
 He's the one with the duck.
 How do you tell the Italian?
 He's the one who bets on the duck.
 How do you tell the Mafia is there?
 The duck wins.
 (Davies 1990, 202)

We see many other comic traditions, however, in the pages of the Italian American novel. In an interview with Fred Gardaphé and Anthony Bruno, Jerre Mangione was pessimistic about the future of Italian American literature. He did think, however, that at least four major texts would always be taught and read: Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939), his own *Mount Allegro* (1943), Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), and Tina De Rosa's *Paper Fish* (1980) (Gardaphé and Bruno 1996, 54).

An old Italian proverb states that "a wise hen does not cackle in the presence of the cock", and as Italian American humor theorist Regina Barreca has written, until recently, women in the community told jokes only in the kitchen. De Rosa's text broke that silence and began a secondary renaissance of Italian American women's writing; *Paper Fish* deserves its legendary status as a revolutionary novel, one filled with rage and sadness, rather than humor. Revolutionary writers in the political and social sense rarely demonstrate much humor; revolt is serious business. And indeed, many early classics of the wider feminist/womanist movement are similarly humorless. It was only after some advances had been won, that a critical mass of female voices could afford to indulge in levity and to explore the possibilities of subversive, liberating humor.

I have written at greater length on Mangione's memoirs elsewhere, so I will now briefly point out that humor can also be used more sparingly, when a tragic narrative requires comedy to underline its major epic themes. Puzo has claimed, in fact, that

every tenement was a town square. [...] Audacity had liberated them; 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 2004, 8-9)

Then too, the tenement was for the Jewish American who became US Senator, Jacob Javits, the equivalent of the frontier's log cabin, where American virtues were learned, absorbed, and passed on to a new generation.

Another classic text of Italian American literature, di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1937), possesses a high degree of tragic seriousness. Yet, like Greek tragedy, its pathos is interspersed with laughter and parody. As Bakhtin notes, "antique tragedy did not fear laughter and parody and even demanded it as a corrective and a complement", since plays by Sophocles were followed by satyr plays (Bakhtin 1984, 122-123). Bakhtin further argues: "True ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. [...] Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature" (123). Accordingly, before the tragedy of Geremio's death tears apart his workplace and his family, we see him, and his workers make their backbreaking work bearable through bawdy, combative humor. More significantly, after his death, the extended chapter "Fiesta" flares up comedically amid the more general despair and suffering of the novel, as the people of the community celebrate various events, including a wedding replete with feasting, taunts, comic duels, ribald sexuality, eating contests, and even comically celebrate the stripped stump of a man's amputated leg. This chapter in the novel does not begin humorously – quite the opposite, as Geremio's family are gathered at his grave; there, Fausto offers a brick laying job to Paul, still a boy, but needing to work at "Job", as it is called, to

feed the family. Geremio's place is taken by his brother-in-law Luigi, whose leg has been amputated after an accident. To cheer him upon his release from the hospital, the *paesanos* throw a fiesta, replete with wine, biscuits, stogies, and raucous stories. Luigi, when asked how the doctors finished off the leg, quips "they chop it off with a sharp trowel and then patch up the end with mortar" whereupon he opens his fly to reveal the stump, as the women squeal, the men, "instinctively put hand between legs", and one exclaims: "By the Madonna, it gives me electricity in the intestines" (di Donato 1937, 187-188). Luigi continues to mock his own condition: "whenever the weather changes one degree I receive the news [in his stump]. Pins and needles... I am now a Christian thermometer of meat and bone" (189). As Bakhtin has copiously documented, Rabelais ceaselessly created raucous, coarse humor by dismembering the body, often creating comic moments through a focus on individual body parts, particularly sex organs, which at one point are actually used to build a wall. Freud, of course, would see Luigi employing self-reflexive humor; drawing the women's fascination leads to fondling and a way of retrieving his sense of masculinity, something that eventually, in fact, leads to his marriage with Cola.

Early in the chapter, a wild drinking spree takes place involving nineteen men who visit a whorehouse; they end the evening in a shanty, where Nazone moans they have sinned; the men, mocking him as "Patron Saint of the Whorehouses", strip him and tie him to a makeshift cross: "'Nazone, sonofabitch' cried Fausta, 'prepare yourself for only the good are crucified!'" – all, including the bound Nazone, drink themselves into a stupor, and the evening ends with "crazy laughing laughter" (205). All of the men, of course, are good Catholics; but, in Italy and many other places in Europe, peasants are permitted to mock the Church and all things religious on the Feast of Fools, where men dress as monks or nuns, ride asses into church, and fling excrement at onlookers. In many ways this mock crucifixion closely parallels such events, which, as Bakhtin notes, "involve drunken orgies on the altar table, indecent gestures, disrobing" (Bakhtin 1984, 75). As in Carnival, participants are permitted excess on special occasions so as to provide sanctioned release of emotions

and energy, as a prelude to a return to quotidian order. Ash Wednesday and Lent, after all, follow Mardi Gras.

Despite the harsh world of work, poverty, and accidents that comprise the rest of the novel, the characters create comic nicknames for each other. Mike becomes “barrel mouth”; another Mike is “orange-peel face”; others we only know by their nicknames, like Asses-ass, Snoutnose, The Lean, and Four-Eyes. The character called Lucy gets his name because his favorite opera is *Lucia di Lammermoor*. The assigning of comic names creates a democratic fraternity, and is yet another way to subvert the power of the clergy, as all the men have the names of saints. The chapter includes scenes among the women, who sew together in their kitchens for extra income; since the burly Luigi has lost his leg, he agrees to sew too. One of the women tells the tale of a godless woman who slams the door on a vendor selling holy objects, even when he offers her a Virgin in glass for free, crying that she did not need God in her house; the vendor replies: “If you need not God, whom do you need, the Evil One?” “Yes!” is her answer. Angelina, the narrator of this tale, reveals its upshot; when the woman gives birth, “Out leaped a real baby Devil, horns and all”: “The women gasped. They signed the cross against the Evil One, and then repeated it upon their bellies”. Now di Donato as narrator wryly observes: “Although they had heard the tale many times...” (di Donato 1937, 195).

The chief intersection of humor and feasting comes when the amputee – now equipped with an artificial limb, symbolic perhaps, of his rekindled sexuality – marries the bawdy widow Cola. During the feast, laughter and wine are equated when someone spills their glass, “Spilled wine upon the table of joy is blessing... feel not badly, our Christ is happy when poor’s table weeps red in laughter of wine!” (243). The chief dish for the feast, a roast suckling pig, arouses the poet in the hungry Fausta (a man, despite his female name). Beating a dishpan with a spoon, he leads the women bearing the pig into the room to strains of the triumphal march from *Aida*, proclaiming his “pure love” for this “naked little angel who lies in roasted beauty [...] I love this she-suckling with all the sincerity of my gold heart!”, and then he amorously kisses the suckling’s mouth. When the

women shriek and demand an explanation, he responds: “Because... love wishes to devour!” (246).

After feasting, tales of old Abruzzi emerge, including an account of how on the night when “the tempest threatened to blow Abruzzi out to sea, the wild Pietro managed himself down the chimney (like the Devil himself) and did for the butcher’s daughter” (249). The surfeit of the feast causes women to loosen their breasts from their corsets, and men to unsnap the tops of their trousers to let full belies protrude. As Bakhtin states, “grotesque realism – which is always positive – emphasizes the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose” (Bakhtin 1984, 26), and di Donato, in this section, employs all these references. Card games follow with ritual curses (“you misrepresented, big-nosed porkface!”), and then tales of European wars are narrated with racial slurs:

[...] out from the earth sprang millions and mil-li-ons of hell-toasted charcoal Ethiops... [...] Nubian fiends... [...]

[...]

[...] Wherever there is trea-cher-y you will find the whoreface English... kerchief in cuff, window stuck in eye, indeterminate between the legs [...]

[...]

[...] The Creator made them from mold of tra-du-cer and filled them with white stink! (di Donato 1937, 259-261)

Nor are the Germans left out: “the breed Teutonic with the gray death’s-head faces. Who trusts the Franks trusts the teeth of Carrion –”; and “the German will eat his own family and friends”. Amadeo sums it all up to the benefit of Italians, “English, German, or Africano – who pays and pays for the music? – The working asses who are we...!” (259-261).

Christie Davies notes that ethnic slurs usually come in two types; the enemy is either lazy, dirty, and treacherous, or cunning, scheming, and dishonest. Interestingly, all the three groups attacked by the men seem to be slotted into the first group. Wordplay is only part of the humor; male hands search under the table for female legs. Focusing on this extended event in di Donato’s novel helps us understand the myriad ways in which feasts and rituals played a crucial role in the Italian American community, something that has a well-known modern coun-

terpart in the annual San Gennaro parade and events in Little Italy. Too often, Italian American culture gets left out of broad studies of similar events in ethnic America. In 1989, Genevieve Fabre and Rachel Ertel hosted a conference on *Festivals and Celebrations in North American Ethnic Communities* at the University of Paris 7. In the resulting conference volume, none of the contributors considered Italian Americans. Fabre does remind us, however, that celebrations have “always been vital to the well-being of society”; “they are touchstones for [everyday life’s] strength and cohesion or for its tensions and conflicts” (Fabre and Ramón 1995, 1).

A strict concentration only on the grave, tragic, and ideologically serious leads to partial vision. In this respect we might note that di Donato significantly chose to join the American Communist Party on the very night that Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed (Gardaphé 1996, 67). As Bakhtin noted, “true ambivalent and universal laughter does not deny seriousness but purifies and completes it. Laughter does not permit seriousness to atrophy and to be torn away from the one being, forever incomplete. It restores this ambivalent wholeness. Such is the function of laughter in the historical development of culture and literature” (Bakhtin 1984, 123).

It is both ironic and fitting that one of the most remarkable novels of the new Italian American Renaissance, Mark Binelli’s *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!*, goes back to the most legendary tragic heroes of Italian American history to construct a raucous, postmodern comedy. As Jerre Mangione predicted to Fred Gardaphé, the “more Americanized the new generations of Italian-American writers become, the less likely they are to write about Italian Americans, unless they begin writing historical novels with heavily fictionalized themes. This could lead to what you have called a renaissance” (Gardaphé and Bruno 1996, 54). And in fact, Binelli could hardly have chosen a more “fictionalized theme”, as he daringly transforms perhaps the most sacred tragic *storia* of Italian American life into a blatant comedy.

In the nineteenth century, Italian immigrants were viewed as little better than animals, their Catholicism feared as a contagion, and their peasant background a sign of their ignorance

– unless they were linked with Socialists and Communists, like Sacco and Vanzetti. Because many immigrants from Italy hailed from Reggio Calabria, Basilicata, and Sicily, then the poorest regions, they were also scorned by other immigrants from northern Italy, and all parties identified the Sicilians with the Mafia. Flannery O'Connor said: "To the hard of hearing, you shout". Apparently in agreement with this sentiment and these types of writers, Mark Binelli has recently taken a radically new approach to Italian American culture through the device of the postmodern novel. His title, *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!* operates on several different registers. First, it signals an irreverent, even revolutionary tone, and thus catches our interest. As we soon learn, he has "killed" the pair himself in a way by reinventing them as a comedy team active during the golden age of vaudeville, silent movies, and then the talkies. Binelli grew up worshiping Abbott and Costello, and he refashions the radical martyrs in that vein, also taking routines and gags from other comics and vaudevillians of the period, such as Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, Fatty Arbuckle, Laurel and Hardy, Jack Benny, even Helen Keller, most of whom have cameo appearances in the novel. Mixing real and fictional characters is a staple of the postmodern novel, as is Binelli's scrambled chronology, use of pastiche (we consider newsreels, diaries, journals, interviews, movie out takes, vaudeville routines along the way), and, above all, his exuberant embrace of parody. One of the most useful of such parodies is Binelli's excerpt from the fictional Hylo Pierce's scholarly work, *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Mr. Mayer's Office... Revisiting the Golden Age of Film Comedy* (1988), which tells us that the comedic team of Sacco and Vanzetti (S&V) has been rediscovered by the academy, and that one scholar has discovered a gay thematic in pictures such as *You're Schvitzing Me* (which takes place in a bathhouse), *Jacks in the Box*, and especially their 1943 forgotten classic made with Bing Crosby, *Take it Like a Man!*, a comic prison film set on Devil's Island. Hylo is skeptical, however, as Sacco apparently was married four times, and indeed, throughout the novel, he comes across as quite a sexual athlete, including an acrobatic tumble with one of the Andrews sisters in a sleeping car.

Binelli sees to it that we get the straight facts – sort of – that he is parodying. In section labeled “Supplemental Material”, he gives us mock-Wikipedia-like mini-essays on various topics, including the real historical figures he features, such as the boxer Carnera, but also several that deal with the real Sacco and Vanzetti. These inserts create a remarkable tension in the book, and draw attention to Binelli’s willful intervention into history in the fictional portions, while simultaneously adding to the humor of irony. As should already be clear, Binelli’s technique and S&V’s chaotic, often nonsensical comic routines resemble the aims and motives of anarchists, whose methods Binelli wants us to see as parallel to those of cutup comics. Along the way, we learn the etiquette of pie throwing, runaway car gags, racial and ethnic humor of the time, and most significantly of all, the art of knife throwing.

Binelli grew up outside Detroit, where he worked in his father’s knife-sharpening shop. The Binellis hailed from Pinzolo, which specialized in knife grinding, and in a tribute to the town, he has his duo visit it in 1965, when they are filming a comic encounter with Hercules, *Labor Pains*, in which Sacco and Vanzetti play employees at the Augean stables. The comedic team of Sacco and Vanzetti, while successful in vaudeville, really gain celebrity status from their movies when they star in a series of knife-grinding/knife-throwing comedies, which include *The Daily Grind*, *Whichever Way You Slice It*, *A Couple of Cut-Ups*, and *Sacco and Vanzetti Take One More Stab*. *A Couple of Wops in a Jam*, a comic allusion to the real S&V, presents a parody of the popular Charlie Chan movies, with Italian stereotypes substituted for the Chinese.

In his fiction, however, although we never lose sight of the comic duo’s ethnicity, Binelli seems much more interested in pyrotechnic writing, which he clearly sees as similar to the high risk knife-throwing acts the pair perform as a complement to their comedy routines. As he puts it, “I took cartoonish movie characters and tried to make them somewhat ‘real’, but neglected to remove them from their cartoonish movie scenarios” (McDermott 2009, 5).

Binelli's list of admired writers interestingly includes most of the names valued in creative writing classes today, but only one of them, Don DeLillo, has an Italian background. However, a reader who knows the Italian American literary canon will see some influences here and there. In one scene we encounter a boxing match with a kangaroo, which of course has to have been lifted from Paul Gallico's 1970 novel *Matilda*. Binelli did graduate work at the University of Michigan and at Columbia. While at Ann Arbor, he made good use of its library's anarchist collection during the writing of his novel. He had first intended to write about a comedy team, since he admired the way the Coen brothers played with genre. But he ultimately decided to focus on a comedy team working in film, a genre he felt he could "subvert". Then it occurred to him that Sacco and Vanzetti would be a great name for his duo. He immediately started seeing links between anarchy and slapstick humor, and "how the comics tended to play working-class types, and how they would often end up foiling bosses, cops, and various authority figures and high-society types. The Three Stooges, the Marx Brothers, all of them; how often they would end up at some ridiculously fancy party, trashing the place?... the connections just proved endless" (Binelli 2006, 2). An interviewer asked Binelli if he ever thought he was going too far with satirizing these "martyrs to liberalism", to which he replied:

I'm tweaking their historical image, which has become – for people who've even heard of them; and many haven't, these days – so one-dimensional. From the start, even their supporters turned them into caricatures... People overlook the violence of their cause, and romanticize their otherness... Upton Sinclair wrote an eight-hundred-page novel about the trial called *Boston*, in which the Vanzetti characters speak in a phonetic broken English, literally stuff like, "I younga man, I washa da deesh"... It's like Amos and Andy! (3)

Accordingly, Binelli shows his film stars being pressured into speaking this kind of dialect, or as Sacco puts it, "some kind of Chico Marx shit, 'Atsa good, Doc!'" (21). Binelli himself employs ethnic slurs himself, as the title for one of his films, *A Couple of Wops in a Jam*, evidences. Salvatore Lagumina also uses the negative stereotype in depicting Italian Americans, and

has unpacked it in his own work – on the cover of his book there is ridiculous picture of a fedora-clad Mafia warrior gobbling spaghetti and meatballs, under which in bold letters the title of the book appears, *WOP!* Such a provocative presentation demands our dealing directly, albeit satirically, with this stereotype, as Binelli defends his position by pointing to other ethnic writers such as Flann O’Brien, whose over-the-top Irishness takes back control of the stereotype by embracing and mocking it.

Although Binelli reports sitting around family kitchen tables while relatives yelled at each other in Italian dialect, he feels that current-day Italian Americans have assimilated so successfully that the feeling of otherness – which can apparently, for him, be both good and bad – has largely been lost. While Italian Americans are regularly referred to as “Guidos”, it would never be acceptable to call a Latino “Pedro”. The assimilation and success of Italian Americans makes the “Guido” label acceptable, and thus his own appropriations of old slurs are also permissible (3).

While Binelli would admit that most of the comics he references here are Jewish, he creates routines for his duo and the other comedians in the book that employ the kind of slapstick that was originated in the *Commedia dell’Arte*, which Binelli studied. He makes a specific reference to Mel Gordon’s classic book on the subject, *Lazzi: The Comic Routines of the Commedia dell’Arte*, which examines in-depth scatological and sexual antics of the genre. Early on in the novel, Bart (as the character of Bartolomeo Vanzetti is referred to in Binelli’s work) can be seen to follow this tradition. As Gordon notes: “we worked in a classical tradition. The commedia. Speed plus incongruity equals funny. It’s especially compelling for us, as Italians, because we’re working in a tradition that can be traced back to the Renaissance” (Gordon 1983, 21).

While working in the variety shows that became known as vaudeville (the term comes from the French *voix de ville*), Binelli’s Sacco and Vanzetti play many roles in many venues, as is the nature of their artform. They play picaresque figures who criss-cross the country, and the plots to their movies offer a variety of roles and situations. Binelli feels that the attraction he has for

these types of performance stems from his prior career as drama critic, which segued with his interest in metafiction, with “characters winking at the audience, playing different roles, switching scenes on a dime. So many different levels (the character, the actor, the stage, the audience) can allow for an interesting fluidity, when you’re telling a story” (McDermott 2009, 6). What he does not say here, however, is that fiction of this nature places extreme demands on the reader, who might well get exhausted early on.

Although their performances focus on Italian Americans, the other acts in S&V’s travels within vaudeville are diverse: Borrah Minevitch and his Harmonica Rascals, the magician Ching Ling Soo, Barrette, the French cross-dresser and trapeze artist, El Brendel, a Swedish dialect comic, Aunt Jemima, a black-face singer (who turns out to be an Italian named Teresina sporting shoe polish), an Irish crooner, and some kid by the name of Durante, who often references the role African Americans play in American musical comedy and vaudeville, and sees strong parallels between that culture and his own Italian American identity.

The theatre tradition involving Harrigan that I detailed earlier in this essay had a parallel in vaudeville. Many of the acts that were strung into an evening’s entertainment involved ethnic “sthticks”, acted out by actual or pretend ethnics. The classic example of this type of presentation was of course generated by the other precedent for this tradition, the minstrel show. Vaudeville proper began in 1865 with the opening of Tony Pastor’s Opera House in the Bowery. Off-color material was purged, creating a *famiglia*-oriented format, which featured melodrama comedy sketches, dance routines, and stand-up, which was more often than not delivered by a duo. Racial comics, James Dormon explains, “simply exaggerated the primary ascriptive qualities to the point of caricature in order to render the stereotype more comical” (Dormon 1988, 454). Hebrew dialect performers were the most popular, but so were “Dutch” and “Irish” acts.

At one point in the novel, there is a discussion about an ethnic group’s use of slurs against themselves where Blacks are compared to Italians, with agreement that accepting and then using

such terms takes away the white man's most powerful weapon, his words. Ultimately, this perspective relates to the lines of connection Binelli draws between the duo and Blacks who were performing – sometimes in blackface – “coon” songs, such as “All Coons Look Alike to Me”, or “No Coon Can Come too Black for Me”. Such songs were popular because they were often accompanied by nimble dancing, comic pratfalls, done against the rhythms of the new syncopated music. Blacks, like the famous team of Bert Williams and George Walker, billed as “Two Real Coons”, were also famous for their comedy routines. The “Coon Song”, however, could be subversive. “The Mormon Coon” bragged of his harem: “I’ve got a big brunette, and a blonde to pet / I’ve got em short, fat, thin, and tall / I’ve got a Cuban gal, and a Zulu pal / Them come in bunches when I call” (Binelli 2006, 459). Binelli has S&V sing similar songs about WOPS and embrace the stereotype in order to subvert it.

Binelli is not exaggerating the truth here. No vaudeville bill would be considered complete without an Italian character actor and an Italian dialect song. In staging instruction for his *A Sunny Son of Italy*, Harry Newton required: “Rough sack suit, trousers rather short; large shoes; blue shirt; red bandanna handkerchief tied around neck; black slouch hat; brass rings in ears [...], black wig; small black mustache [...] make-up face dark” (Dormon 1992, 10). “Antonio Spaghetti” might be a day laborer, a peddler, or more often, a street musician, such as a singing organ grinder. Costume, gestures, and dialect – which led to the character Chico Marx played – make for an entertaining “type”. Dormon suggests that the character's relatively benign qualities of naivete, simplicity, and ignorance deflected the fears of Anglo Saxon America, while the striking physical difference of these figures suggested they would never be real Americans, which also deflected fear. Ironically, however, this comic relation bred intimacy, and ultimately helped real Italians acculturate.

Just as Binelli brings in cameos by real people, so does his comic duo. Their films feature roles for the celebrated Italian boxer Primo Carnera, and Mussolini's trophy airman, Italo Balbo, “the Italian Lindbergh”, in a ridiculous movie (much

of which is featured in the novel) about his kidnapping by the duo. There is a paradox depicted here: how can one become a modern and still return to sources? Binelli's novel, while concentrating on Italian folk traditions, slapstick and burlesque, grapples with this dilemma when it refers to the futurists, early aviation heroes, and modernist painters of Italy, while simultaneously ransacking both Italian and Italian American history to make contemporary points. Binelli's form of comic historiographic metafiction places him in the company of Carlos Fuentes, Gabriel García Márquez, Thomas Pynchon, and especially E.L. Doctorow, whose *Ragtime* strikingly resembles this novel, in many ways. The comedy of revisiting and questioning the past is part and parcel, in fact, of postmodernism, and should, according to Umberto Eco, be achieved "with irony, not innocently" (Eco 1994, 67). Irony is perhaps the dominant form of humor in *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!*; it is achieved through the imposition of different kinds of readings of the past, methods that have been facilitated recently by the work of feminist, queer, and ethnic critics.

Part of the impulse to sift through the past comes from unhappiness with the present. As Bart tells us at one point, the mayhem the pair create makes them like the itinerants of the period: "they would or would not adhere to the discipline of the new industrial order... the alternative was acquiescence. Comfort equals collaboration" (Binelli 2006, 165). Or, as Jean-François Lyotard has noted, the postmodern "invokes the unrepresentable in presentation itself, that which refuses the consolation of correct forms, refuses the consensus of taste permitting a common experience of nostalgia for the impossible, and inquires into new presentations" (Lyotard 1993, 15). This is a concise description – albeit one that does not consider the comic – of Binelli's apparent intent and method, as he pillages the past to make statements about ethnicity, identity, and the affinities between destruction and creation, tragedy and comedy, anarchy and slapstick.

Let us return to the figure of Falstaff. Sacco half completes a gag book, and notes: "One dreams [of] the great titular roles, the Kings and Moors and ever-pondering Danes. But then one realizes, in a powder flash of epiphany, that the name Falstaff

has been indelibly inked upon one's certificate of birth, and that placing a crown upon one's head, or blackening up, it'll merely makes one more what, in fact, he already is" (227). The novel ends with Sacco dead, and Vanzetti living alone with his memories, but Binelli cannot resist one final, revealing parody. In an apparent flashback to one of the pair's movies, we get a parody of the classic Sydney Poitier/Tony Curtis movie, *The Defiant Ones*, where the two stars, escaped criminals who hate each other, are handcuffed together. This hilarious romp is also highly symbolic, as it underlines the lifelong bond between the two men, and their *destino* to be always dreaming up gags, always on the run. They wind up on a movie set, where extras representing virtually every ethnic group are milling about, *en route* to their sets. The chief set is a town square, taking us back to Bakhtin, Harrigan, and the origin of all narrative folk culture. Sacco and Vanzetti, transformed through the lens of postmodern parody, leave us not only as a pair, but as part of the jostling, posing, and entertaining population, just waiting for their time on America's screen, and a possible place in its heart. Binelli's Italian comedians, ever anarchic, ever creative, paradoxically bring people together in a better way, helping transform an agreement to agree on *dissensus* into *e pluribus unum*.

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Chapter 5

Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh

Salvatore Scibona's *The End*: Italian American Literature in Translation between Italy and the US

The End (2008) is the first novel by the American writer Salvatore Scibona. This work marked the outstanding debut of the author both in the US and in Italy, where the novel was translated as *La fine* in 2011. The fictional setting, Elephant Park, a neighbourhood in Cleveland, Ohio, is populated by first- and second-generation Italian Americans primarily of Sicilian origin. The plot revolves around a culminating event taking place on August 15, 1953, when a religious procession for the Feast of the Assumption is disrupted by a group of African Americans who unexpectedly join the processioners. The novel is narrated through the perspective and voice of an anonymous, third-person omniscient narrator who throughout the novel relates the points of view of six different characters moving back and forth between 1913 and 1953.

Widely successful in the US, and relatively so in terms of sales in Italy, the work was acclaimed in both countries with critiques revealing more analogies than differences. Reviewers, literary critics and scholars in the United States often noted Scibona's sophisticated depiction of the Italian American experience, yet also tended to reduce the transcultural processes and individual specificities of the Italian Americans evoked in the novel bringing the "translated" culture back to the "source" culture. Many of the American reviews tackling the novel's formal complexity compared Scibona's literary mastery to that of modernist non-ethnic authors, as if literariness and hyphenated literature

were – still – mutually exclusive terms. The Italian reception of the book, primarily consisting of non-scholarly reviews, generally erased Scibona's personal complex ethnic background and effaced the Italian *American* experience and agency portrayed in *The End*. The real author and his characters were instead praised for their "Italianness", as if this category were an essential, invariable trait. Critics in Italy also tended to ignore the racist outbreak directed against African Americans in *The End*, an erasure that understandably continues to resonate with the victimizing narrative still dominating the national public memory of Italian migrations to the US.

Fred Gardaphé has argued that the whitening dynamics of Italian Americans in the US coincided with a long lasting, self-imposed invisibility, a refusal to be seen that is based on their having historically been viewed as "people of color" (Gardaphé 2010, 1). After a long tradition of both inflicted and un-coerced invisibility, a condition studied, in the past three decades, in the pioneering works of Olga Peragallo, Rose Basile Green, Patrick Gallo and Richard Gambino, Italian American Studies began to flourish on both sides of the Atlantic (Izzo 2017, 9). The historiographical, ethnographic research¹ as well as the recovery and reinterpretation of the literary and cultural archive² have consistently redefined, revised and developed the field (Izzo 2017, 10-11).

Italian American literature now enjoys the role and recognition it deserves, while Italian American Studies, both in the US and in Italy, has been investigating what are considered the most important features of Italian American "discourse": the contradictory relationship with Italy as a national, political entity, and the complex interrelation with Italian history, culture, language and literary traditions. Notwithstanding the general praise and critical enthusiasm, American and Italian receptions of the novel *The End/La fine* show that the Italian American experience in

¹ See in particular the works of Donna Gabaccia, Stefano Luconi, Simone Cinotto, Joseph Sciorra, Luisa Del Giudice and Elisabetta Vezzosi.

² See in this regard the scholarship of Anthony Julian Tamburri, Fred Gardaphé, Paolo Giordano, Francesco Durante, Helen Barolini, Edvige Giunta, Louise De Salvo, Mary Jo Bona, Martino Marazzi and Robert Viscusi.

the US is still transatlantically perceived through an assimilationist and reductionist perspective, frequently silencing, mainly in Italy, the complex racializing dynamics evoked in the novel.

The post-World War II whitening processes that came to characterize Italian American communities in the US followed decades of proximity and intimacy between Italian Americans and African Americans in both the South and in northern urban spaces, that often resulted in documented cases of racist violence against Blacks. Notwithstanding some scholarly attention, this history is largely ignored in Italian public discourse, where it currently emerges as a problematic issue fraught with strategies of removal and rewriting, casting Italian Americans in the role of victims, as the Italian reception of *The End/La fine* also demonstrates.

On one level, the ancestral idea of national blood and the narrative of victimization that dominate Italian public discourse and memory reveal the intertwined dynamics of remembering and forgetting and erase the problematic dynamics of “ruptures”, “affiliations”, “identifications” and “disidentifications” determining “Italian American discourse” (11, my translation), as well as the complex, transcultural dynamics of the Italian American experience. On another level, the narrative of victimization – because of “forced” migration and the racist discrimination experienced in the US – deletes from the critical frame the historical agency and heterogeneity of the Italian migrants and Italian Americans that Scibona has masterfully re-created in *The End* and that has been the subject of Italian American Studies both in Italy and in the United States for decades.

The Author and the Work: Fictionalizing the Italian American Experience

Salvatore Scibona was born in Strongsville, Ohio, a southwest neighborhood of Cleveland, in 1975, to parents of Italian and Polish ancestry. He graduated in 1997 from St. John's College and received an MFA in fiction in 1999 from the Iowa Writers Workshop at the University of Iowa. He has been the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship, a Guggenheim Fellowship,

an O. Henry Award, a Pushcart Prize, and a Whiting Writers's Award. His short stories have appeared in the *Threepenny Review* and subsequently, after some initial recognition, in *The New Yorker*, *A Public Space*, and *Harper's*. *The End* was published in 2008 by the small, relatively new Minneapolis-based non-profit Graywolf Press, and a year later it appeared in paperback through Riverhead, initially achieving relatively modest sales. After being selected as a finalist for the 2008 National Book Award, however, *The End* began to receive quite a number of favorable reviews. In the wake of its nomination, literary prizes and commercial success multiplied. In 2009, the New York Public Library awarded Scibona the Young Lions Fiction Award, a prize recognizing innovative contemporary fiction by American writers 35 or younger. In 2010, the then thirty-five year old writer was named one of *The New Yorker's* "20 Under 40 Writers to Watch".

The End, translated by Beniamino Ambrosi and titled *La fine*, was published in Italy in 2011, by the independent 66th and 2nd, a Rome-based publishing house that had been founded two years earlier by Isabella Ferretti and Tomaso Cenci (Turi 2017). Although the subject of considerable media attention, the Italian translation of Scibona's novel had only limited sales and distribution (Durante 2016). Since 2000, Scibona has served as a fiction fellow at the Fine Arts Work Center, taught summer fiction courses at Harvard University, served on the staff of the Work Center, and has been a visiting professor in creative writing at Wesleyan University. He is currently the Sue Ann and John Weinberg Director of the Cullman Center for Scholars and Writers at the New York Public Library. *The Volunteer*, Scibona's second novel, was published in 2019.

As a member of the Italian Talent Abroad network of the Aspen Institute Italia, Scibona remarked in a 2013 interview that his parents "did not speak their families' languages – neither Italian nor Polish" (Aspen Institute Italia 2013). To the interviewer's question – how could he write a book on "Italian immigrants in America after World War II" if he had tenuous connections with Italy and Italian Americans – Scibona answered that because the "strong culture" of his grandparents, which

had “completely disappeared in just one generation”, had been conveyed to him exclusively through memory and postmemory³, he had to “touch” and “relive” it, “reinvent[ing]” and reevoking it through a paradoxal process of Italianization in Italy. He was “the only one of Italian descent” among thirty Fulbrighters “who had never been to Italy”, and the Fulbright grant was for him the occasion “to learn everything from scratch”, spending time in Rome and Catania and learning a fluent Italian (Aspen Institute Italia 2013). In a previous interview with Alessandra Farkas published in *Corriere della Sera*, Scibona mentioned the “complete removal of the ‘migratory parable’ within his parents’ family, arguing that the memory of the migration experience was embodied in his Sicilian great-grandmother, Domenica Spriglione, an “intelligent, illiterate, spiritual widow” (Farkas 2010, 52). The elements at play in Scibona’s complex, multilayered self-perception as Italian American simultaneously evoke the concept of heritage, constructedness, memory and postmemory, the idea of descent and the possibility of choice. The “Italian Americanness” of the writer and his work takes shape as a polysemic process intertwining transatlantic family bonds and voluntary dynamics, deeply interrogating categorization and thwarting an essentialist perspective.

In a 2009 review published in the *Bollettino* of the Calandra Italian American Institute, Fred Gardaphé rightly argued that one of the merits of Scibona’s work was that “[t]he Italian American immigrant experience was never more intricately represented” and “complexly written [...] than in Salvatore Scibona’s novel, *The End*”: the lives of “the inhabitants of Elephant Park, a Little Italy of sorts in Cleveland, Ohio”, unravel within a “complicated structure” and “an intricate style”, while through the figure of the narrator the work captures the perspective of the characters in a manner that “reminds us of Virginia Woolf’s sophistication, Joyce’s retrospection, and Bellow’s determination” (Gardaphé 2009, 10).

The majority of American reviewers avoid the issue of Scibona’s identity and cultural affiliation, choosing instead to con-

³ On the concept of postmemory, see Hirsch 2012.

centrate on the high modernist influences in his novel or on the verisimilitude of its characters, often dealing with them from a reductionist perspective. The Italian reception of the novel focuses rather on Scibona's ethnic descent. The writer's Italianness or presumed "Sicilianness" are consistent themes in the Italian reviews, thus establishing a direct relation between the author and the novel's characters that grants for the "authenticity" of both the author and his product.

What Is an (Italian) American?

As Donatella Izzo has argued, the terminological plurality and the heterogeneity of the defining categories – the terms "Italian American, Italian-American, Italian/American; italoamericano [Italoamerican], italiano d'America [Italian in the US], americano italiano [American Italian], diaspora italiana negli Stati Uniti [Italian diaspora in the United States]" – indicate a terminological plurality and an identitarian heterogeneity, and reflect an instability of both self-perception and self-representation which, in turn, resonates with contemporary academic debates surrounding issues of identity (Izzo 2017, 9). The current flourishing of the Italian American literary, cultural and intellectual production and the liveliness of the field both in the US and in Italy should not detract from what, as Gardaphé has noted, amounted to a long lasting, self-imposed invisibility of Italian Americans in the US grounded in their historic representation as a "people of color" (Gardaphé 2010, 1). As anticipated, even in the American reviews and interpretations, both by specialists and non-specialists, the heterogeneity of Scibona's background and the process of cultural translation are often effaced. The Italian American characters of the novel are reduced to their provenance and constructed as an homogeneous group: "Italian immigrants"; "Italian community" (*Publisher's Weekly*, nd.); "Italian inhabitants" ("A Demanding but Rewarding Novel", 2008); the "Italian neighborhoods of Elephant Park, Ohio" (Crawford 2008, 237).

Scibona's Italian American characters are actually quite heterogeneous in the historical, cultural and linguistic context in which they were born, and in relation to their provenance, gen-

der, age, and class. They are mainly of Sicilian origin, with the exception of Costanza Marini, an old widow performing illegal abortions, born in Cassino, Lazio. *The End's* Italian American characters are, moreover, distinguished by their differing responses to the assimilationist forces of Americanization, and by their heterogeneous, ambivalent, and multifaceted relation to Italy as well as to Italian Catholicism and the variety of Italian cultures directly transmitted, indirectly received, and always re-elaborated.

The “Roman Catholic arcana and the Southern Italian superstition” (Domini 2009, 21) represented in the novel, or the “uneven Catholicism” and “religious eccentricities” of Rocco Lagrassa, who practices baking “glazed sugar mounds that have the red candies on top” to “obscenely mimic physical attributes of Sant’Agatha”, and takes “Sunday morning breaks to receive Communion” (Ripatrzone 2013, 27), invisibilize both the transculturality of hyphenated cultures and Italy’s syncretism of religion and folklore. The interweaving of Catholicism, paganism, high culture, scientific knowledge and popular folklore that produced formations such as the Neapolitan *jettatura* (“evil eye”; see De Martino 1989) in Southern Italy during the Enlightenment further problematizes interpretations relying on a rigid opposition between religion and superstition. The secularization of religious feasts and their apparent sacrilegious or superstitious character were consequences of the transformations of the old rites and gave way to “new”, post-Tridentine saints, such as Saint Anthony of Padua, whose cult and feast were transformed to counter both Protestant iconoclastic attacks on Catholicism and modern laicization processes. The secularization of feasts was marked by a shift from winter to summer, thus increasing the thaumaturgical value of rites at the expense of their penitential character (Galasso 2009, 150, 145).

To my knowledge, the only scholarly exception to this approach is found in Caren Irr, who emphasizes “the ambivalent relation to ethnic tradition” staged in the novel and points to the “not remotely nostalgic” depiction of Italian cultural and religious tradition (Irr 2013, 42). For Irr, Scibona “largely refuses to engage the most common ethnic stereotypes of Mediterranean

migrants” such as “the Godfather/Mafia references or motifs of amoral familism” (22). Scibona’s “immigration narrative[s]” can moreover be inscribed within the “trauma subgenre” of migration literature, “rather than fixating on a loss of a homeland associated with the mother”, because *The End*’s “heroes” “are often highly mobile subjects” (9-10).

In its scholarly reception, the issue of the novel’s literary value is even more problematic. As I have already noted, critics (with the exception of Gardaphé) seem largely to ignore the innovative, modernist or postmodernist techniques in Italian American literature (so abundant in Pietro di Donato, John Fante, Don DeLillo, etc.), or even the existence of an *ethnic* modernism (Sollors 2008). The masterly control of modernist techniques and strategies, such as point of view and voice, should grant Scibona a place in the transatlantic, modernist pantheon together with William Faulkner, T.S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and James Joyce (DeMarco 2008). On the other hand, Scibona is for John Domini rather an example of an “Italianate” primitivistic literature which “fleshes out a scrabbling immigrant Cleveland, an Italian-American neighborhood he calls ‘Elephant Park’”, and combines “Roman Catholic arcana and Southern Italian superstition” with “plain old perspicuity about the human animal as it ages and changes” (Domini 2009, 21). Both reviews reaffirm the existence of a divide between the ethnic, social document (relying on an almost biological *italianità*, or better *sicilianità*) and the high modernist expatriate, elitist, male white literature.

The reception of *The End* in Italy ensued in two specific points in time. The first occurred after the publication of the novel (2008) in the US, and the second right after the publication of the Italian translation (2011). In Italy the novel was acclaimed by the press and Scibona himself soon became a rather famous figure on the Italian cultural and editorial scene. In 2011, he participated in the Festivalletteratura in Mantua, a prestigious annual literary festival. The Italian biographical sketch published on the festival’s website presents him as “nato a Cleveland, in Ohio, da una famiglia di origine siciliana [born in Cleveland, Ohio, to a family of Sicilian origin]”, whereas the English version introduces the writer as “Born in Cleveland,

USA, in 1975” (“Scibona, Salvatore”, 2011). Between 2009 and 2012, Scibona was generally presented either with an emphasis on his Italian origins – thus erasing his Polish origins, his composite background, as well as the complexities of (his) Italian Americanness – or on his Sicilian ancestry. Antonio Carlucci, who wrote an enthusiastic review of *The End* in 2010 for the Italian weekly magazine *L'Espresso*, identified Scibona as an “americano [American]”, or an “autore Americano di origine italiana [an American author of Italian origin]” (Carlucci 2010). In the title of Luigi Mascheroni’s review for *Il Giornale*, the writer has “origini siciliane [Sicilian origins]” and is presented in the article as “questo italo-americano [this Italian-American]” (Mascheroni 2011, 29). In *D – la Repubblica delle donne* Camilla Gaiaschi defines Scibona as “italoamericano [Italian American]”, whereas the title of the brief sketch stresses the characters’ Italianness: “Le miserabili vite degli italiani in America” [The wretched lives of Italians in America] (Gaiaschi 2011, 48). For *l'Unità*’s reviewer Giuseppe Rizzo, the writer is “italo-americano [Italian-American]”, and once again the title of the review evokes the unassimilability of Italian migrants: “Gli italiani in America [The Italians in America]” (Rizzo 2011, 2). Finally, the author is “italoamericano [Italian American]” for Nicola Bultrini of *Il Tempo*, while as usual the title of the review does not refer to the settled Italian Americans of the novel, but to the permanent status of Italian migrants as perennial migrants, “Storie e vita di immigrati a ferragosto [Mid-August immigrants’ stories and life]” (Bultrini 2011, 16). The only partial exception to such reductionist identifications is a review by Lara Ricci, who in *Il Domenicale*, the Sunday cultural supplement of *Il Sole 24 ore*, introduces the author as “pronipote di emigrati italiani e polacchi [great grandson of Italian and Polish migrants]” (Ricci 2011, 30).

With a regionalist, exotic or even secessionist range, Scibona is then often defined, through a paradoxical synecdoche, as Sicilian. In the Sicilian regional press, television news accounts, or in the titles of local editions of national newspapers, he appears as a “Scrittore siciliano, tra i venti più amati in USA [A Sicilian writer, one of twenty most loved in the USA]” (“Scrittore sicilia-

no”, 2010). To the regional, Sicilian edition of the news channel of Italian national public broadcasting, Scibona is a writer “siculo-americano [Sicilian-American]” (TG3 Sicilia 2011). In the Palermo edition of *D – la Repubblica delle donne*, the title and subtitle of an interview-review claim the Sicilianness of both the characters and the author: “Il romanzo di Little Italy: Scibona racconta i siciliani d’America [The Little Italy Novel: Scibona narrates America’s Sicilians]”; “Lo scrittore statunitense che ha radici a Mirabella Imbaccari [The US writer whose roots are in Mirabella Imbaccari]” – while in the article Scibona is introduced as a “scrittore americano di origini siciliane [American writer of Sicilian origins]” (Falzone 2011).

Even in the otherwise informative and thorough review by Guido Caldiron, who neatly sketches the history of the Italian migration to the US and the complexities of the Italian American experience, Scibona is introduced (in the title) as an “American” writer “nato in una famiglia di origine siciliana a Cleveland [born to a family of Sicilian origin in Cleveland]” (Caldiron 2011, iv).

Racisms

According to the majority of scholars, and with the partial exception of Thomas Guglielmo (2003), Italian and Italian American racial identities were perceived and conceptualized as shifting between the two sides of an increasingly polarized color line based on the one drop rule and constitutionally sanctioned by the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision. Between the end of the nineteenth century and the first three decades of the twentieth century, US and Italian institutional racisms operated in both countries through the consolidation of race as a scientific and legal category. The previous US racial distinctions – quadroon, octoroon, mulatto, white and black – were replaced by a strict black/white paradigm of race. 1930s Italian Fascist politics and the anti-black legislation in the African colonies (see De Napoli 2009) were preceded by the struggle over Libya (1890-1913) and Rodolfo Graziani’s 1922 attacks in Tripolitania (see Re 2010). From the turn of twen-

tieth century to the end of the Fascist regime, the category of race travelled across the Atlantic. It was translated and adapted, producing heterogenous and often contradictory ontologies of whiteness and blackness. With a seemingly paradoxical result, both in Italy and in the US, Italians and Italian Americans were assigned and assigned themselves on both sides of the color line or within the grey spaces in-between, playing the roles of active subjects and passive objects, racializers and racialized, freshly whitened protagonists and latently black antagonists (see Orsi 1992; Jacobson 1998; Roediger 1999; D'Agostino 2002; Guglielmo 2003; Moe 2010; Re 2010; Guglielmo and Salerno 2012; Luconi 2012; Petrovich Njegosh 2012; Giuliani 2013; Lombardi-Diop 2013), before the whitening process that took place in Fascist Italy and before and after World War Two in the US (Luconi 2012).

As argued by Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998), and earlier by Robert Orsi, one of the “peculiarities” of Italians and Italian Americans, determining their “dangerous inbetweenness”, was their extreme proximity to African Americans in the South and, later, in Harlem (Orsi 1992, 313). In 1891, eleven Italian Americans had been lynched in New Orleans for their alleged role in the murder of police chief David Hennessy. Focusing on the New Orleans lynching, Jacobson notoriously remarked that, beyond the racial marker of complexion and bodily appearance, what “made” Italians black was the role played by their contiguity to African Americans. It was their living, working with and marrying black people that affected the perception that “they did not *act* white” (Jacobson 1998, 57). To become white and legitimately claim whiteness, Italian Americans had to erase a history of racial and ethnic marking, discrimination, segregation and lynching, or even to embrace the structural racism historically related to whiteness (Gardaphé 2010, 1; Izzo 2017, 16).

The US reception of *The End*, both on the academic level and in non-scholarly reviews, takes into account the novel's instances of Italian American racism towards African Americans depicted in the 1953 Feast of the Assumption episode. The only seeming exception is Domini, to whom the 1953 events represented in the book reflect the “decay that hit all inner cities

during that era, largely because the ‘tizzoons’ [a quote from *The End*] – the African Americans – start moving in” (Domini 2009, 21). Irr argues instead that the novel “tackles the racial logic of earlier writings”, dismissing the rigid opposition modeled on “black-white binaries”, yet she interprets the events occurring during the Feast of the Assumption as an example of “insular defensiveness” and “racial antagonisms” (Irr 2013, 17, 22). As the anonymous author of the review published in the *Kirkus Reviews* noted, Scibona offers a subtle reading of “Italian” [sic] self-victimization and the active, racist hostility Italian Americans exhibit towards African Americans; the Feast of Assumption is the occasion in which “these shards of conversation turn sinister as the novel progresses, as the Italian inhabitants of the Ohio enclave Elephant Park try to justify their hostility when a handful of African Americans try to take part in their celebration” (“A Demanding but Rewarding Novel”, 2008). As noted both by this anonymous reviewer and by Nicholas Ripatrazzone, the apparently sudden outbreak of racism during the Feast of the Assumption has been carefully weaved into the whole novel, thus “rehearsing” “the racial tension that will later disrupt the parade” (Ripatrazzone, 2013, 29).

The complexity of Scibona’s formal structure reverberates on his use of a third-person narrator who – as it often happens in modernist literature – is simultaneously outside and inside the narration, detached from the story he relates and ambiguously reporting it from the point of view of the character, frequently without distance or irony. As Ripatrazzone rightly emphasizes, the reader has to reread the intricate scene of the Feast of the Assumption to realize that the point of view orienting the narrator, both structurally and morally, is that of Rocco Lagrassa: “Rocco knew that others, seeing the incomplete action, would think a ‘sacrilegious’ had mistaken the holy procession for a roadhouse”; yet, the narrator is not the detached “Joycean narrator” objectively describing “the action with a curious mix of distance and wit” (30), because his point of view, at times indistinguishable from that of the character of Rocco Lagrassa, relates to the participants of the event with distance and mildly racist disgust.

In the Italian reception of the book, both before and after the Italian translation, the issue of the Italian American racializing dynamic staged in the novel is rarely discussed, and only in small or medium edition daily papers, such as *Liberazione*, in web publications (such as *Italianetwork*, whose main sponsor is the Italian leftist trade union CGIL) or, more explicitly, in the female editorial supplement of the large edition newspaper *La Repubblica*, *D* (“fervent cattolici sedotti dal KKK [fervent Catholics seduced by the KKK]”; Gaiaschi 2011, 48). With the exception of Alessandra Farkas’s review published in the *Corriere della Sera* before the Italian translation of the novel (Farkas 2010, 52), the reviews appeared in large edition newspapers and weekly papers (such as Antonio Carlucci’s review in *L’Espresso*, 2010) do not mention the issue. In the interview published in *Liberazione*, to a cautious Scibona the cause determining the loss of ethnic difference on the part of the Italian Americans is “la paura dell’integrazione [fear of integration]” (Caldiron 2011, ii). Italian American racism is thus explicitly mentioned only by Farkas (“pregiudizi razziali [racial prejudices]” and “odio contro i neri [hatred against Blacks]”; Farkas 2010, 52), or hinted, by Scibona himself, in a conversation with the US writer Jaimy Gordon published in the *Corriere della Sera*, where the writer argues for the simultaneity of the Italian American integration and of the Italian Americans’ whitening process (“L’immigrazione dà vita alla cultura”, 2011).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the possibly unintentional but significant reversals operated by Daniela Liucci – “il 15 agosto del 1953, il giorno in cui comincia l’invasione afroamericana del quartiere [August 15, 1953, the day the *African American invasion* of the neighborhood began]” (Liucci 2011; italics mine) – and by Boris Limpopo’s blog on *Wordpress.com*: “Elephant Park a Cleveland, una Little Italy già *assediate dalle avanguardie della penetrazione afro-americana* [Cleveland’s Elephant Park, a Little Italy already *under siege by the vanguards of the Afro-American penetration*”] (Limpopo 2011; italics mine). In the last paragraph, I propose a reading of the novel’s narration of the 1953 Feast of the Assumption in Elephant Park that focuses on multiple layers of racializing dynamics and on their

partial occlusion through a process conflating “domestic intelligibilities and interests” (Venuti 2000, 468) in *The End*’s Italian translation.

The Feast of the Assumption in Translation

As argued by Irr, the episode of the 1953 Feast of the Assumption is at the core of Scibona’s novel because it produces the shift in the internal relations between the main characters of the Italian American community of Elephant Park and brings to a head the crisis in racial tension between the Italian Americans and the African Americans in *The End*:

The novel is organized around events that transpire during the Feast of the Assumption. All six primary characters undergo private transformations and changes in their relationship during the festival [...]. Intergroup relations are also changing: a ripple of rumor passes through the procession, and the faithful react to the presence of African Americans in the crowd and ultimately in the neighborhood. (Irr 2013, 42)

The Assumption is a Roman Catholic feast day commonly celebrated on August 15 and commemorating the Virgin’s ascension to heaven. An important national holiday in Italy, as well as one of the main *feste* celebrated in the Little Italies across the US, the Feast of the Assumption often involves a procession carrying the statue of the Virgin. The fictional procession is narrated in the novel by the anonymous, third-person omniscient narrator using the character of Rocco Lagrassa as his privileged, internal witness and, at some point, from the points of view of various Italian American children (“five girls and a little boy”; Scibona 2008, 41), who are watching the scene from a rooftop.

Ahead of the clergy, “twelve prodigious men of early middle age”, “slow on their feet, oxen stout”, force their way into the “masses” (41). Following the clergy, a syncretic Madonna, dark-skinned, with a small, upturned nose and typically adorned with jewels and money, slowly advances:

Behind the clergy came the Virgin, smirking, her porcelain skin dark like an Arab’s, the nose upturned, English, her stature dwarflike, her clothes and hands stuck with specks of diamond donated over many years by women

who had had them prised from their engagement rings. [...] Ribbons hung from the columns and the people pinned money to the ribbons as they dragged by. (42)

A group of women in black parade behind the statue of the Madonna and, through Rocco Lagrassa's perspective, the narrator emphasizes the details of the unpleasant contact between the female Catholic worshippers and the dirty paved path, conveying a sense of estrangement adding to the already animalized depiction of the men and verging to disgust: "their feet naked to the pebbles and cigarettes butts and the soiled napkins and the spilled pop on the pavement" (42).

Suddenly, "at the edge" of the forbidden, free space between the band and the front of the procession – "an empty space of half a block, which people had historically enjoined themselves from entering" – the presence of some African Americans is detected: "a colored woman and a colored man were dancing" (44). Announced by the racist slurs of the children, "one of them jolted outright. Then the others. The first poked the air. 'Look!' She said. 'Look at the shines!'" – and related by the voice of the narrator and the point of view of Rocco Lagrassa, more African Americans join in: "shortly, they were joined by some other colored men and colored women, not too many, about seven. They were clapping, he could see, and doing a slow-stepping, herky-jerky dance, invisible, as one is in a crowd, so they surely believed, while the fevered, dissonant music kept playing" (44).

After the African Americans have entered into the sacred, Italian American space, everything abruptly stops and recoils: "he [Lagrassa] saw the Virgin stop and the rest of the procession stop", and immediately after the parade does an "unprecedented thing": "It lurched backward down the hill", the statue of Mary "carried back into the church" (46). The narrator renounces his omniscience and leaves it to Rocco Lagrassa to interpret what has just happened, while the reader is left to decipher this liminal and crucial episode on his/her own:

No, no, wait. Something had happened, and nobody had seen it *but* him – and the children. There were some Negroes, they heard music and saw a band, they started to dance. But the men up front, the priests and the sweepers and the men carrying the platform, and all the many thousands

in the crowd who did not see what Rocco saw must have heard a thousand differently contorted versions of what had happened – like, some Negroes are smoking dope in the parade; some sacrilegious niggers have mistaken the holy procession for a roadhouse. (47)

Sacrilegious contact is averted, the sacredness of the religious procession is preserved, and the whitening process of an in-between race assured through the inferiorization and discrimination of African Americans.

In his now classic study *Translation, Community, Utopia*, Lawrence Venuti argued for the necessity of understanding the process of translation as a simultaneously linguistic, cultural and ideological act:

Translation is readily seen as investing the foreign language text with a domestic significance. [...] Translation never communicates in an untroubled fashion because the translator negotiates the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text by reducing them and supplying another set of differences, basically domestic, drawn from the receiving language and culture to enable the foreign to be received here. The foreign text, then, is not so much communicated as inscribed with domestic intelligibilities and interests. (Venuti 2000, 468-469)

The process of inscription, Venuti maintains, begins with the apparently neutral choice of the text to be translated, and, as the culturalist and postcolonial approach to Translation Studies has emphasized, we need to interrogate the wider cultural, literary and editorial context in which a translation is produced and received (Trivedi 2008). The Italian reception of both *The End* and *La fine* does, in fact, reveal ambivalent, multiple layers; it inscribes the text with “domestic intelligibilities and interests”, and produces what Wang Hui has defined as the “intense discursive and ideological negotiation” (Hui 2009, 202) of linguistic and cultural translation.

In terms of linguistic translation, the Italian version of the novel by Beniamino Ambrosi is sophisticated and cross-cultural, generally privileging strategies that preserve “the foreignness of the foreign text” (Venuti 2000, 469). Yet, in relation to the original novel’s racializing discourse and language, it employs strategies of negotiation that seemingly operate in service of ideological “domestic intelligibilities and interests”. As in the

above-quoted passages, the source text makes use of an ample, heterogeneous array of racializing terms (such as “colored” on the part of the narrator), of words which were originally self-defining and were later negatively resemanticized, such as “Negro” with the capital N (see Scacchi 2012, 266), and of disparaging, deeply racist designations (“shines”, “nigger”). The target text adopts terms that flatten the terminology of the source text and renders all the quoted racializing and racist words with the Italian term “negro” (Scibona 2011, 61-62, 64-65), whose negative, explicit and deeply racist resemanticizing had not yet taken place in the 1950s.

The translator does not provide an explanation, with the result that the fluidity and heterogeneity of the racializing and racist attitudes of the individual members of the Italian American community depicted in the novel, as well as those of the narrator, are effaced. At the same time, the lack of variety in the Italian racist labels points to a presumed lack of racial, racializing and racist vocabulary of the target text. It is as if Italian history, as well as the current public context, discourse and, specifically, daily language were racially innocent, when in fact they bristle with locutions such as *marocchino*, *moretto* (Moorish, Moroccan, employed to indicate coffee with milk), *baluba*, *bingobongo* (terms that stand for a crude and uncivilized person), *beduino*, *ottentotto*, *zulù*, *abissino*, *orango*, *scimmia* (Beduin, Hottentot, Zulu, Abyssinian, orangutan, monkey; Scacchi 2012, 267). As argued by Laura Ricci more than a decade ago, Italian contemporary language still bears witness to the linguistic heritage of liberal and Fascist colonialist racism, the language of Empire, which continues to define the public memory and the collective imagining of Italian colonialism (Ricci 2005), as well as of Italian identity.

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Chapter 6

Valerio Massimo De Angelis

The Unfortunate Pilgrim: Mario Puzo's Deconstruction of the American Myths of Migration

In September 2015, the Italian Association for North American Studies (AISNA) held its biennial international conference in Naples. The title of the conference was *Harbors: Flows and Migrations of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas. The USA inland the World*. Its opening keynote lecture was given by Werner Sollors, who discussed a wide selection of representations, both visual (photos, paintings and drawings) and literary, of the first glimpses the immigrants from various parts of the world got of the Statue of Liberty when arriving on the shores of the New World. Almost invariably, these images of Lady Liberty were suffused in an atmosphere of hope, gratitude, and relief, totally consistent with the myth so perfectly conveyed by Emma Lazarus in “The New Colossus”, the poem engraved on the pedestal of the statue: for migrants to the USA, arriving to the shores of New York City meant “birth, beginning, and promise, and the Statue of Liberty came to embody this cultural emphasis visually and textually, well into the twentieth century” (Sollors 2017, 20). But there were three notable exceptions.

One of them was taken from the Prologue to Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*, and it provides one of the most famous examples of deconstruction of the standard perception and interpretation of the Statue's symbolic meaning. The other two exceptions were excerpts from the journals of two different immigrants from Italy (both from Molise). Roth's and the Italian immigrants' images all present a rather skewed vision of Lady

Liberty – cold, alien, and hostile. She is exactly the opposite of Lazarus’s “mighty woman”, the “Mother of Exiles” lifting her “lamp beside the golden door”. Gabriel Iamurri, who arrived in America in 1895, “felt like one who is carried somewhere into the woods blindfolded knowing where he is but not knowing where he came from nor where to go to get out” (Serra 2007, 35). The Statue of Liberty “could not speak, she was mute, could not tell me where to go or what to do about it” (37). F. Michele Daniele, who came to New York City in 1905, even implied that the mostly negative impression the Statue made on him was shared by many other Italian immigrants:

it only served to remind me of all that I had left behind – my family, my friends, my home. Perhaps if my background had been somewhat humbler [...] I might have been more excited by that symbol of freedom. Yet I honestly doubt that even the poorest, lowliest paesano experienced any different sensation than I did [...]. This, I fully appreciate, shatters one of the dearest stereotypes of romantic legend. (34)

The comparison between the Italian and the Jewish migrations to the USA is the very axis around which this book rotates, and these first impressions of America may already give an idea of the similarities between these two immigrant experiences, and of the peculiar features of the processes of cultural assimilation (and of the resistance to them) that they share. To give an example, David Riesman once pointed out that, as “the Italian immigrant has to go through a gastronomically bleached and bland period before he can publicly eat garlic and spaghetti, so the Jewish immigrant must also become Americanized before he can comfortably take pride in his ethnic cuisine, idiom, and gesture” (Riesman 1953, xv). Both Roth’s *Call It Sleep* and Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim* may well be taken as instances of the historical phase (the 1930s and the 1960s, respectively) when these two communities were more or less accepted in the mainstream of American culture, and could therefore start to retrieve and even celebrate in their literatures those markers of ethnicity they had been forced to disguise or hide or, better still, melt into the American pot.

Call It Sleep starts with Genya and her son David’s very first impression of the “Golden Land”. Genya is a Jewish immigrant

from Poland who in 1907 is bringing her son David to reunite with her husband and his father, Albert, who came earlier to the United States, and hers are the very first words we heard from a character in the novel. By saying “And this is the Golden Land” (Roth 1977, 11), Genya ironically echoes the poetic lines (from an unknown, possibly non-existing source) of the epigraph “(I pray thee ask no questions / this is that Golden Land)” (9):

And before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light – the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared again at the massive figure in wonder. (9)

The harsh, stern, iron-like features that the mother and son detect in the Statue are in striking opposition to any other perception from just arrived immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century and seem to predict an equally rude attitude by the “natives” of the “Golden Land” towards the two newcomers. What the Prologue seems to be creating as a horizon of expectation for the reader is an unfriendly environment that the young David and his mother will have to face in order to survive in what initially looks more like a new wilderness than the heaven on earth the advertisements and travel guides that people contemplating migration to America could read at that time in many countries, including, and most pertinent to the context of this essay, Italy.

But when the reader starts wandering through the noisy streets first of Brownsville and then of the Lower East Side, s/he almost immediately starts to realize that the supposedly nightmarish urban hell into which the boy is catapulted is much more the result of his own biased and distorted perception, conditioned as it is by his very young age (David is two when he arrives to New York City and six in the subsequent plot) and by his conflicted relationship with a father he knows only as a

violently authoritarian “American”¹ (Albert came to America when David was not yet born), rather than the truthful picture of a world where dangers and temptations are ominipresent, as are (unexpected) help and opportunities. What the novel finally manages to create is a myth of America as the (not necessarily golden) land where immigrants from all over the world can finally find a place where they will not be melted together in some kind of homogenizing cauldron, but inharmoniously accommodated in a new heterogeneous space – a sort of *heterotopia*, that “fundamentally unreal” place which, according to Michel Foucault, is “capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible” (Foucault 1986, 25)². Inharmonious and even chaotic as it may be, this heterotopian space is also the place where the members of all the ethnic communities of the Lower East Side manage to overcome their differences and to understand each other (each in his or her different language), as when they all run to David’s aid, when he faints after having put a metal bar on the electrified tracks of the trolley.

In Roth’s novel, such a space is “fundamentally unreal” in the sense that it does not yet exist in real life, except in the specific occasion of David’s stunt and outside David’s vision of the whole world converging to save him. What *Call It Sleep* adumbrates as a child’s fantasy is precisely this utopian/heterotopian possibility, projected onto a future still to be built but already predicted in the early decades of the twentieth century by people such as Horace Kallen, who in his 1915 essay “Democracy Versus the Melting Pot” saw America as a “symphony of civilization” which, through “the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of ‘European civilization’”, would lead to “a multiplicity in unity, an orchestration of mankind” (Kallen 1924, 116-117). The process of the immigrant’s adjustment to the apparently hostile environment of the New World thus finally reverses the

¹ Albert is presented as someone who “had evidently spent some time in America” and is dressed in “the ordinary clothes the ordinary New Yorker wore in that period” (Roth 1977, 10).

² On the utopian/heterotopian multilingual dimension of *Call It Sleep*, see V.M. De Angelis 2009 and 2017.

image of the Prologue, or at least announces the possible reversal of that image, in some way (oblique and contradictory as it can be) realigning the novel to the mythology of hope embedded in Emma Lazarus's poem and in the journals and diaries of many Jewish immigrants to America.

Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* follows a path that can be conceived as being totally opposite, and it confirms the ominous prediction of life-to-be in America that the Italian immigrants evoked by Sollors saw in the iron features of Lady Liberty. This view of America, which is negative from the very beginning, is not the overriding and ever-recurring feature of the Italian American myth(s) of migration, but it surfaces here and there to contest the dominant vision of the "American Dream" and is due more or less to a definite awareness that the differences between the New and the Old World are not so clear-cut as the rhetoric of the Dream programmatically declares³. Robert Viscusi stresses how

Africans were transported to America as slaves; Anglo-Saxons remember coming in search of religious freedom. These experiences shape their founding myths [...]. The founding myth for the Italians is this memory of how the rich expelled the poor into the world the great Cristoforo discovered and that the great Amerigo first recognized it for what it was.

That is, this New World has turned out to replicate some of the less lovely features of the Old World. (Viscusi 2006, 146)

But what is even more interesting is the fact that Puzo's deconstruction of the American myths of migration develop within a plot that ultimately actualizes the dream of material success which is the very foundation of those myths, instead of denouncing its impracticability. This dream, that Roth carefully chooses not to address, is replaced by David's final "real" dream (we may call it sleep...) that fantasizes harmonizing the various hyphenated identities without making them lose their individual distinctiveness. The comparison between these two novels is justified by the fact that, as Daniela Gioseffi remarks in her forceful vindication of the novel's cultural role, "when *The*

³ On the representation/deconstruction of the American Dream in Italian American literature in general, see Marazzi 2010.

Fortunate Pilgrim appeared in 1964, the author was called ‘the Italian Bernard Malamud, the Henry Roth of Italian culture in America!’” (Gioseffi 2003, 122)⁴.

The Fortunate Pilgrim is Mario Puzo’s second novel after *The Dark Arena* (1955), a novel about the post-World War II occupation of Germany by the American army. 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. What the hard-working Angeluzzi-Corbo family in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* could not do for Puzo, *the Family*, the Mafia, managed to achieve. As Fred Gardaphé states in *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, “the mother-son paradigm employed by Puzo in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* is exchanged for the father-son paradigm in *The Godfather*” (Gardaphé 2006, 15)⁵. One can certainly interpret these characters’ reversal of fortunes as an implicit indictment of the contradictions inherent in the American Dream, which abstractly celebrates individual commitment to the values of abnegation and self-sacrifice (in Lucia *Santa*’s and Octavia’s “female masculinities”, to borrow Gardaphé’s felicitous terminology)⁶, but ultimately rewards the (male) exploiters

⁴ For a comparative analysis of the migrant experiences of Italian Americans and Jewish Americans, see Thomas Kellner’s classic *The Golden Door* (1977).

⁵ Puzo himself recognized in the Preface he added to the 1996 reprinting of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* that the protagonist of *The Godfather* is Lucia *Santa* turned into a man: “Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother. I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love for her family and for life itself” (Puzo 2004, 9).

⁶ As a matter of fact, Lucia *Santa*’s (and also her daughter Octavia’s) strength lies in a feature that is conventionally associated with male identity – the ability to rationally elaborate strategic plans for the future: “While the men talk, work, and sleep, Lucia *Santa* and her older daughter Octavia sit in the kitchen at night and plan. If the men seem too close to the transportation industry that they are almost absorbed into it, the women, who are confined to their homes, have the energy and detachment to set their families moving toward their final goal” (Dwyer 2003, 58-59).

of vice and crime⁷. Thomas J. Ferraro has noted that, if Puzo mythologizes “the de facto matriarchy of immigrant New York in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, in *The Godfather*” he monumentalizes “illegitimate capitalism as the gloriously demonic triumph of an insidiously patriarchal family – at the expense, apparently, of women’s presence, female knowing” (Ferraro 2000, p. 499)⁸.

The Fortunate Pilgrim tells the story of the Angeluzzi-Corbo household from the 1920s to the early post-World War II period. At center stage we find the majestic figure of Lucia Santa, who early in the narrative marries Anthony Angeluzzi in order to escape from the confinements of a southern Italy described as a backward, almost primitive country. After his premature death, she weds Frank Corbo, in order to ensure the survival of her three children (Larry, Octavia, and Vincenzo); she would go on to have three more children from this union (Gino, Sal, and Lena). Even though Frank has a steady job on the railroad, the family can only afford to live in a small tenement on 10th Avenue, in Little Italy. Lucia Santa stoically faces all the various vicissitudes that she and her family encounter, from the growing madness (triggered first by an ill-fated conversion to fundamentalist evangelism and later by the alienating pressures

⁷ Gardaphé also adds that early Italian-American writers “knew the power of the mother, and novelists like Puzo celebrated this in works like *The Fortunate Pilgrim* before they felt the pressure to create a patriarchal version of masculinity that was more expected and accepted in the United States, as Puzo did in *The Godfather*” (Gardaphé 2006, 200). Nonetheless, “Puzo developed female masculinity through the figures of Lucia Santa and her daughter Octavia in ways that suggest that the women 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 2018, 559).

⁸ Mary Jo Bona proposes an alternative reading, by inverting the relationship through time of the two novels: Puzo’s Mafia saga, instead of being a (commercially and also culturally successful) gender translation of (one of) the myth(s) of Italian American identity from female god-mother to male Godfather, would be the object of a sort of preemptive dismantling by the earlier novel, because, when juxtaposed to *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, “*The Godfather* can be deconstructed and the very mythology of Sicilian justice critiqued by its central character, Lucia Santa, whose resiliency and strength emerge from an impregnable understanding of honor and loyalty disconnected from masculine notions of power” (Bona 2015, 49). Besides, Larry, who “successfully” becomes a member of the Mafia, is finally dismissed by his mother, who by doing so also dismisses “an unofficial form of authority that she finds morally repugnant” (Bona 2010, 29).

of working in a cocoa factory) of her second husband, who will die (willingly if painfully abandoned by his wife) in a mental asylum, to the suicide of the shy and hypersensitive Vincenzo. For all these various male figures, who sooner or later fail her and the family, Lucia is not, as one critic has suggested, “a mental and moral slave” (Pardini 2017, 36), but rather the embodiment of that “secret tradition of Italian American women” consisting of “rebellion” (Ferraro 2005, 77), resistance, stubborn refusal to give up, and especially to allow the unity of the family to crumble and fade away⁹. According to Chiara Grilli, Lucia Santa even “evokes Carl Gustav Jung’s archetype of the Great Mother”, as incarnated in quite a number of female Italian American characters: “Strong, ready to fight for their children, and at the same time cursing them aggressively, these women are the perfect embodiment of the good mother and of the terrible mother, a representation hinting less at the Christian and more at the pagan tradition of the Southern Italian custom” (Grilli 2018, 153-154).

In one of the many sudden and unexpected detours from the general realism of the novel, the narrator shares Lucia Santa’s hallucinatory vision of the superhuman power of old Italian women. This phantasmagoric show of a primordial and timeless energy, as clichéd and stereotyped as it may be, effectively symbolizes the refusal to surrender to the de-humanizing and ultimately lethal logic of the modern, urban, individualistic culture of American capitalism:

Their eyes flashed fire; energy and power radiated from their black-clad, lumpy bodies. They devoured everything that happened on the Avenue as they spoke. They hurled curses like thunderbolts at children headed for mischief. They sucked greedily on ridged paper cups of chilling lemon ice and took great bites of smoking hot pizzas, dipping brown invincible teeth deep into the lava of hot tomato sauce and running rivers of cheese to the hidden yeasty dough. Ready to murder anyone who stood in the way of

⁹ Commenting on Samuele Pardini’s book, Donatella Izzo stresses how Lucia Santa is the “historically and socially specific, material embodiment of a way to live in the world inspired by communal sharing, reciprocity and relatedness, inclusion and non-partitioning” (Izzo 2017, 19; my translation), as opposed to the individualistic ideology of capitalism.

so much as a crust of bread for themselves or their children, implacable enemies of death. They were alive. The stones of the city, steel and glass, the blue-slate sidewalks, the cobblestoned streets, would all turn to dust and they would be alive. (Puzo 2004, 246)

Even the Great Depression cannot defeat Lucia and her family. The subsequent economic boom caused by the war socially and economically raises their standard of living:

While the war raged over the world, the Italians living along the western wall of the city finally grasped the American dream in their calloused hands. Money rolled over the tenements like a flood. Men worked overtime and doubletime in the railroad, and those whose sons had died or been wounded worked harder than all the rest, knowing grief would not endure as long as poverty. (253)

The physical embodiment of this upward mobility is their move to Long Island, more than once invoked as the ultimate object of desire, as the fabulous place where owning a house meant for Italian immigrants that the American Dream had in fact come true (Dwyer 2009, 61)¹⁰. They had finally ascended 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:

Then they were ascending the slope of Queensborough Bridge, running through the slanted, flashing shadows of suspended cables. The children stood up to see the slate-gray water below, but in just a few moments they were off the bridge and rolling down a wide, tree-lined boulevard. The children began to shriek, and Lucia Santa told them, yes, now they were on Long Island. (Puzo 2004, 258)

This dream-like and mythical dimension is apparent from the very beginning, even in the title of the novel, which invokes the founding myth of (Anglo-)American culture – and in so doing once again connects to literary representations of the hopes and

¹⁰ The passage of the Angeluzzi-Corbo family from the inner city tenement to the suburban Long Island private house is paradoxically symbolic of the movement of the Italian American community from margin to center. On this historical transformation, see La Gumina 1988; on its representation in Italian American culture, see Gardaphé 2004.

desires of the Jewish American migrants, who also identified with the predicament of the Pilgrim Fathers (as in Anzia Yezierska's autobiographical short story "America and I")¹¹ and actually reversed, in a play of mirrors, the original self-identification of the American Puritans with the Hebrews of the Bible.

In the very first scene of *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, another 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. The novel opens with Larry Angeluzzi riding "his jet-black horse proudly through a canyon formed by two great walls of tenements", perfectly projecting onto the landscape of modernity an image from the past that in fact *is part* of that modernity, thanks to the movie industry¹²:

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. 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. 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. (12)

¹¹ In "America and I", first published in the collection *Children of Loneliness* (1923), Yezierska tells her migrant experience as a working woman in search of a job that may allow her to make use of her creativity, and when she seems to be failing she happens to read the story of the Pilgrim Fathers, and understands that America is not a finished product, but a "work in progress" that can give her the possibility to contribute to the American project without renouncing her ethnic roots.

¹² In his ride, Larry even passes through a sort of cinema arena, showing the same ghostly mythical image he is imitating in real life: "At 27th Street the wall on Larry Angeluzzi's right fell away for a whole block. In the cleared space was Chelsea Park placed with dark squatting shapes, kids sitting on the ground to watch the free outdoor movies shown by Hudson Guild Settlement House. On the distant giant white screen, Larry Angeluzzi saw a monstrous horse and rider, bathed in false sunlight, thundering down upon him, felt his own horse rise in alarm as its tossing head caught sight of those great ghosts; and then they were past the intersection of 28th Street, and the wall had sprung up again" (Puzo 2004, 13).

The scene prepares the reader for the novel's depiction of the Italian migrants "as fearless and courageous as those European settlers who earlier cleared the wilderness and tamed the West" (Oliver 1987, 17). It is followed by an even clearer comparison: "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 2004, 16). In order to become a legitimate part of such a mythical landscape, the Italian migrants must sacrifice their ethnic identity.

Losing their connection to their "race" is, however, only *one* of the prices the immigrants pay in the New World in exchange for the possibility of assimilation. The alternative entails more or less fully embracing one of the most negative clichés of *italianità*, that of the Italian as *mafioso*, because Italian organized crime is, as a matter of fact, integral to American political corruption¹³. If *The Fortunate Pilgrim* "examines the myth of the American dream and the real possibility that the *outsider* might succeed in realizing it" (Tamburri 1998, 17), this "real possibility" is achieved through what Lucia Santa has always tried to resist, and that her sad pragmatism has finally forced her to accept – the involvement of a representative of the corruption of *italianità*, a Mafia *padrino*. Larry, whom she by now considers as "lost" to the family because he had chosen to become a member of the *Famiglia*, manages "to acquire a 'godfather' and with that aid" is able "to free his mother and children from the bondage of New York City's West Side, then lead them into the Canaan

¹³ Anthony Tamburri suggests that "Puzo's use of a sometimes sleazy, Italian/American character – especially those involved in the stereotypical organized crime associations – may figure as an indictment of the social dynamism of a dominant culture which refuses access to the *outsider*" (Tamburri 1991, 40) – or better still, in my view, of a social and economic system which grants that access only to those who either relinquish any ambition to preserve some ethnic marker and to resist the logic of competitive individualism, or, on the contrary, accept to be classified and therefore controlled by stereotypical representations of their supposedly "authentic" ethnicity. The integration of the *mafioso* inside the mainstream social and cultural system is confirmed by the first description of a member of the *Famiglia*, Zi' Pasquale, "definitely Italian but dressed American, with no trace of the greenhorn; hair trimmed close, tie skinny and plain and solid-colored" (Puzo 2004, 177).

of Long Island” (Viscusi 2006, 49), so thoroughly complying – on the surface – with the basic tenets of the myth of America as the new Promised Land for those “fortunate pilgrims”.

In the last scene of the novel, echoing a number of analogous commentaries by both the narrator and various characters throughout the text, Lucia Santa meditates on the fate of her family, laying bare what for her is the ultimate deception of the American Dream, the fact that it creates a perverted series of self-generating desires never to be satisfied by their actual fulfillment:

America, America, blasphemous dream. Giving so much, why could it not give everything? Lucia Santa wept for the inevitable crimes she had committed against those she loved. In her world, as a child, the wildest dream had been to escape the fear of hunger, sickness and the force of nature. The dream was to stay alive. No one dreamed further. But in America wilder dreams were possible, and she had never known of their existence. Bread and shelter were not enough. (Puzo 2004, 256-257)

Giving so much, compared to the few opportunities offered by the Old World, America is expected to give everything and give it freely. But what America concedes with such apparent generosity is only money, and turning upside down the ordinary relationship between money and value it requires the immigrant to *pay* for the money s/he receives by renouncing some of those same dreams it has awakened, as in the case of Octavia, who has to give up her project of becoming a schoolteacher to meet the most immediate needs of the family. In order to raise money, one has to sell what money should buy – a future¹⁴. Puzo actually “kills Lucia’s dominance by moving her away from her power base, the ethnic community, where her native language could still be used to further her causes, where her friendships could aid in providing for and protecting her family” (Gardaphé

¹⁴ But the novel could also imply that Octavia’s renunciation is what gives her the possibility of replacing her mother, in the future, as the head of the family – even if in a different way. Mary Jo Bona states that Mario Puzo might suggest (something really uncommon for a male Italian American author before the end of the 20th century) Octavia’s growing (if not totally acquired) independence and power “in having her choose not to bear children”, in an era when “such decisions were not made easily, especially for a woman of Octavia’s generation” (Bona 2018a, 388).

2006, 31). The “bottom line for the immigrant is ‘Americanize or go crazy’” (30). The American Dream is bought by relinquishing cultural authority and any discursive claims to an ethnic identity. It means accepting to be “melted” away¹⁵, as it is still now the case if, like Peter Carravetta reminds us, Italian Americans always have, “at some point – say, when you pay your taxes or apply for a visa or are sent to war”, to “deny the adjective”, and so “are constitutively threatened to relinquish one part of their selves when certain contingencies arise” (Carravetta 2015, 115-116) – even when they look as positive ones. And Lucia’s final dirge about the betrayal of hope paradoxically brought about by the American Dream turned into reality also sounds like the recognition that she has to settle back into the ordinary, subordinate role usually assigned to women, and thus disappear from the social and cultural foreground (to melt into the shadows, one could say...).

As a matter of fact, in his elegy of a female figure that acquires a majestic dimension, almost larger than life, Mario Puzo avoids a widespread tendency in (male, and not only Italian American) migrant fictions at least up to the 1970s, that of downplaying, when not totally ignoring, what Irene Gedalof calls the “embodied work of mothering, such as childcare and childbirth, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as transmitting culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other inter-personal relationships” (Gedalof 2009, 82). Most Italian American communities up to the mid-twentieth century differed from dominant WASP culture because they still largely adhered to traditions that gave

¹⁵ Some early interpretations of the novel see its ending in a much more positive way, as a celebration of that “typically” Italian-American will to survive that bends the American Dream, even deforms it, but finally makes it “real”, thus confirming and reinforcing the dream itself and the myths of migration that are interconnected with it. According to Rose Basile Green, for example, Lucia Santa’s ultimate revelation allows her to see that the truth of a dream “is that no achievement is perfect. Puzo then concludes that preservation is not enough. [...] bread and shelter are not enough for happiness”, and that “America holds the opportunity for further possibilities [...]. Puzo’s theme of survival, therefore, transcends necessity and its incriminatory operations, and looks to a future of a humanity made more expansive in a better environment” (Green 1974, 348).

priority to “the family over all institutions and the individual, [to] the matricentric family versus the patriarchal family, and [to] a culture of interdependence versus independence” (Tardi 2010, 97). Lucia Santa’s triumph is based precisely on her ability to reproduce that system of traditions and to exploit at the same time the occasion provided by the “fundamental changes to family relations, especially between the sexes and the generations” (Gabaccia 2000, 100), required by the new environment. After the gradual severing of the connections with the homeland, the reproduction of traditions firmly establishes itself in the diaspora (see Bona 2018b, 16). Being in charge of a vast family amid the harsh realities of immigrant life in the nightmarishly alien landscape of New York City, Lucia Santa gradually becomes aware of social possibilities she could never attain nor even dream of in Italy. Although “Lucia Santa, completely absorbed in raising and running her family in her own way, shows very little the concern for assimilation or acculturation”, America truly becomes for her “the land of opportunity and of all those things she could not have as a young woman back home” (Mulas 1995, 53).

In this regard, the protagonist of *A Fortunate Pilgrim* seems to perfectly embody the pattern described in a recent survey of the historiography of “Little Italies”:

A Sicilian woman in the tenements, for example, might help her husband in the morning to set up shop, then meet her *comari* (her fellow godmothers, or, by extension, women from the same ancestral village) in the afternoon to do the needlework that was hired out to them by a female acquaintance who picked it up from a nearby clothing factory, then have coffee with a neighbor who lived on the floor below while looking after her own children and the children of the other families, and then have dinner with her family and its boarders. A woman who had previously been isolated in an agricultural village in Sicily thus found herself at the center of a new network of social and economic relations. If it was true that the Italian immigrants maintained certain Sicilian traditions, it was also true that they adapted them to the new environment that, in turn, partly determined their development. (Garroni 2018, 172)

Being “different than before, as their children are now different from their parents, all of whom now constitute a group that is no longer the Italian of the old world nor, for that matter, the

complete American of the new world”, Lucia Santa and Octavia come to “inhabit an interstitial space” (Tamburri 2014, 49) where the mother can rule the family with an unprecedented authority and the daughter “not only marries outside her ethnicity but transgresses the religious boundary as well; she is to marry a ‘Jew’” (47) – and she also wears “business suits” (Puzo 2004, 191) that are more customarily worn by men¹⁶. If Octavia can have the possibility of trespassing ethnic, religious and even gender borders, it is because of Lucia Santa’s “protection”. She is delighted to see her daughter marrying a Jew and not an Italian, because those “guinea tyrants, those despotic greenhorns” are incapable of showing “mercy to womankind” and only want to exert their “masculine tyranny” (193).

But the transplantation (and adaptation, and deep revision) of Italian social and interpersonal relationships in the Little Italies cannot last forever. As Robert Viscusi recalls, “Little Italy meant a captive market of external 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” (Viscusi 1990, 64-65).

Lucia’s predicament seems at first precisely that of being entrapped between an America where she does not understand how to fit in, and an Italy that looms like a nightmare to which she does not want to return. But then, she slowly manages to exploit her role as preserver of the past in the land of the future¹⁷. Her downfall is caused by the fulfillment of the project of Americanization – losing her power of mediation between her Italian

¹⁶ Rose De Angelis points out that Octavia’s “verbal prowess and her extensive reading subvert the traditional association of mind/intellect with the male and public life; Octavia [*sic*] transcends the limitations of her situation and journeys out of the private sphere of the home” (R. De Angelis 1995, 40). On Octavia’s radical choices that define her as an independent woman, see also Ahearn 1985, 129-132. On the ambiguities of Octavia’s supposed independence, see below.

¹⁷ On Lucia Santa as “transmigrant mother”, see Bisutti 2017, where she is described as the embodiment of the archetype of “the loving and at the same time terrible mother, who makes moving possible and watches over it, who pays the price of the American dream and does not hesitate when necessary to make also her dear ones pay for it” (111, my translation).

heritage and American modernity, she must exit the stage, sadly aware that her family will never again be what it once was, as exemplified by Gino, who volunteers for the war without even telling his mother: "With terrible clarity she knew Gino would never come home after the war. That he hated her as she had hated her father. That he would become a pilgrim and search for strange Americas in his dreams" (Puzo 2004, 257).

But Gino's dreamy search for something better looks very much like the umpteenth reiteration of a myth which the novel has throughout systematically undermined. Earlier in the plot, the father of Gino's best friend, Joey Bianco, loses all the money he has put in the bank. The narrator gives voice to the desperate hope Joey's father, Pasquale, still nourishes:

America, America, what dreams are dreamed in your name? What sacrilegious thoughts of happiness do you give birth to? There is a price to be paid, yet one dreams that happiness can come without the terrible payments. Here there was hope, in Italy none. They would start again, he was only a man of forty-eight. He still had twenty years of work in his body. For each human body is a gold mine. The ore of labor yields mountains of food, shelter from the cold, wedding feasts, and funeral wreaths to hang on the tenement door. That comical little gnarled body in long winter underwear and gray mustaches still held a treasure to yield up, and with a woman's practical sense Mrs. Bianco was worried more about her husband than about the money they had lost. (146)

But Mrs. Bianco's shift of her preoccupations from the loss of money to the dangers the quest of the Dream entails for the health and life of her husband reveals that rather than on a Covenant with God the American Dream might be founded on a pact with the Devil. The metaphor that translates not only Pasquale's, but everyone's body into a source of material wealth, a "gold mine", an "ore of labor", literally reduces the human to the economic which is the cornerstone of capitalist social organization, and the ideology that capitalism has built in order to transform the nightmare into a dream. It extracts value ("a treasure") out of an apparently valueless "comical little gnarled body".

Another and even more radical reversal of the American Dream can be seen in Gino's attitude towards his friend Joey,

who has also lost all the money he meticulously hoarded by denying his natural drive to indulge in earthly pleasures, such as ice creams and hot dogs – a perfect reenactment of Robinson Crusoe’s inauguration of the myth of the *homo economicus*, based on the deferral of gratification in order to build up the original accumulation of capital. Gino is fascinated by Joey’s almost puritanical virtue in obeying the imperatives of the capitalist Super-Ego. But instead of imitating Joey, he not only satisfies his own desires but also shares the little earthly pleasures he can buy with his friend who is much “richer” than himself, and all the poorer for it: “Gino had always respected him and given him at least one bite of hot dog, one taste of pizza, one lick of lemon ice to help him past temptation”; Gino even feels a total empathy with Joey’s sense of loss, after he realizes “the extent and finality of his tragedy”, because what his friend has lost is, “in some way”, “his money”, too (142). With a further, paradoxical twist, Gino feels luckier than his friend precisely because he is poorer than him, having therefore much less, almost nothing, to lose.

If failing can be a success, succeeding in America can also turn, for Italian immigrants, into a failure, as is perfectly testified by Lucia Santa’s daughter, Octavia, who is so clever in selling sewing machines to Italian immigrant women that they buy them even when they do not need to – and she refuses to cheat those women, thus losing her most lucrative job. For all of her independent spirit, her ability in providing financial support to her family through her sewing expertise (she immediately finds another job after having being fired), and her mastery of the English tongue (a counterpoint to the smooth Italian she uses to lure her would-be clients), that allows her to dialectically beat the relief investigator who cuts his share from the subsidy he has illegally granted to Lucia Santa, Octavia cannot achieve a full-fledged autonomy, even if she somehow also epitomizes the image of self-empowerment through sewing so recurrent in Italian American literature, and that Mary Jo Bona has already thoroughly investigated (see Bona 2014).

The American standard myths of migration are clearly modeled after a pattern of initiation rites. The protagonists must un-

dergo a series of rituals in order to reach some higher and fuller identity. Such challenges are ultimately overcome by shedding the past and accepting the opportunities of an American future. Both *Call It Sleep* and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* seem to accept this narrative pattern, but also revise it, one perhaps by reinforcing the American Dream (but only on the imaginative level) and the other by perhaps defusing it (but only after having given the migrants what they thought they wanted).

Roth's novel substitutes the myth of the melting pot with that of a noisy kaleidoscope where nothing is left behind and everything is preserved and refracted innumerable times. Its young protagonist finally becomes a real hero not by renouncing his old identity and embracing the new self that America wants him to acquire, but through the reinvention of his personal and cultural past (sanctioned by his learning classical Hebrew), which he naively tries to actualize in today's America (he wants to replicate Isaiah's purification through fire by inserting a metal rod into an electrified rail). His attempt at self-sacrifice turns him into the focal point of attention for all the other ethnic communities of the Lower East Side, whose multilingual and multicultural diversity will be saved and later reflected by the mirror of David's future self as a poet (*Call It Sleep* was projected as the first part of a wider *Künstlerroman*).

On the surface, Puzo's novel is more traditional in the development of its plot according to the rules of the Italian American epic of survival. But the title that ironically links the Italian American experience to the mythological founders of American civilization sets the stage instead for a brutal deconstruction of the American Dream, all the more treacherous when the Italian immigrants manage to make it true. They are unfortunate not because they are Italian and immigrants (coming from a Catholic, and not a Protestant environment, they should implicitly be unable to comply with the imperatives of capitalist ethics), but precisely because their experience repeats and redoubles that of the original Pilgrims, revealing the self-defeating, Sisyphus-like logic of a myth of individual and collective progress through the endless deferral of the fulfillment of desire that actually hides (and strengthens) the de-humanizing machinery of exploitation.

When she seems to have brought her family away, safe from that hell, Lucia cannot but mourn what she has lost – first of all, her innocent (and much more American than Italian) desire for the future, a future which is now already past, and no longer retrievable:

And now a million secret voices called out, “Lucia Santa, Lucia Santa, you found your fortune in America”, and Lucia Santa weeping on her backless kitchen chair raised her head to cry out against them, “I wanted all this without suffering. I wanted all this without weeping for two lost husbands and a beloved child. I wanted all this without the hatred of that son conceived in true love. I wanted all this without guilt, without sorrow, without fear of death and the terror of a judgment day”. In innocence. (Puzo 2004, 256)

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Part II
Jewish American Literature

Chapter 7

David M. Schiller

From Ethnic Stereotyping to Geopolitics in the Vaudeville and World War I Era Songs of Irving Berlin and Al Piantadosi

In a short entry on Irving Berlin for the *Encyclopedia of American Jewish History*, I suggested that Berlin's career epitomized two paradigmatic aspects of the American-Jewish experience, "one, a rags-to-riches story of financial success; the other, the central importance of the entertainment industry within the larger saga of cultural assimilation and social transformation" (Schiller 2008, 683). Irving Berlin's trajectory – from his start as a vaudeville composer who trafficked in ethnic stereotypes, to his cultural enshrinement as the icon of Americanism who composed "White Christmas" (1942) – is well known; and "White Christmas" itself remains emblematic not only of the Christmas holiday, but also of America's entry into World War II.

Indeed, much earlier in his career, in "Let's All Be Americans Now" (1917), Berlin had already begun to define Americanism in terms of support for World War I. In contrast, the American-born, first-generation, Italian American composer Al Piantadosi composed a song that became, in its time, the anthem of the American pacifist movement, "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" (1915). A comparison of the early careers of Berlin and Piantadosi, from their beginnings in the world of vaudeville and saloon entertainment to their engagement with nationalism and geopolitics, reveals not only the similarities in their individual career paths, but also an aspect

of the immigrant experience that was shared by Jewish Americans and Italian Americans alike¹.

In this essay, I focus primarily on a group of songs composed between the years 1906-1918, when Edison cylinder recordings and shellac records were becoming a significant factor in the distribution of music and the music industry, although still secondary to sheet-music publications. Among the songs I cite here, four were composed by Piantodosi, five by Berlin, and one was actually a collaborative effort, with music by Piantodosi and lyrics by Berlin. Together, the published sheet music and the recordings (many of them now digitized) provide a wealth of primary material. In their own work from this period, Piantodosi and Berlin depict the milieu they shared and their creative responses to it.

Both Piantodosi (1882-1955) and Berlin (1888-1989) were children of immigrant families. Piantodosi's parents immigrated to America from Pietrastornina, Italy, in 1880; Al (christened Albert Joseph) was born in New York City two years later. Berlin on the other hand was born in Tyumen, Russia, and emigrated to the US as a child with his parents in 1893. Both boys grew

¹ Although I frame this essay as a comparative study, a direct comparison is somewhat complicated by the divergent traditions of scholarship on Italian American and Jewish American culture. Indeed, the present situation in musicology may resemble the status quo of decades ago in literary studies. Consider, for example, the interview with Joseph Papaleo that Fred Gardaphé published twenty years ago in *Dagoes Read*. When Gardaphé asked Papaleo "What does Italian/American literature mean to you?" Papaleo answered, "Well I have to start by talking about the Jewish-American writers [...] We [Italian/Americans] do have a tradition in writing, but no one has delineated it yet, no one else can see it" (Gardaphé 1996, 171). Similarly, it seems, the Jewish-American presence in Tin-Pan-Alley has been extensively delineated, while the Italian-American contribution has been relatively neglected by academic musicologists. In recent scholarship, the Jewish-American perspective has been tending towards an unabashed, celebratory nostalgia. For example, Jack Gottlieb, a long-time associate of Leonard Bernstein and a highly regarded composer of synagogue music in his own right, was also the author of a meticulously researched and musically insightful book titled *Funny, It Doesn't Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (2004). It is only in the last decade that scholarship on Italian-America's contribution to popular music in America has gotten some traction, especially since the publication, in 2010, of *Amore: The Story of Italian American Song*, by Mark Rotella, and more recently of *Jazz Italian Style: From Its Origins in New Orleans to Fascist Italy and Sinatra*, by Anna Harwell Celenza (2017).

up easily assimilating into American culture. By 1905, Piantadosi was well-established as “Ragtime Al”, the house pianist at Callahan’s Dance Hall, located at 12 Chatham Square, while Berlin had found work as a singing waiter at the Pelham Cafe, a block away at 12 Pell Street. Both were situated in the lower Bowery neighborhood, now part of New York’s Chinatown.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, humorous dialect songs that “represented” (or misrepresented) ethnic stereotypes were a staple both of the vaudeville stage and of saloon entertainment. James R. Barrett writes: “As vaudeville blossomed, artists from a bewildering array of backgrounds performed “Dutch” (German), Jewish, Irish, Black and Italian acts. This tendency to ethnically cross-dress owed a great deal to minstrelsy. Like its forerunner, vaudeville was a distinctly American art form due precisely to its preoccupation with ethnic and racial difference” (Barrett 2012, 167-168). But it was not only the performers, but also the creators of the vaudeville repertoire who cross-dressed freely, as they stereotyped both their own and other minority and immigrant cultures quite indiscriminately.

Piantadosi published his first song, “My Mariuccia Take a Steamboat”, in 1906. On the sheet-music cover, shown below as Figure 1, the lyricist is identified as George Ronklyn, a singing waiter who worked with Piantadosi at Callahan’s (Jasen 2003, 28). The vaudeville performer Alex Carr is also pictured. Carr was best known at the time as a “Hebrew” character specialist, and as an early collaborator with Sophie Tucker on the vaudeville stage (Fields 2003, 49). Nonetheless we can infer that he included this Italian-dialect song in his repertoire, at least for a time; in fact, the cover was designed to be printed with a rotating gallery of popular artists’ portraits, so that sheet-music sales could be tweaked by featuring a variety of vaudeville stars. In addition to its published form, “My Mariuccia” also comes down to us on an Edison cylinder recording by the pre-eminent male recording artist of his day, Billy Murray (1887-1954)². A child of Irish American immigrants, Murray was a consum-

² Murray’s recording of “My Mariuccia” is licensed for audio streaming and can be found at: <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/search/results?q=My%20mariuccia>.

mate vaudevillian and performed in all the ethnic dialects, including Blackface minstrelsy. The first verse and chorus of “My Mariuccia” read as follows:

Just one year ago today I met my Mariuccia,
Believe me boss, now what I say, she’s so nice-a, just-a just.
I buy-a de clothes so fine-a fine, she look-a just like-a de queen.
I save-a my money to make-a her mine.
She make-a skiddoo with tough-a Tony
He quit-a his job on da DSC.

And now she’s gone and left me all alone.

My Mariuccia take-a steamboat (toot-toot), She’s gone away,
She make-a too much-a jealous for me, she fly away
She’s gone-a back to the old-a country,
Make-a twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three.
My Mariuccia take-a steamboat (toot-toot), She’s gone away.
(Piantadosi – Ronklyn, 1906)

The reference to the D.S.C. (Department of Street Cleaning) is significant; the Department, whose workers were subjected to quasi-military discipline and clad in white uniforms, was one of the major employers of Italian American immigrant men:

The white army functioned as an idealized symbol of an assimilated and harmonious white polity of American men, in which potentially unruly southern Italian men – whose “whiteness” was open to question – were brought under military control and homogenized, their immigrant identities subsumed under the category of civic employee. (Murphy 2010, 99)

In the second verse, the song’s protagonist is revealed to be a pushcart fruit vendor. His mock-tragedy is thus set against a Darwinian economic background in which only the “strong”, like “tough Tony”, survive.

“My Mariuccia” became an instant hit for Piantadosi, and Irving Berlin’s first published song, “Marie from Sunny Italy”, was an attempt to follow up on it with a spin-off hit of his own. The friendly rivalry between Piantadosi and Berlin was recounted by *Billboard* columnist Jack Burton in the issue of June 11, 1949: “Berlin at the time was working as a singing waiter at Mike Salter’s Pelham Cafe, which was losing trade nightly to Piantadosi’s “toot-toot” song. So, Salter decided to fight melody with melody

and talked Berlin and another of his singing waiters [Mike Nicholson] into turning out a tune that would bring his fickle customers back” (Burton 1949). Despite its title, “Marie From Sunny Italy” is not a dialect song, but a conventional romantic ballad. It is worth mentioning, though, that Berlin’s lyrics in this, his maiden attempt, begin with an awkwardly memorable couplet “Oh, Marie, ’neath your window I’m waiting / Oh, Marie, please don’t be so aggravating” (Berlin – Nicholson 1907).

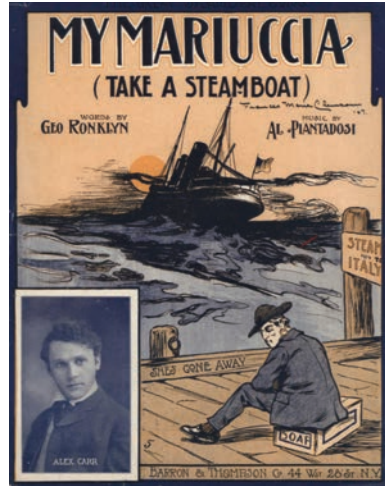


Figure 1. “My Mariuccia Take a Steamboat” (placeholder).

In 1908, Piantadosi teamed up with Halsey K. Mohr (1883-1942) to compose the music for a Jewish-dialect hit, “I’m a Yiddish Cowboy (Tough Guy Levi)”, with lyrics by Edgar Leslie (1885-1976). This song capitalized on the fame for one of the star performers in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show, William Levi “Buck” Taylor (1857-1924). Taylor was not Jewish, but the name Levi provided poetic license enough to suggest that he might be. As shown in figure 2 below, the image juxtaposes the real William Levi “Buck” Taylor and his transformation into *Tough Guy Levi, the Yiddish Cowboy*. The lyrics are a hodgepodge of stereotypic “Yiddish” dialect, “oi, oi”, casual anti-Indian racism, and a topical reference to the dimestore novel character Diamond Dick:

Way out West in the wild and wooly prairie land,
 Lived a cowboy by the name of Levi,
 He loved a blue blood Indian maiden,
 And came to serenade her like a tough guy.
 Big Chief Cruller-Legs was the maiden’s father,
 And he tried to keep Levi away,
 But Levi didn’t care, for every evening,
 With his Broncho, “Buster,” Giddyap! Giddyap, He’d come around and say:

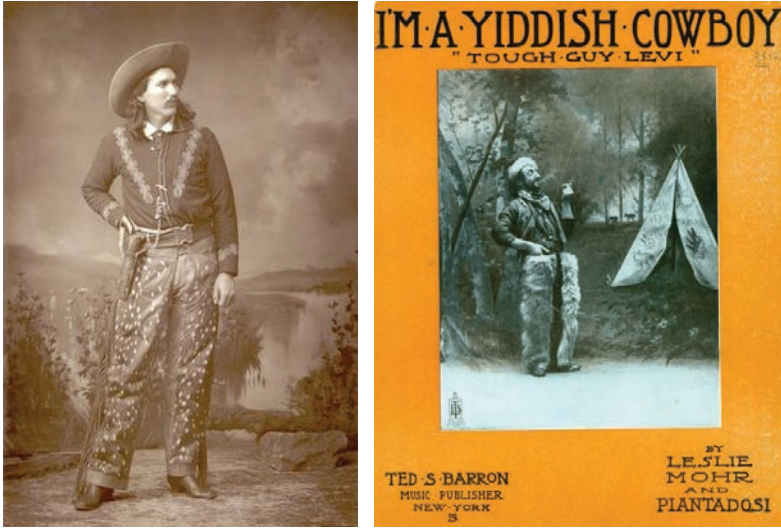


Figure 2. William Levi “Buck” Taylor and “Tough Guy Levi” (placeholder)

Tough guy Levi, that’s my name, and I’m a Yiddish cowboy,
 I don’t care for Tomahawks or Cheyenne Indians, oi, oi.
 I’m a real live Diamond Dick, that shoots ’em till they die,
 I’ll marry squaw or start a war, For I’m a fighting guy³.

(Piantadosi – Leslie – Mohr, 1908)

The next year, 1909, was a productive one for both Piantadosi and Berlin. Their published songs from that year include a non-ethnic, sentimental ballad “Just Like the Rose”, on which they collaborated, with Berlin providing the lyrics and Piantadosi the music. In addition, Piantadosi wrote the Italian dialect song, “Good-bye Mr. Caruso”, while Berlin produced both the Italian-dialect song “Dorando”, and Jewish dialect “Sadie Salome”. The latter three songs were all highly topical.

³ “I’m a Yiddish Cowboy” was recorded in 1908 by Edward Meeker (1874-1937) and released on Edison Gold Moulded Record 9984. It has been digitized and re-released on *Jewface: Hi-Fidelity Reproduction from the Original Wax Cylinder Recordings*, Reboot Stereophonic audio CD, RSR 006, 2006.

On 17 November 1906, the *New York Times* ran a story headlined “Signor Caruso, Tenor, Arrested in the Zoo”. He had been arrested, the story reports, “in the monkey house in Central Park on a charge of annoying a woman who stood near him. The arrest was made by Policeman James J. Kane, a plain-clothes man detailed especially to the duty of watching for men who annoy woman in the Park Zoo. The lyrics, by Billy Dunham, are squarely in the vaudeville ethnic-humor style:

My head is goin’ dip, I think I got the pip,
 Since I read about Caruso:
 Ev’ry thing I was a-stop, no more work the barbershop,
 When I hear his voice he lose-a,
 No more the customers was come, I kill myself I drink Bay-Rum,
 Next year no op’ra Itali-an, cause was-a come one Spanish man...

Oh poor Mister Carus’, His great-a big-a voice he’s-a lose,
 No more he sing in Opera grand, He’s gone-a back to Italy to peddle banan’
 He was one big-a chump, Smoke-a cigarette a make-a fool with the monk
 Good bye, I cry, good-by Mister Carus’.

(Piantadosi – Dunham, 1909)

The speaker, although he is presented as a stereotypical caricature, is also a keen observer of current events. To be sure, the central charge against Caruso, inappropriate touching, was meticulously reported in the *New York Times*. But other details as well – the appearance of “one Spanish man”, and the concern that Caruso had lost his voice – are corroborated by contemporaneous news reports. In its March issue of 1909, the *Theater Magazine* reported: “A new Caruso has been found. [...] He is only twenty-one years old, but gives promise of rivaling the great Italian tenor in vocal achievement. The young tenor looks like Caruso and, more strangely, there is a resemblance in name, for the boy’s name is Carasa – Federico Carasa. But he is a Spaniard” (“Caruso’s New Rival”, 1909, XXVIII). Such an appraisal seemed timely, as Caruso was having troubles with his voice at the time. Towards the end of a follow-up story, on November 23, 1906, the *NYT* had reported: “So serious is the condition of Caruso’s throat that Dr. Holbrook Curtis, the throat specialist, has been called in and has examined the singer several times within the last few days. Dr. Curtis acknowledged last night

that Caruso's throat has been noticeably affected by the events of the last week, but he expressed the hope that all signs of the trouble would pass away as soon as the trial was over" ("May Get Mrs. Graham", 1906). This kind of synchronicity between the daily papers and Tin-Pan Alley, between fact and musical fiction, is not exceptional; it remains characteristic. The next two songs considered below, both by Irving Berlin, provide further evidence of the same process.

Berlin's "Sadie Salome" tells the story of a nice Jewish girl whose success on the vaudeville stage is compared to Salome's Dance of the Seven Veils. The then-topical relevance of Salome (around 1907-1909) has been noted by the distinguished music critic Alex Ross:

The first time the Metropolitan Opera staged Richard Strauss's *Salome*, ninety-seven years ago, J.P. Morgan's daughter blanched at the sight of a soprano making out with a severed head, and the production was shut down after one night. The ballerina who had performed the Dance of the Seven Veils on the Met stage decided to take her act to a vaudeville house, where she had a considerably warmer reception. America was soon in the grip of a Salome craze. (Ross 2004)

In the lyrics, written for Berlin by Edgar Leslie (who, as we have seen, already had a previous Jewish-dialect hit with Piantadosi's "Yiddish Cowboy"), Sadie outdoes all other contenders as the only "real" Salome; although the song is humorous, Sadie's exotic sexuality is reified:

Sadie Cohen left her happy home,
 To become an actress lady
 On the stage she soon became the rage,
 As the only real Salomy baby.
 When she came to town, her sweetheart Mose
 Brought for her around a pretty rose
 But he got an awful fright, When his Sadie came to sight
 He stood up and yelled with all his might:
 Don't do that dance, I tell you Sadie,
 That's not a bus'ness for a lady!
 'Most ev'rybody knows, That I'm your loving Mose
 Oy, Oy, Oy, Oy, Where is your clothes?
 You better go and get your dresses,
 Ev'ryone's got the op'ra glasses

Oy! such a sad disgrace, No one looks in your face
Sadie Salome, go home⁴.

(Berlin – Leslie 1909)

Another Berlin hit, “Dorando”, tells the story of the legendary Italian distance runner Dorando Pietri (1885-1942). He finished first in the marathon at the 1908 Summer Olympics in London but was disqualified for receiving assistance from the umpires at the very end of the race. Not unlike Piantadosi’s farewell to Caruso, Berlin’s song recounts the disappointment of an Italian American fan when a subsequent match race between Dorando and the Canadian Onondaga runner Tom Longboat (1887-1949) came to a somewhat similar conclusion:

Just like-a da sport, I sell da barbershop, and make-a da bet Dorando
he’s a win

Then to Madeesa Square, Pasquale and me go there,

And justalikadat, da race begin.

[Chorus] Dorando! Dorando! He runarunaruna run like anything,

One-a twoahundred times around da ring.

I cry, pleasanunga stop, Just then, Dorando he’s a drop,

Good-bye, poor old barbershop. It’s no fun to lose da mon,

When de sun of a gun no run, Dorando, He’s gooda for not!

(Berlin 1909)

Although the song is stereotypical, the athleticism of both runners was historic; indeed heroic, and the historical record vindicates Dorando’s courage:

The professional marathon title changed hands last night at Madison Square Garden after one of the most sensational contests ever witnessed in this country, when Thomas Longboat, the Canadian Indian, ran Dorando Petri, the Italian champion, off his feet until the latter fell to the track exhausted half a mile from the finish of the race. As a contest it was unsurpassed in the history of American long distance running, and as a spectacle it was replete with thrilling interest and heart stirring incidents. (“Longboat Wins”, 1908)

As we reach the end of the first decade of the twentieth century and begin our transition to the World War I years, it is

⁴ Edward M. Favor (1856-1936) recorded “Sadie Salome” on a commercially released “Indestructible Record” audio cylinder in 1909. It is available for live streaming on the *Internet Archive* (archive.org/details/ind-1211, accessed 2 June 2020).

appropriate to turn briefly from our focus on Italian and Jewish American stereotypes, and consider Berlin's landmark hit of 1911, "Alexander's Ragtime Band". In the history of American popular music, twentieth-century ethnic songs are direct descendants of the nineteenth century minstrel-show songs that caricatured and stereotyped African Americans. By appropriating and capitalizing on the ragtime idiom, which was created by Black musicians, Berlin was continuing and updating the minstrel tradition. Traces of Southern Black dialect appear in the opening verse of "Alexander's Ragtime Band":

Oh, ma honey, Oh ma honey,
 Better hurry and let's meander,
 Ain't you goin', ain't you goin'
 To the leader man, ragged meter man?
 Oh, ma honey, Oh ma honey,
 Let me take you
 To Alexander's grand-stand brass band.

Yet later, in the familiar chorus, the song seems to be already looking ahead to the First World War: "They can play a bugle call / like you never heard before, / So natural that you want to go to war" (Berlin, 1911)⁵.

Remarkably, Alexander had a real-life counterpart in one of the pre-eminent African American musicians of the era, James Reese Europe (1880-1919). In 1910, Europe had created a membership organization for Black musicians, the Clef Club; and on May 29, the Clef Club orchestra, 100 members strong, gave its debut performance (Badger 1995, 56). It thus existed, in reality, as the model for Alexander's band, the best band in the land (Badger 1998). In 1916, Europe enlisted in the Army, in an all-Black regiment. As a lieutenant, he led his troops in combat and, concurrently, directed the regimental band.

Through this contextualizing detour, we return to Piantadosi and Berlin. In January of 1915, when pacifist and isolationist positions were still widely held in the United States, Piantadosi and

⁵ "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was recorded by Arthur Collins and Byron G. Harlan on 23 May, 1911, and released on the Victor label; available for audio streaming at: <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/search/results?q=Alexander%27s%20ragtime%20band>.

lyricist Alfred Bryan published one of the most timely and effective political songs in the history of American popular music, “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier”. The sheet music cover, shown below in Figure 3, portrays the mother with white hair, perhaps prematurely grey with worry. We can clearly discern, in her expression, the troubling images of war that preoccupy her mind, as she embraces her boy, with her knitting placed beside her.

Bryan’s lyrics are effective, but it is important to remember that he was not himself a committed pacifist. He was responding to and articulating “a nearly undisputed American consensus” (van Wienen, 2002):

Ten million soldiers to the war have gone,
 Who may never return again.
 Ten million mothers’ hearts must break,
 For the ones who died in vain.
 Head bowed down in sorrow,
 In her lonely years,
 I heard a mother murmur thro’ her tears:

I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier,
 I brought him up to be my pride and joy,
 Who dares to put a musket on his shoulder,
 To shoot some other mother’s darling boy?
 Let nations arbitrate their future troubles,
 It’s time to lay the sword and gun away,
 There’d be no war today,
 If mothers all would say,
 I didn’t raise my boy to be a soldier⁶.

(Piantadosi – Bryan 1915)

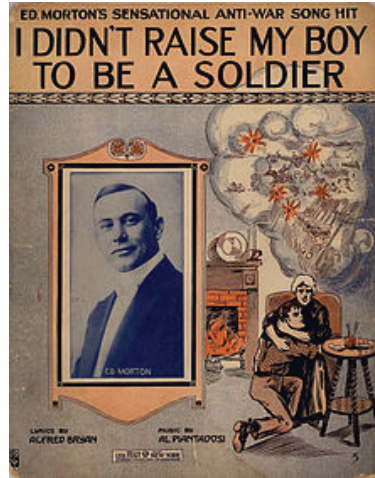


Figure 3. “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” (placeholder)

⁶ “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” was recorded by the Peerless Quartet in

The line “Let nations arbitrate their future troubles” appears to echo the words of Jane Addams herself. In a Special Cable to the *New York Times*, published on April 30, 1915, Addams wrote: “The adoption of a ringing resolution urging that moral, social, and economic pressure be brought to bear upon nations failing to refer their disagreements to arbitration, marked the Second day of International Congress of Women [at the Hague]”. The Congress’s call for “World Arbitration” was also stated in the piece’s subhead (“Women Urge Ban on Secret Treaties”, 1915).

The significance of “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier” can hardly be overstated. In 1917, to quote van Wienen again,

the Administration had to contend with the legacy of pacifism represented, in politics, by organizations such as the Woman’s Peace Party and, in popular culture, by texts such as Piantadosi and Bryan’s song. [...] By its enormous popularity, this song had helped constitute American pacifism as a qualifiable political reality. Now the popularity of pacifism, once huge, still substantial, had to be reversed or neutralized by government propaganda. (van Wienen 1997, 150)

Van Wienen identifies three spheres of discourse here: politics, popular culture, and government propaganda. To the extent that a pattern has emerged in this study, we can add a fourth sphere: the press. For, as we have repeatedly seen, whatever got reported in the press was thereby made instantly available to be reintroduced into popular culture by the music and entertainment industry.

Berlin’s “Let’s All be Americans Now”, shown below in Figure 4, was copyrighted on February 17, 1917. Coincidentally, James M. Beck (1861-1936), a Republican congressman from Pennsylvania (who later became one of the staunchest opponents of the New Deal) had just published a column in the previous week’s *New York Sunday Times*, endorsing the shift in public opinion that Berlin’s song takes as its rallying cry. The headline proclaims that there are now “practically no dissenters from President Wilson’s clarion call to duty”; as President Wil-

December of 1914, just prior to its publication. It was released on the Columbia label, and is available for streaming on the *Internet Archive*: https://archive.org/details/78_i-didnt-raise-my-boy-to-be-a-soldier_peerless-quartette-piantadosi_gbia0017070a.

son “thus treads the path of honor and dignity, all Americans, of whatever party, race, creed, or ancestry, or whether in the past his eulogists or critics, should loyally stand behind their leader and pledge to the Government he represents their ‘lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor’” (“Spirit of the Nobler American Now Awake”, 1917). Or, as the lyrics, by Edgar Leslie (We have already encountered him as the lyricist of “I’m a Yiddish Cowboy”, “Sadie Salome”, “Go Home”, and Dorando) and George W. Meyer, recognized – “Now is the time to fall in line. / You swore that you would be so true to your vow: / Let’s all be Americans now”:



Figure 4. “Let’s All Be Americans Now” (placeholder)

Peace has always been our pray’r
 Now there’s trouble in the air
 War is talked of ev’rywhere
 Still in God we trust
 We’re not looking for any kind of war
 But if fight we must –
 It’s up to you! What will you do?
 England or France may have your sympathy
 Or Germany, But you’ll agree
 That now is the time To fall in line
 You swore that you would so be true to your vow
 Let’s all be Americans now⁷.

(Berlin – Leslie – Meyer⁸, 1917)

⁷ “Let’s All Be Americans Now” was recorded by the American Quartet, featuring Billy Murray on lead, in February of 1917, and released on the Victor label. It is available for live streaming on the *Internet Archive*: https://archive.org/details/78_lets-all-be-americans-now_american-quartet-berlin-leslie-meyer_gbia0004853b.

⁸ George W. Meyer, whose name also appears in the credits, may have assisted with the musical arrangement; he is better known as a composer than a lyricist, and

It would make for a nice conclusion had World War I marked a decisive turn away from ethnic stereotyping toward the spirit of the nobler American, but of course that is not what happened. All that we can conclude is that two talented young men, one a first-generation Italian American, the other a Jewish American brought here as a child, both found work in the saloons of New York's Bowery, and both went on to become prominent, professional songwriters, and helped bring the ragtime era to a close, and usher in the jazz age of the 1920s. Both trafficked in ethnic stereotyping, and both contributed to the great national debates of the time, and to the perennial national debate about what it means to be an American. Their experiences and their work continue to remain relevant to this day.

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Chapter 8

Doris Kadish

Jewish Immigrants in the 1930s: Politics, Literature, and Religion¹

[President Obama] points out [...] that the fiction of Junot Diaz and Jhumpa Lahiri speaks “to a very particular contemporary immigration experience” about “longing for this better place but also feeling displaced” – a theme central to much of American literature, and not unlike books by Philip Roth and Saul Bellow that are “steeped with this sense of being an outsider, longing to get in, not sure what you’re giving up”.

(Michiko Kakutani)

It is widely known that Jewish immigrants to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century met with remarkable success in climbing the socio-economic ladder in comparison with immigrant groups such as Italians, Irish, and others. Various reasons are offered as to why: for example, that the scholarly tradition of studying the Torah predisposed Jews to valuing education, and that the skills such as dressmaking and tailoring acquired in Russia gave them an advantage in their jobs in the New World.

Their success was not only socio-economic, however. Some Russian Jewish immigrants – those known as the intelligentsia – also rose up the cultural ladder dramatically in the early 1930s despite having entered the country as non-native speakers of English. An illustrative example is Philip Rahv, the co-founder

¹ For an in-depth analysis of Philip Rahv’s relation to Jewishness, see Kadish 2021.

with William Phillips of *Partisan Review* in 1934. He was born Fevel Greenberg and emigrated in 1922 at age fourteen, having attended school in Vienna before his arrival in the United States. He appears to have never graduated from high school or college. Despite his lack of formal education, however, his elevated intellectual reputation earned him a named professorship in American literature at Brandeis University from 1957 until his death in 1973².

T.S. Eliot called *Partisan Review* “the best American literary periodical”. It featured works by poets Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens, and Dylan Thomas; novelists George Orwell, Saul Bellow, and Philip Roth; and such philosophers and critics as Hannah Arendt, Lionel Trilling, and Edmund Wilson. Sociologist Norman Birnbaum stated that “a New York intellectual was one who wrote for, edited, or read *Partisan Review*” (qtd. in Wald 1987, 9). Art critic Hilton Kramer wrote that during the 1940s and 1950s the *Review* was as essential to his education as books, concerts, and museums: “It gave us an entrée to modern cultural life – to its gravity and complexity and combative character – that few of our teachers could match (and those few were likely to be readers or contributors to *PR*)” (Kramer 1996, 20).

Philip Rahv’s preeminence notwithstanding, the question arises whether he deserves to be included in the history of Jewish immigrant literature or literary influence by Jewish immigrants. Did he even meet the standards commonly set for being Jewish? As a young man, he angrily and emphatically rejected all affiliation with the Jewish religion and exhibited scorn for Zionism. In a letter dated January 7, 1929, Rahv wrote: “Poison and orthodox Judaism are the same to me” (qtd. in Kadish 2014, 777). Once he achieved prominence, as Stephen J. Whitfield notes, he largely refrained from writing about Jewish subjects or speaking out against the rise of Hitler, even after Americans learned about the systematic extermination of Jews and other groups. He was not alone. *Partisan Review* and the intellectuals associated with it, a large number of whom were Jewish, remained disengaged from imperiled communities overseas. Whitfield

² For biographical information I refer to Dvosin 1987 and Kadish 2014.

judges *Partisan Review* harshly in this regard: “The failure to confront the Shoah while it was happening is in retrospect one of the most puzzling and saddening consequences of the cosmopolitanism animating the journal” (Whitfield 1998, 10).

I will argue here that despite or perhaps even because of Rahv’s disengagement from Jewishness he merits our attention today: not as an exemplar of what it means to claim minority status or origins but as a counternarrative that calls into question accepted views of religious, ethnic, and national identity. Such a counternarrative helps to remind us that there has never been one single path to belonging to an immigrant group or to representing its cultural viewpoint. One size does not fit all, especially for a group like the Jews that in the diaspora has never had a unitary country of origin, religious practice, or political viewpoint.

A contrasting example can serve to bring into focus what Rahv was not, and what some might expect or want him to be. That example is the Nobel-prize winner Saul Bellow, whom Rahv admired greatly. In an essay about *Herzog* (1964), Rahv praised Bellow “as the most intelligent novelist of his generation [...] this intelligence is real endowment, coherent, securely founded, and of a genuine intellectual quality which [...] is neither recondite nor esoteric. It is directed toward imaginative ends by virtue of a true and sharp sense of the pain that rends the human world, of its ills both curable and incurable” (Rahv 1964, 125). Bellow’s Lithuanian-Russian parents migrated to Canada in 1913, two years before his birth. He spoke Yiddish at home, learned Hebrew at age four, and was steeped in Jewish customs and practices. He reports that at home prayers and blessings were recited all day. Although he later removed himself from the Jewish community, he never disavowed his Jewish identity. Remaining Jewish to the core, Bellow spoke Yiddish to the end of his life. He described himself as “an American Jew whose interests are largely, although not exclusively, secular”, but proclaimed loudly that he was not an assimilationist, because “[a]ssimilation is an impossible – a repulsive – alternative” (Bellow 2011b):

It would be a treason to my first consciousness to un-Jew myself. One may be tempted to go behind the given and invent something better, to attempt to reenter life at a more advantageous point. In America this is common, we have all seen it done, and done in many instances with great ingenuity. But the thought of such an attempt never entered my mind. (Bellow 2011a)

Bellow's literary language, like his identity, remained rooted in his Jewish origins. Speaking of Bellow's celebrated *The Adventures of Augie March*, Zachary Leader observes: "That Augie is Jewish and speaks an English in which Yiddish inflections, constructions and expressions are heard is part of what makes him, as he describes himself at the novel's end, "a Columbus of those near-at-hand'. He recounts his adventures in a style of American speech largely absent from high culture" (Leader 2015).

Rahv's Jewishness was of a different, more ambivalent nature. Seven years older than Bellow, Rahv was also the son of immigrants and was sufficiently schooled in Hebrew to support himself teaching the language until 1931. Unlike Bellow, however, he actively turned his back on Jewish traditions and sought intellectual alternatives that would allow for acculturation into American life. His mentor, Mordecai Grossman, a student of John Dewey at Columbia University, wrote for *The Menorah Journal*. Authors for that publication, which was centered at Columbia and initially included Lionel Trilling, turned away from old world customs, seeking "to forge a thriving secular, intellectual Jewish culture in the heart of Western society" (Strauss 1996, 326). Rahv went beyond *The Menorah Journal* in choosing that path of assimilation that Bellow called "an impossible – a repulsive – alternative". Secular and cosmopolitan, like Trilling, Rahv moved steadily and by design into the American literary mainstream. Bellow's style went counter to that mainstream and to the standards set by Rahv and the intelligentsia of *Partisan Review*. He was "a rebel against what might be called the 'Jamesian standard' [...] Henry James being revered in the late 1940s by literary intellectuals and professors of English, especially Jewish intellectuals and professors such as Leon Edel, Lionel Trilling and Philip Rahv"; nonetheless, the

“*Partisan* crowd needed him; they couldn’t be without a great novelist to go along with the great other things – critics, poets, memoirists – that they had”; yet “he was suspicious of their high culture and ideological values [...] Bellow wasn’t about to be co-opted by an intellectual, to say nothing of an editorial, viewpoint” (Leader 2015).

In short, what the contrast between Bellow and Rahv illustrates is the need to uncouple the terms “Jewish” and “immigrant”. Bellow retained his Jewishness but was not an immigrant, not only because his parents left Russia for Canada several years before his birth but because he rejected the ideas and ways of the immigrant. The famous first line of *The Adventures of Augie March* is: “I am an American – Chicago born”. Rahv rejected his Jewishness, but with his rough personal style and manner of speaking he was perceived as an immigrant. His viewpoint was also in certain significant respects that of an immigrant, as two examples of Rahv’s writings illustrate. They illuminate the facets of immigrant identity – language, alienation, class consciousness, and racial sensitivity – that he shared with Russian Jews of his generation.

A decade before Rahv came to embody the high cultural literary standard of Henry James he was, if not a “Columbus of those near-at-hand” like Bellow, somewhat of an explorer and interpreter of their world. An illustrative case in point is Rahv’s contribution to the second issue of *Partisan Review*, a translation from Yiddish of a poem entitled “Homeless but not Motherless”. Its author, the Yiddish poet, Leib Kvitko, was a member of the Communist Party of Germany and the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee. The poem is subtitled “Variation on a theme by L. Kvitko”³. Both “homelessness” and “motherlessness” are themes that relate to the immigrant’s separation from his homeland and family. Moreover, Rahv was drawn to writings in Yiddish, the maternal language of Jewish immigrants. His choice to translate and expand upon a poem written in that immigrant language indicates that at this early stage in his career, at least,

³ For another of Rahv’s translations of Yiddish poems see “Walls”, by Arn Kushnir, which appeared in *The Rebel Poet* in July 1932.

he was not running away from his origins, as others did. Arthur Liebman writes: “For those with higher secular education or those with aspirations to become socially mobile, Yiddish was an unpleasant obstacle or stigma [...] these Jews took great pains to put as much distance between themselves and the Yiddish-speaking masses as possible. Many indeed, conscientiously, unlearned or forgot this ‘jargon’” (Liebman 1979, 105-106).

Nevertheless, for all the closeness to immigrant origins apparent in “Homeless but not Motherless”, a distance from those origins is equally apparent. Rahv is the author of the poem which he presents as a “variation on a theme”. Nonetheless, his poem is based on a translation, despite the fact that he aspired at the time to be a poet in his own right⁴. Nor is it personal. It is seemingly not about either him or his mother, at least not on the conscious level. Ironically, the title reverses his experience as an immigrant. He was never homeless. And he was motherless: during his adolescent years, his mother, an ardent Zionist, chose to spend her life in Palestine and, later Israel, instead of America with the rest of the family.

The choice to include a translation of a Yiddish poem in *Partisan Review* was quite appropriate at the time. Not only had Yiddish literature flourished in New York for decades by the 1930s. Yiddish literature also fit with the political mission of *Partisan Review* as noted in the introduction to the first issue:

Partisan Review is the organ of the John Reed Club of New York [...] we shall maintain a definite viewpoint – that of the revolutionary working class. Through our specific literary medium we shall participate in the struggle of the workers and sincere intellectuals against imperialist war, fascism, national and racial oppression, and for the abolition of the system which breeds these evils. (Rahv 1934)

At the time when “Homeless but not Motherless” appeared in *Partisan Review*, Yiddish was important as the language of the laboring masses and union organizations in the United States. Leftist politics were closely linked to the cultural phenomenon known as *Yiddishkeit*, “a culture and a medium that bound the

⁴ For Rahv’s original poetry and efforts to publish his poems, see Kadish 2014, 789-790, 806.

immigrant Jews together while simultaneously insulating them from significant contact with the non-Jewish world”: Yiddish and *Yiddishkeit* were proletariat-oriented, and the socialist *Daily Forward* was the leading Yiddish-language paper in the country “and, for a period of time, the leading socialist daily as well” (Liebman 1979, 381). It is thus as an instance of proletariat writing in the mode of socialist realism that Rahv found inspiration and significance in Kwitko’s poem.

The figure of the mother in the poem then is both a maternal image of immigration and a feminine embodiment of the suffering endured during the Depression, a figure of loneliness, neediness, and poverty: “On a speeding train I sighted my mother / Dozing wrapped in her shabby coat”; “outside a jewelry shop I saw my mother standing / munching dry bread in great haste/ from nowhere to nowhere she wanders/homeless and gray as dust”. The mother in this poem also serves as a lens for magnifying images of oppression: “business men drive by in fast procession/their eyes sewn up in livid bags”; “exquisite plenipoten-tiaries”; “corpulent asses” (Rahv 1934).

Rahv explores and describes a phenomenon in the poem that he himself, as a member of the intelligentsia, never experienced, but one that as a Jewish immigrant he surely knew well. After all, he lived and wrote in New York City, one of the most horrific locations of poverty and suffering in the country at the time. The Lower East Side was estimated to have been the most crowded area in the world, with 540,000 immigrants jammed into an area of scarcely more than a half a mile. New York embodied “in its size and diversity all of the themes of class stratification, social interaction, political activism, labor, and the individual’s struggle to survive” (Glaser – Wintraub 2005, 17). Rage at inequality and estrangement from city life were recurrent themes in proletariat literature set in New York in the early 1930s.

“Homeless but not Motherless” is, in short, a socialist realist depiction of the Depression which, although grounded in Rahv’s immigrant identity, focuses primarily on class disparity in an urban environment. The times invited such writing, which prominent authors did much to legitimize. Consider T.S. Eliot,

whom Rahv wrote about on several occasions. In “For Whom Do You Write” Rahv wrote: “We lived on the carrion of Eliot, writing poems that were an unspeakably sad reflection of the end-of-the-world mood, affected, semi-conscious and petulant” (Rahv 1934). Eliot’s early writing, inspired by Charles Baudelaire, also dwells on the subject of the hopelessness and misery of urban life. Eliot’s “Morning at the Window” in *Prufrock and Other Observations* also feminizes poverty:

They are rattling breakfast plates in basement kitchens,
And along the trampled edges of the street
I am aware of the damp souls of housemaids
Sprouting despondently at area gates.

The brown waves of fog toss up to me
Twisted faces from the bottom of the street,
And tear from a passer-by with muddy skirts
An aimless smile that hovers in the air
And vanishes along the level of the roofs.

(Eliot 1917, 19)

Rahv viewed the urban downtrodden as a Jewish immigrant with a strong connection to Yiddish-speaking workers in New York. He wrote during the heyday of American socialism in a polemical mode. Eliot’s focus was different. In “The Music of Poetry” Eliot explained his disengagement from such political aims: “the poet is no more concerned with the social consequences than is the scientist in his laboratory”; yet he would surely have approved of Rahv’s grounding in his own experience: “it is the poet’s business to use the speech which he finds about him, that with which he is most familiar [...]. He must, like the sculptor, be faithful to the material with which he works; it is out of sounds that he has heard that he must make his melody and harmony” (Eliot 1942, 462).

Things changed considerably for Rahv, *Partisan Review*, and world politics in the years following the publication of “Homeless but not Motherless” in 1934. When the John Reed Club dissolved in 1935, the magazine lost its funding and was forced to fold in October 1936. Its ties with the Communist Party had become strained. Matters worsened with the Moscow Trials between 1936 and 1938, in which Leon Trotsky was accused of

conspiring against Joseph Stalin. Rahv, a Trotskyite sympathizer, was expelled from the Party in 1937. In December of that same year, Rahv found himself at the helm of a reconstituted *Partisan Review* with a new editorial board, new funding, and a strictly critical and literary, although still leftist, mission.

This is the context of a second text that also illustrates the ways in which Rahv retained immigrant values, his assimilation into American culture notwithstanding. The text in question is his celebrated essay “Paleface and Redskin”, which appeared in the *Kenyon Review* in 1939. The attention garnered by “Paleface and Redskin” promoted him to the ranks of one of the most influential critics of American literature. As Sanford Pinsker observes, it was “an essay so eye-catching, so wonderfully schematic, so entirely *usable* that whole paragraphs were trotted out [...] in hundreds of lecture halls and on not a few final examinations” (Pinsker 1989, 477-478). If Rahv remained an immigrant at heart, he was no longer an obscure marginalized one.

Ostensibly “Paleface and Redskin” represents a description of American literature, albeit a somewhat reductive one. Rahv distinguishes two polar types: one stemming from a devitalized but refined Puritan heritage; the other from the vigorous but often vulgar culture of the frontier and big cities. Palefaces – Hawthorne, Melville, Henry James, T.S. Eliot – refuse to grapple with the harsh realities of American life. Redskins – Whitman, Dreiser, Steinbeck, Sandburg – express the vitality and aspirations of the masses. He claims that the latter, whom he colorfully describes as “nearly all redskins to the wigwam born”, are the ones who “control the main highway of literature” (Rahv 1939, 254), a situation he deplors. Writing *for* the masses had had political value during the proletariat phase of the early 1930s. But writing *about* them typically lacked intellectual value. In Rahv’s literary dichotomy, the intellect of the palefaces is pitted against the experience of the redskins. Both are necessary but neither is sufficient. As Saul Bellow observed, *Partisan Review* wanted to have it both ways: they wanted intellectual refinement but also the innovative and energetic writing that emanates from below or from the margins. Referring to the British aesthete Walter Pater’s celebrated desire to achieve artistic ecstasy by “burn-

ing with a gemlike flame”, Bellow accused *Partisan Review* of wanting “to cook their meals over Pater’s flame and light their cigarettes at it” (Gussow – McGrath 2005)⁵.

Beneath the surface of what seems to be purely an objective literary analysis, however, it is possible to discern the perspective of the Jewish immigrant. For Rahv, both paleface and redskin literature ultimately failed to measure up to the European literary tradition that he and other members of the Jewish immigrant intellectuals of his generation prized. American writers lacked the depth of European giants like Dostoevsky or Thomas Mann in expressing national-cultural values, grappling with the crisis of values with which the modern world is afflicted, or understanding history in its movement and evolution. For such literature to exist in America according to Rahv, a Marxist synthesis was needed. American experience would only acquire value in coming together with European intellectualism. Bellow objected to *Partisan Review*’s “Europeanization of American literature”, their “injection of European avant-gardism to middle-brow America”, and their efforts “to mate high art with anti-Stalinist Marxism” (Mikics 2015).

The viewpoint of the Jewish immigrant can also be discerned in the racialization that is a notable feature of “Paleface and Redskin”. True, one can dismiss as old-fashioned racial insensitivity Rahv’s choice of the title of his essay. One might similarly interpret Bellow’s infamous statement regarding multiculturalism, “Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans” (Gussow – McGrath, 2005). I suspect, however, that such racialized terminology reflected more than just insensitivity. At an unconscious level, it may also have signified the Jewish immigrant’s own discomfort at being excluded from the racially unmarked, majority culture of America and being relegated along with other minority groups to the marked category of inferiors. Rahv revered the palefaces Henry James and T.S. Eliot. But ultimately he was not one of them. Victims of systematic, racially-motivated antisemitism, especially in the 1930s, which Philip

⁵ Bellow’s comment appeared in Bellow 1971, 177. Although directed at *Partisan Review* after Rahv left, it applies as well to the earlier editorial choices he made.

Roth has called “the most pointedly antisemitic decade in world history” (Thurman 2017), Jews were far from being considered “pale”. Immigration papers in the early twentieth century listed Jews as Hebrew, not white. They only entered the category of white in the 1940s, as Karen Brodtkin details in her provocatively titled book *How the Jews Became White* (1999). Jewishness was considered a racial identity when Rahv wrote “Paleface and Redskin”, as it still is today for certain Jews.

Although a member of an American intellectual elite, Rahv remained an immigrant with a brash New York manner who never quite fit in. He accepted a named professorship at Brandeis University but scorned academics. He climbed the social ladder marrying three non-Jewish women. They either ignored his Jewishness or found it exotic, as did Mary McCarthy in describing him to her Vassar friend Nathalie Swan as her “Levantine lover” (McCarthy 1992, 83). He married Swan, the moneyed daughter of the co-founder of the Junior League, in 1941. They led an elitist life, described by Mark Krupnick, a young professor who served as Rahv’s assistant, as revolving around “beautiful and expensive things – women, paintings, wines – which disposed him to enjoy the company of the wealthy and well born”; Krupnick also describes Rahv as living a deeply conflicted set of values, but, a “Marxist in his deepest convictions, Rahv had nevertheless during the misery of the Depression years absorbed many of the seigniorial values of the artists – James, Conrad, Yeats, Eliot – whom he had loved no less than the revolution” (Krupnick 2005, 166, 165).

Nothing shows how conflicted Rahv was better than his attitudes toward T.S. Eliot, who has been repeatedly charged with blatant antisemitism, for example for the stereotypical caricature of a Jew in his 1919 poem “Burbank with a Baedeker: Bleinstein with a Cigar” (see Ricks 1988, Julius 1996, Menand 1996). Such instances of antisemitism would undoubtedly not have bothered Rahv. Benjamin Ivry observes that Jewish intellectuals at the time “habitually treated such comments as minor irritations in the general context of historical experience”; moreover, he notes the productive, respectful professional associations Eliot had with Jews and even his own identification,

as an alien in England, as “a metic, like the Jew”, who “can only naturalize himself in cities” (Ivry 2011). In a similar vein, Ronald Schuchard calls attention to letters Eliot exchanged with the Jewish social philosopher Horace M. Kallen, some of which express a willingness to help German refugees and scholars or teachers in German concentration camps (Schuchard 2003, 17).

Rahv had his own take on Eliot’s objectional views. His first published article in 1932 entitled “T.S. Eliot” acknowledges “his recent affiliations with all that is reactionary and sterile on the modern scene” (Rahv 1932, 17). Yet he asserts that the best way to combat his views is to understand them. He highlights Eliot’s early work, which set out to “tear off the mask of piety and virtue from the smug bourgeoisie of New England” and displays “the intense dynamism of profound revolt” (17-18). Eliot perceived “certain profound spiritual problems, springing from the total complex of modern life” (18). In contrast, Rahv deplores the change that occurred when Eliot espoused the conservative elements he had satirized earlier and converted to Anglo-Catholicism. What fell by the wayside, Rahv asserts, is the social realism of his earlier poetry. With *The Waste Land* and later works, he fell into “the swamp of mysticism and scholasticism”; his “arbitrary choice of allusion and evocation” made his works available only to an intellectual elite – as a result, Eliot “must be discounted as a positive force in literature” and placed “with the retarders of the revolutionary urge towards the creation of a new human humanity” (18-19). In short, he concludes that a “poetry of aristocratic moods and ascetic ideas is neither possible nor desirable in an era of plebeian revolt and materialist dynamics” (19).

In his 1936 article on Eliot, Rahv again acknowledged Eliot’s veering toward fascism. But he defended him against “left critics” who, with their “crude treatment” of the esteemed poet, place him “beyond the pale of analysis and interpretation” (Rahv 1936, 11, 13). Arguing that politics should not stifle appreciation of art, Rahv concludes: “Every work of art, no matter how sure we are of its origin, must be examined anew. There is always the possibility of creative contradictions, on which the dialectic feeds” (11). The contradiction he discovers in his

analysis of *Murder in the Cathedral* is between Eliot's Christian search for salvation and the historical reality of warring classes that is essential to the meaning of the play.

That Rahv never mentions antisemitism and persists in defending Eliot in the face of the horrific events of the 1930s and 1940s may seem shocking, but it is not unique. Another group of intellectual Jews responded similarly fifty years later when the highly esteemed Belgian literary critic and Yale professor Paul de Man was found to have published antisemitic articles as a young man. Two prominent Jews came to his defense: the Algerian theorist Jacques Derrida and De Man's Yale colleague Geoffrey Hartman. That Hartman escaped Germany in 1939 on a children's transport to England makes his defense of De Man even harder to understand than Rahv's of Eliot (see Atlas 1988 and Menand 2014).

Rahv's last defense of Eliot is found in his review of *To Criticize the Critic and Other Writings* entitled "Eliot's Achievement" in 1966. Again, he dismissed Eliot's conservative ideas as belonging "to an entirely different order of discourse" from his aesthetic ones and states that they "are even at best quite unoriginal [...]. Eliot is no system-builder, has no great flair for logical consistency" (Rahv 1966, 2). As a literary critic, Rahv judges him as unparalleled: "he is the finest literary critic of this century in the English language" (Rahv 1936, 4). Rahv comments on Eliot's "errors of judgement and errors of tone" and indirectly addresses the most damning evidence of Eliot's antisemitism, the sentence published in 1940 in *After Strange Gods*: "reasons of race and religion combine to make any large number of free-thinking Jews undesirable" (Rahv 1940, 20). Eliot later explained that "free-thinking", not Jews, was his target; and he expressed regrets for having used the word "race" (Schuchard 2003, 15-16). Rahv's comments about this remark are more a dismissal than a defense. The author regretted the publication of this work; its alleged fanaticism "has been voiced mainly by his disciples" (Eliot 1966, 9).

To conclude, what did it mean for Philip Rahv and his generation to be Jewish immigrants? As noted at the start, the terms "Jewish" and "immigrant" need to be considered separately.

Rahv remained an immigrant because he never fully endorsed American cultural values. Intellectually he remained attached to Europe. Politically, too, his profound commitments were to non-American ideologies: socialism and non-Stalinist Marxism. He could not become an American just as he could not become a Zionist. He believed in an internationalist worldview, not in narrow nationalist cultural affiliations, whether American or Israeli. To generalize beyond his example, the Jewish intelligentsia of the 1930s shared his views.

Regarding Jewishness, Rahv's story is somewhat out of the ordinary, however. As they assimilated, many of his cohort migrated to Reform Judaism and Zionism. Rahv did not. But in an odd dénouement to his strictly secular life, he chose to return to his Jewish roots in the end. His will names the state of Israel as the beneficiary of his estate. This turn of events is especially puzzling in light of his hostility to Judaism, his rejection of Zionism, and his silence regarding the fate of Jews during the Holocaust. It is true that personal reasons may have played a role in the bequest. Rahv was childless, estranged from his family, and so angry at his third wife that he reportedly wanted to prevent her benefiting from whatever fortune he left behind (Kadish 2014, 283).

Other explanations are undoubtedly more important, however. One is political. In conversations with William Barrett, the co-founder of *Partisan Review*, Rahv bemoaned the lack of conviction among Americans. Harking back to the 1930s when he and others believed in changing the world after the Russian Revolution, Rahv found the faithlessness and barrenness of political aspiration of the 1970s disheartening. Barrett reports Rahv saying: "I wish I were in Israel. At least people there believe in something" (qtd. in Barrett 1982, 204). Stephen J. Whitfield concludes that near the end of his life he saw Israel as closer to socialist ideals than the Soviet Union or the United States (Whitfield 1998, 10).

Another explanation concerns the Jewish origins that Rahv retained, his social and professional assimilation notwithstanding. Perhaps at some level the bequest to the Jewish state represented an acknowledgment of his own immigrant history that he had either never truly wanted or been able to escape. Mary Mc-

Carthy, his lover in 1937, wrote that he was a fierce defender of his Jewish identity, despite his atheism and secular philosophy:

That was perhaps why we quarreled so much that summer, although we were greatly in love. It was a class war we fought, or so he defined it. I defended my antecedents, and he his. He boasted of Jewish superiority in every field of endeavor [...] Jewish musicians and scientists and thinkers [...]. His forceful assertions [...] were arousing anti-Semitic feelings in me, which, to my shame, were put into words. Scratch a Gentile and you find an anti-Semite was his reply. (McCarthy 1992, 68)

McCarthy also called attention to the enduring importance of the mother in Rahv's Jewish identity: along with "the tenderness of his feeling for the Jewish state" she wrote of "his love for being Jewish" and "his love for his mother" (80).

The Jewish mother looms large in any attempt to interpret the end of Rahv's life. An ardent Zionist, she had chosen to separate from her children and live in Israel. As a socialist and an intellectual, Rahv rejected her choice. Later in life, however, he may have needed to connect to the lost mother evoked in "Homeless but not Motherless". Family ties traditionally have had primordial importance for Jews. Perhaps Israel was symbolically the best or only way for Philip Rahv to ultimately rejoin the Jewish family he never had as an immigrant in America.

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Chapter 9

Marta Anna Skwara

The Polish Factor in Jewish American Writing. Three Cases:
Sholem Asch, Isaac Bashevis Singer, and Jerzy Kosiński

Jewish American writing is usually mediated by a culture of American writers of Jewish origins. Naturally, nostalgia for their countries of origin is most vivid and meaningful for the first generation of immigrants who remember its specific contours, and make generative use of it in their writing. Three Jewish American authors of Polish origin, who at different points of their lives settled in the US, represent different attitudes towards their Jewish-Polish background, which, to some extent, determined their American literary careers. I would like to present their cases, analyse not only the Jewish and American but also the Polish elements in their writings, and therefore question any easy generalizations inherent in the label “Jewish American”.

Sholem Asch (Szalom Asz, אש שלום, 1880-1957) is perhaps the least obvious example since, despite his having settled in the US during WWI and having become a naturalized American citizen already in 1920, he has long been labelled just as a Jewish writer or a Jewish writer of Polish origin. Even if his plays were staged in New York and many of his novels were written and published in the US (in Yiddish and/or in English translations), among them seven devoted to Jewish-American life, he has long represented Jewish or “world” literature in the US. His career in the States ended bitterly with New York’s leading Yiddish-language magazine *Forverts* (*The Forward*) accusing him of promoting Christianity. Asch had always been fascinated by the idea of an independent Jewish state, and settled in Israel towards the end of his life.

The second writer I examine is Isaac Bashevis Singer (Icek-Hersz Zynger, זינגער באַשעװיס יצחק, 1902-1991). Similar to Asch, Singer never wrote in Polish; but, again like Asch, he made his Yiddish literary debut in Poland (in 1936) and initially won wide readership among Yiddish readers. He immigrated to the US soon afterwards and began to publish in English. He also kept writing in Yiddish, and actively participated in the process of translating his work. However, Singer did not abandon his Polish heritage; he incorporated it into many levels of his novels and short stories that are for the most part set in pre-war Poland. He was enormously successful not only in America but also worldwide, receiving the Nobel Prize for literature in 1978.

The last writer I wish to discuss, Jerzy Kosiński (Józef Lewinkopf, 1933-1991), offers yet another example of a Jewish-Polish-American writer who, despite being labelled as an American writer of Jewish (Jewish-Polish) origin, came from an assimilated Jewish family. Kosiński never wrote in Yiddish, and never published in Polish, which was both his native language and the language of his higher education. Yet, he based some of his novels written in America (at the beginning probably only co-translated from Polish originals) on the Jewish-Polish experience. Perhaps it would be more proper to say: they were based on dark legends he created of that experience, as I hope to demonstrate.

Basing my arguments on these three cases, I will try to outline various interpretative possibilities that this variegated corpus of Jewish-Polish-American writing offers. I will focus mostly on issues of religion, race, cultural memory and assimilation, and – last but not least – on these authors' literary fame and success. It is important to evoke biographical facts which to some extent determined the cultural positions of each of these writers.

Asch was born into a large Chasidim family in Kutno in the Polish Mazovia region, when it was still a part of Prussia (after the third partition of Poland). Due to his extensive religious studies (he had trained to be a rabbi), Hebrew was his most developed language (although he could also read Polish, German and Russian). Yiddish was the language of everyday communication and of the literature that he most relished, particularly the

works of Icchak Lejb Percec, one of Poland's most popular Yiddish writers of the time. Thanks to Percec's invitation, Asch first published his short stories in *Der Jid*, a Yiddish magazine distributed in Warsaw and Krakow. Subsequently, Asch was able to publish more frequently after relocating to Warsaw. It was here that Asch befriended two famous Polish writers, Stanisław Witkiewicz and Stefan Żeromski, who encouraged him to develop his writing in Yiddish as his original cultural background. They also helped Asch translate his plays for the stage and introduced him in Polish literary circles (Kuligowska-Korzeniowska 2011, 30-37). In his letters, written in "demonic" Polish, as Antoni Słonimski, a fellow Polish writer of Jewish origins, put it (Słonimski 1989, 12), Asch expressed much admiration for Polish literature. Later, in autobiographical interviews and in various talks, he emphasized the meaning that Polish literature had in his own writing. He was deeply influenced by its authors, such as Poland's chief romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz as well by realists such as Bolesław Prus, Henryk Sienkiewicz, Stefan Żeromski and Władysław Reymont (Sitarz 2013, 263-270). Reymont persuaded Asch to write a short story in Polish which he himself corrected, but Asch immediately translated it into Yiddish (273).

Before settling in the US, Asch led a somewhat nomadic life, living and working also in Germany, Palestine, and France. In 1933 he was initiated into the Order of the *Polonia Restituta*, an honor of high rank conferred on civilians, military and foreigners alike for outstanding achievements in their fields and for contributing towards the enrichment of Poland. However, he was bitterly criticised in Jewish circles for accepting this honor, and unjustly accused of ignoring incidents of antisemitism in Poland. Asch had taken a clear stance in various pronouncements condemning antisemitic incidents, connecting them to the Nazi influences of the time (274-275). He never directly accused Poles of antisemitism. He felt that blanket blame contributed to generalizing the guilt of individual cases, and thereby further exacerbated antisemitic sentiments. He had hoped that his words could "further the brotherly co-existence of both nations", which, in his view, was "necessary for his homeland to prosper"

(Asz 1932, 513; my translation, here and elsewhere). In 1938, Asch became a permanent resident of the US. He then devoted his efforts to writing a trilogy on Christianity and its connection to Judaism. This work brought him negative reviews and harsh criticism from Jewish readers and critics, finally leading to his emigration from the US to Israel, where he chose to live in a small town which, according to his daughter, reminded him of his native Kutno (Sitarz 2013, 63).

Out of the many cultural and political aspects of Asch's worldview (he was a Zionist as well as a Polish patriot who always emphasized his love for Mazovia, but also an international figure who would live and write in several countries), his interests in the closely interlinked histories of Christianity and Judaism, along with his strong bonds to Poland and Polish culture, would prove very problematic in the US at the time. His positionality, perhaps, accounts for the liminal position his work occupies in the Jewish American literary canon – it would be several years before Asch was even regarded as a Jewish American writer. In his 1950 article “Sholem Asch: Still Immigrant and Alien”, Oscar Cargill blamed American society's unwillingness to accept immigrant authors, especially those writing in languages other than English. It is significant that Jewish American circles disregarded Asch's work, even though he was one of the founders of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee (Joint) and contributed for many years to *Forverts*. The journal broke with him in 1939, after Asch's novel *Der man fun Naceres* (subsequently published in English translation as *The Nazarene*) presented Jesus as a pious Jew. His position in the US was further weakened when the two following volumes of his biblical trilogy – *The Apostle*, devoted to St. Paul, and *Mary*, a discussion of the Mother of Jesus – appeared in print. A common accusation against Asch in the Jewish American press at the time was that he “let his non-Jewish milieu influence his work” and “tried to please non-Jewish readers” (54).

The Polish characters in Asch's Yiddish work as well as his American novels are of particular interest. For example, Antoni Cholewa in *Istriwer* (East River, 1946), is characteristically nicknamed *Ola Boga!* (something like “Oh, My God” ex-

pressed in a Polish folk manner). He keeps rabbits, and plants sunflowers, cabbage and geraniums (it is hard to find a more Polish combination!) in Harry Greenstock's yard. Greenstock himself is another character from a small town in Poland, who loved his surroundings from an early age, and just like Asch had always loved the Mazovia landscape. In Asch's last American novel, *Grosman un zun* (Grosman and son, 1954), the reader encounters a different type of Polish figure. An old Jew has once stolen 27.5 dollars from someone named Jan Kowalski (a most typical Polish name), and wants to atone for this old sin. First accused of madness due to "inventing" a Jan Kowalski, Grosman finally clears his conscience when Jan Kowalski's confessor testifies that Grosman's theft had long been forgiven by the late Kowalski. These are but a few of the types of Polish characters one finds in Asch's novels and short stories. They add to the complex richness of Asch's multicultural world which is also populated by Italians, Irish, Spaniards and characters of several other nationalities. Asch's work emphasized the more human aspects of human coexistence, and this thematic formed the basis of much of the criticism that was directed against him. In terms of his literary and narrative style, Asch's use of intertextuality is particularly noteworthy, especially the creative ways in which he incorporated elements from Polish literature into the works he wrote outside Poland.

Of the nearly thirty novels Asch wrote, seven were devoted to Jewish life in the US, beginning with *Amerika* (1911) and ending with *Grosman un zun* (1954). Due to lack of space, I will analyse only the first novel published in Yiddish in the US, later translated into Polish (1926, republished in 1930), and widely read on both sides of the Atlantic¹. It is important to emphasize that the novel was translated into Polish directly from Yiddish by a bicultural translator (Mojżesz Szpira), and that therefore all the realities and names (common both to Yiddish and to Polish) were not distorted, as so often happens with translations of Yiddish literature into English.

¹ The English translation by James Fucks appeared in 1918 in New York by Alpha and Omega.

Despite its Kafkaesque title, Asch's *Amerika* is a realistic picture of the Jewish immigrant life in New York, painted against a rich panorama of what had been Jewish life back home. The novel begins in the small town (Jewish *sztetl*) of Leszno from which a father of a poor Jewish family, Meir, departs in order to work in America, leaving behind his wife and four children, among them the six-year-old Yosele, his favourite and most talented child. In the second chapter, we find Meir in New York, where he feels lost "on a desert among 5 million people and thousands of brothers" (Asz 1930, p. 21). His compatriots find him a simple tailoring job, a monotonous work for which he commutes daily by "a train in a tunnel" that is often compared to a beast. America itself is often called "Columbus" and portrayed as a monster by the Jewish women who cannot even understand the name, which sounds strange to them.

Meir, a simple worker, lives among other Jews from whom he feels alienated (their heads are uncovered while he covers his with a traditional *jarmulka*). He finds the local prayer house, run by the Society of Leszno, unbearable because of its commercialism. Therefore he devotes himself to private prayers and recitation of the *Mishnah* and *Gemara*. Even during the meetings at *reb* Chaim Kohen widow's house, where all his compatriots from Leszno would gather to talk about their lost world, Meir keeps apart – rejecting an invitation to join the workers' union, since he does not feel like a worker. Finally, he puts all his heart into planning on bringing his family to America².

The journey of Meir's wife and children is arduous, including an illegal border crossing where a group of smuggled Jews are treated like "pieces of commodity exported to America, passed from hands to hands" (58). There is only one way the Jews can fight their sense of alienation: they must keep together and support each other. Although Meir did not experience such community bonding in America, his family has experienced it on their journey³. Also, on a journey back, caused by Yosele not being

² He learns from the only compatriot he has who can speak English and knows American realities – speaking to the role that language and culture play in alienation – that it is possible to buy boarding-cards to a ship on credit.

³ Having boarded a ship on the first day of Hanukkah, all the Jewish passengers

admitted to the US due to old typhoid scars on his head, the boy and his older sister are generously helped by all the Jews on board who smuggle them back into Russia. Meanwhile, America, the alienating monster also known as Columbus, continues to grow. When Meir meets his son at Ellis Island, he describes America as an evil “country of freedom” that wants to separate them. Yosele’s heart-breaking final call for his mother as he is forced to leave emphasizes his feeling of separation from both his family and his new country.

Yet alienation and rejection do not affect everyone in the same way. Yosele’s two brothers change from noisy boys into independent footballers, who have learned English and garnered small jobs. They begin to despise their old-fashioned father and his lack of practical knowledge. Also, Yosele’s sister, who subsequently comes back to America, becomes an independent factory girl with her own life. These transformations deepen the parents’ loneliness and their longing for Yosele, whom they now view as their only true child. Back in Leszno, the talented Yosele studies successfully in the *cheder*, lives with his aunt and uncle, and exchanges affectionate letters with his beloved and idealized father. When the scars on his head are cured by a local medic, Yosele returns to America. However, instead of experiencing great joy at being reunited with his family, he suffers. His brothers speak a foreign language, do not cover their heads and disrespect his religious habits. His father and mother, burdened by work and duties, have also changed. Only in the evenings, when he melodically recites the *Gemara* with his father, does Yosele feel at home again. His alienation deepens in the public school he now attends. The foreign language, odd new habits, and childish activities all prove detrimental to him. He is especially upset by a May Day parade to Central Park where the children are dressed in fairy-tale costumes. Dressed up against his will, Yosele loses all his boyish self-respect. Finally, feeling psychologically maltreated, he falls seriously ill in the humid New York weather and dies.

celebrate together the holiday with a *chazan* (Synagogue singer) from Kielce, praying *kedusze* (a hymn), and sharing a meal afterwards like one big family.

This novel was unjustifiably excluded from the Jewish American canon because of its stark depiction of the theme of alienation. Certain specifically Polish references in it may account for its reception. There are references to Polish towns – Leszno, Sochaczew, Góra Kalwaria – and emblematic Polish characters, such as the peasants on board ship who gather under a cross and a church banner, and sing their “holy song” upon arrival. There is also a description of the extremely “pale face of Christ” (67) that belongs to a Polish Jew. Such references are characteristic of Asch’s ideas. The text evokes certain typical elements from Yiddish literature that Asch develops, such as mythical personifications and fable-like narrative stylistic patterns. These elements appear particularly in the chapter on Yosele and his sister’s miraculous return to their *shtetl* unharmed (Sitarz 2013, 110). Yet, without any knowledge of Polish literature, especially without any familiarity with the works of Henryk Sienkiewicz, an author much admired by Asch, the connections between his Yiddish writing in America and what he wrote back home are lost.

I believe that in order to understand *Amerika*, later published in an abbreviated version as *Yosele*, a short story by Sienkiewicz proves fundamental. Published in 1879, “Janko Muzykant” (Yanko the Player) focuses on a talented sensitive peasant’s child, a half-orphan, who feels alienated due to both his poverty and sensitivity to music. He dies, having first been beaten mercilessly for reaching for his Master’s violin. However, the real reason for his death goes deeper than his social alienation and his education. The story was very popular. It set a pattern in Polish literary culture for depicting the character of a poor sensitive child that exists even to this day. It is improbable that Asch did not know this story, especially since he read Sienkiewicz as a youth (184)⁴. What I find particularly striking about the similarities between the two narratives is their focus

⁴ In the American context, it can be noted that long before Walt Whitman’s poems were translated into Polish, his short story “Death in a School Room”, dealing with a sensitive child maltreated by a bad teacher, acquired wide readership at the turn of nineteenth century – and not because of its literary value but because of its topic, which was akin to Sienkiewicz’s novel (Skwara 2004, 70).

on poor talented children who must die in a cruel unempathetic world and the fact that they are so unique that no one can really understand them. In both texts, physical fragility and susceptibility to illness are emphasized. Both boys are immersed in their own worlds, music in Janko's case, holy books and their melodic recitations in Yosele's. Both children are temporarily and metaphorically orphaned. Both die in situations which make readers reflect on the world we inhabit. Their mothers' despair, emphasized in the conclusions of both stories, has symbolic dimensions. Yosele's grave becomes a symbol of the price that his mother (but also the whole nation) has to pay for moving to an alien country, as much as Janko's grave becomes a symbol of social alienation engendered by poverty and class society. Into the basic structure of a poor sensitive child's life found in Sienkiewicz's immortalized trope, Asch inscribes his own images, which are typical of Jewish culture. Some scenes of the two stories seem parallel, such as the scene of the boys' death, from which, surprisingly, the beloved Yosele's father disappears completely. Just like Janko, Yosele dies in the loving arms of his mother, experiencing a supernatural vision before his death. While Janko sees sunshine which leads him to God, who, as he hoped, will give him a violin in Heaven, Yosele's vision is much more elaborate. He can see himself on a wide heavenly road on which "the world of Jews of all epochs" gather, and Moses leads a funeral procession consisting of both historical Jewish figures, patriarchs, scholars and angels, and Yosele's grandmother. Yosele begins to understand that he envisions his funeral when, amidst songs and music, the procession ascends to Heaven's gates. Here a crucial difference between the two narratives of the poor sensitive boys emerges: Yosele dies accepted by his nation, Janko dies alone, with an epilogue to the story offering a harsh social commentary⁵. Asch creates a vision of a collective national and religious unity wherein souls are saved. When put into the American context, Asch's *Amerika*

⁵ A dialogue between a rich violin owner's daughter and her admirer, praising Italy as the country of great artists, emphasizes ironically the tragic fate of a poor Polish child. Especially when a young lady, in French, enthuses over the happiness of finding and supporting talents in Italy.

adds the crucial element of immigrant alienation. When put into a Yiddish and Polish context, the narrative reveals a cultural and literary context that highlights the intertextual aspects of this immigrant fiction.

Many other cases of interesting intercultural intertextuality can be found in Asch's American prose, among which I would only mention here his descriptions of nature, which were a new element in Yiddish literature. Asch is even believed to have introduced nature descriptions to Yiddish prose (116). One finds especially the motif of a river, which becomes quite significant in his writing. We find the descriptions of the Wisła (Vistula) river in his early novel *Dos shtetl* (published in Minsk in 1904, and six years later in Polish translation as *Miasteczko*), and of the East River in his much later American novel. Both descriptions call to mind the best known river motif in Polish literature from Eliza Orzeszkowa's novel *Nad Niemnem* (*On the Niemen*, 1887-1888)⁶.

In *Dos Shtetl* (Town), the Vistula becomes a magic border between reality and fantasy. Jewish boys see it as the River Jordan. A hill behind the river becomes Ararat in their eyes. It is also the point of departure for men travelling to a *cadyk* (Chassidic leader), and a place where one waits for them to return. Beyond the ocean, a river, even as dirty and surrounded by ugly buildings as the East River in New York, evokes memories: "The nearness of the East River had brought the old country to their minds: along the Vistula, the Bug, and the Volga enormous rafts of logs floated" (Asch 1946, 35). The river is also able to ferry heroes to another world, as in the case of one of the novel's main characters, Nathan, who reflects: "As a young boy he had often dreamed of being able some day to travel to Europe. For hours at a time he had stood on the bank of the East River and watched the ships cutting through its road, billowy surface...A longing for distant lands was awakened in him by

⁶ In Poland, Asch befriended Orzeszkowa and carried on a correspondence with her (while she helped him to get a scholarship for learning Polish and visiting Zakopane, the Polish artistic centre at the time). In one of Asch's letters we even find a poem in Polish that alludes to a folk song quoted by Orzeszkowa in *Nad Niemnem* (Sitarz 2013, 270-271).

the sea gulls..." (141). As in Orzeszkowa's novel, the title river's name embraces the whole district around it, and depicts a broad panorama of its inhabitants' lives that flow like a river. Again, as in the case of his intertextual connections with Sienkiewicz's writing, Asch is inspired in a unique way. Orzeszkowa's river is set in the countryside, while his, even if it brings back country memories, is a city river with a different character. From nature, it moves us into civilization, a move which is always painful. Orzeszkowa begins her description of the Niemen in this manner: "The swollen river rocked in its comfortable bed. Overhead the sun shone in a clear sky. Everything around on the river seemed to be in constant movement"; she ends by describing an industrialized river with its "oily waters" covered in "blue smoke" and pierced with "hoarse sounds of sirens"; its bank is no longer "a sandy wall growing out of the green ground and cut off from the blue sky by a crown of dark woods" that "in the sun... looked like half a gold ring" (Orzeszkowa 2014, 9). In Asch, we find "an unending line of somber factory buildings, their tall chimneys belching black clouds of smoke", with only their windows "reflected gold in the sunlight" (Asch 1946, 62).

Asch's attention to nature can be connected not only to images from Polish literature but also to his memory of the Polish landscape, expressed affectionately in a speech delivered at a meeting of the Polish Pen Club in 1928: "But I have learned the most from the Polish lands, where I was born. The Polish landscape remained in my memory when I roamed the world" (Asch, qtd. in Sitarz 2013, 264). Thus, biographical and literary memory, the memory of the land, and the memory of its literary representations are important elements in reading Asch, particularly in those texts written in America that depict American lands Nathan capes. They often connect the New and the Old World, like the East River does.

Cultural memory, rather than intertextuality, becomes crucial in reading Singer's prose. As opposed to Asch, Singer belonged to a large group of Polish Jews, who from 1918 onward held Polish citizenship, yet chose to live outside the mainstream culture by using only Yiddish in their life and work. Singer admitted learning some Polish "quite late" and reading some Pol-

ish literature (especially Sienkiewicz and Waclaw Berent). He never, however, devoted any of his numerous literary essays to Polish writers, except to those of Jewish origins (which seems natural since he was connected only with Jewish literary magazines published in pre-war Poland). At first, Singer even regarded writers of Jewish origin who exclusively wrote in Polish – and we had many of them, often the best masters of the Polish language, such as Bolesław Leśmian or Julian Tuwim – as traitors who betrayed their own culture to serve a “younger and perhaps less important culture” (Adamczyk-Garbowska 1996, 31). Later, he softened his opinion by allowing them to choose Polish and to cherish it as much as he himself cherished Yiddish. From Singer’s perspective, that is from a perspective of a rabbi’s child who spent his childhood in a small Mazovian town (Leoncin) and his youth on Krochmalna Street in Warszawa (i.e. the centre of the Jewish-speaking neighbourhood in Warsaw), Polish was a strange language, and Polish newspapers, magazines and books belonged to a different reality. Also, Singer did not really belong to Poland politically. Although formally a Polish citizen, he would say that before the First World War he was a citizen of Russia, which did not mean much to him either (63). Thus, one can view his debut in Yiddish, with a novel devoted to analyzing the psychological and anti-social mechanisms found in the Jewish *shtetl* of Goraj in the 17th century, and his journalist career in Yiddish newspapers published in Poland, as a reflection of his particular chosen cultural milieu.

Originally cut off from Polish culture, Singer could have remained so, had it not been for his immigration to the US in the late 1930s. In fact, Singer never mentally left the Poland of his childhood. In one of his oft-quoted conversations, he even admitted that he never stopped living in the country of his youth (cf. Adamczyk-Garbowska 1996, 17). Perhaps it was simply the only surroundings that he ever found familiar, in terms of topography and cultural landscape. Most of his novels written and published in the US are set in pre-war Poland. His heroes are both Jewish and Polish, as are his villains, and thus some readers and critics have accused Singer of being both antisemitic (especially in New York) and anti-Polish (especially in Warsaw).

Certainly, what makes his world appealing to so many different readers, even those who never came in contact with either Jewish or Polish culture, is its deeply human, often archetypal dimension. However, what makes it unique is its mixture of culture and language from which nothing can be removed without distortion. Translations of Singer's work vividly show how much is lost, but such loss is often missed by those who can read Singer only in English.

Even if Singer tended to oversee his translations into English carefully, many elements of his rich multicultural style are simplified to a form more acceptable to the American public and subsequently to the world. As a consequence, when translated into Polish, Singer's novels appear uprooted. Some vivid examples are offered by Monika Adamczyk-Garbowska, a Polish academic and translator, who switched from translating Singer's writing from English into translating it from Yiddish originals. She proved that many everyday Jewish and Polish details had simply disappeared from the English versions. Many original habits and customs depicted in his first Yiddish novel, for example, become obscure when attempts are made to render them universal. What in the English version is called "drying fruit to preserve it for the rest of the year" is, in fact, drying the fruit for a typical Jewish dessert called *cymes*; the neutral forms "necklaces and decorations" are, in fact, local, yet well-known Polish folk adornments (*kreln un pacierkes / korale i paciorki* made of different kinds of colourful beads); a "nondescript housecoat" proves to be a *cajgenemchalat*, a traditional Jewish overcoat made out of *cajg* – a hard cotton (19).

This translator also points to more serious stylistic changes that concern Singer's first novel. While the Yiddish original flows with its own melody and rhythm, English versions, for obvious reasons, lose this lyrical quality. The whole original story is narrated in the past and present tenses alternatively, which makes it both dynamic and universal. The story narrated in English, according to grammatical rules, is placed only in the past (20). Through the efforts of this translator and scholar, some of the original cultural balance was restored. This edition of the first Polish translation of Singer's first Yiddish novel was also

equipped with a rich dictionary of Jewish terms and cultural information, some of which are now long forgotten in modern Polish culture⁷, and some have been well preserved in modern times, like *klezmer* (a street musician) or *trefne*, originally signifying non-kosher food, but in modern Polish signifying illegal or fake objects.

It would be natural to assume that it was only Singer's first novel published in Yiddish in Poland that was so in tune with his home culture, and that later works, written in Yiddish in the US, and then translated into English, did not immediately lose this connection, which perhaps gradually disappeared during the process of translation and cultural adaptation. The original Polish names, for example, often changed or removed from English translations, had been intentionally included by Singer, to suggest the social status of a character. For instance, Antosia could be only a maid, and Felicja a lady. Typical endings of Polish noble names such as "-ski" or "-cki" suggest a noble character, often in contrast to a hero's social stature – a shoemaker Zawadzki is a good example of this connection (Karpluk 1984, 207-208). Also, Polish words and sayings (commonly used by assimilated Jews), historical characters, or songs accompanying particular events were frequent in the original Yiddish texts. But King Jan Sobieski, a symbol of former glory days, or the Potocki family, a symbol of elegance and wealth, mean next to nothing to English readers. As Adamaczyk-Garbowska has emphasized, the use of Polish by Singer had a very wide register, from denoting familiarity to introducing foreign elements. The function of Polish in Singer's writing is as ambivalent as Poland itself is as the country in which Jewish community felt both familiar and alienated. Thus, Polish literature is often represented through the loss of the original Jewish culture. For instance, Hadassah, the heroine of the first Singer's novel published in America, *The Family Moskat*, reads Polish romantics, realists and modernists represented respectively by Mickiewicz, Prus and Przybyszewski (Singer 1980, 62). Her readings situate her in-between Jewish and Polish culture, as does

⁷ Such as *aguna* (*agune*) – an abandoned wife who is not a widow and thus cannot remarry.

her use of language. When she speaks Yiddish, her voice has “a youthful, almost childish quality”; Polish accents come from her lips “precisely and definitely” (63). There is little similarity between the languages she uses. However, another character’s (Asa Heshel’s) Polish has an unusual sentence structure, and it becomes “by some sort of miracle the homey Yiddish” (64). The female character, Miriam, from *The Manor* (1967), loses her common sense by reading Polish books, especially romances⁸. First, she marries a decadent Polish count, Lucjan Jampolski, then she converts to Christianity. In general, reading Polish literature in Singer’s world signifies a process of assimilation that has negative consequences for the Jews involved.

While a different perspective on Polish culture and Jewish life in Poland was adopted by Singer, who emphasized alienation and conflicts much more than Asch ever did⁹, both shared a similar use of familiar Polish landscapes in their American fiction. In Singer, Polish scenery, even with Catholic elements, becomes a unique locus that connects different epochs of Jewish history:

Asa Heshel found something in the Polish landscape that none of those other countrysides possessed. It seemed to him that the difference lay in the strange silence over everything... The small silver clouds that floated above appeared to have a peculiarly Polish shape. All the sounds merged into a single stilled murmuring... From a distance the farms with their straw-covered cottages appeared like the relics of ancient settlements... An open roadside shrine revealed a figure of Mary holding the Christ child... In front of the shrine a candle burned... A timeless tranquillity seemed to exude from the white birches, which gazed far off into space, and the silver-gray willows, bent like old men, with long, dangling beards. Asa Heshel was reminded of the Emperor Casimir¹⁰ and of the Jews who had come to

⁸ The archetype of Emma Bovary’s character from Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* is recreated by the author in a different cultural context.

⁹ Suffice it to compare Asch’s image of the *shtetl* from his first novel and Singer’s creation of Goraj. Even if they both present a predominately hermetic Jewish milieu, Asch’s depiction of the Christian neighbours is especially meaningful – in one symbolic scene, in both the synagogue and the church calls for a prayer addressed to the same God are heard. In Singer’s creation, Polish peasants live somewhere on the outskirts of Goraj, and appear only in the sphere of commercial exchange – Jews sell them pictures of Christian saints.

¹⁰ In fact, it was King Jan Kazimierz who granted Jews many privileges in fourteenth-century Poland.

Poland a thousand years before, asking to be permitted to trade, to build their temples, and to acquire ground to bury their dead. (246)

Even “gypsies”, whom Asa “had never come across outside of Poland”, are a sign that he “was home again” (246). In Singer’s world paralleled landscapes help to make sense of the New World, even more strongly than in Asch’s work. The American farm calls to mind a familiar homestead: “Near the house was a well and an outhouse like in a Polish shtetl” (Singer 1976, 92); New York reminds one of Warsaw: “New York reminded me of Warsaw. All that was lacking was the horse-drawn sledges” (163); and even the Argentinian breeze is reminiscent of the Vistula and Warsaw (20). Surprisingly, Yiddish can also evoke Polish, as we learn in the short story “Sam Palka and David Vishkover”: “The man I dictated this book to tried to correct me all the time; he didn’t like my Polish Yiddish” (134). As in Asch’s case, behind a literary creation lurks a biographical experience, and a need to make the New World familiar. In Singer’s memoir, *Love and Exile*, we find such a description:

I was told that Spadina Avenue was the center of Yiddishism in Toronto, and there we went. I again strolled on Krochmalna Street – the same shabby buildings, the same pushcarts and vendors. [...]

[...]

It was odd that having crossed the Atlantic and smuggled myself over the border I found myself in a copy of Yiddish Poland. (Singer 1986, 317-319)

Singer clearly pointed out the main differences between Jewish life in Poland and in America, which to a certain extent complements the message of Asch’s *Amerika*: in Poland, Jews had taken root for centuries and created their own world; they spoke their own language, cultivated their own habits and religion. They came to America with a desire for assimilation, with a need to learn a language and to become part of the American world (Adamczyk-Garbowska 1994, 54). Yet, as opposed to Asch, Singer never devoted any work of literary fiction solely to the problems of assimilation in America; pre-war Poland remained his favourite topic, as clearly seen in his first novel published in English in the United States. *The Family*

Moskat takes place in Warsaw, Terespol, and Biała Podlaska. It deals with problems of assimilation. However, as is often emphasized, “Singer is describing a brutally destroyed world and [...] his composition is underscored by his knowledge of the deterioration of European civilisation in the twentieth century” (Milbauer 1985, 106). Moreover, neither Asch nor Singer ever devoted a literary work directly to the Holocaust. They were unable to find a literary medium to deal with such a traumatic experience about which they only heard. It was a Jewish-Polish-American writer of yet another generation, Jerzy Kosiński, who made the Holocaust one of his major themes.

At first glance, Kosiński seems to be quite different from Asch and Singer in at least two important aspects: he never wrote in Yiddish (and probably did not even know the language as many assimilated Jews in Poland did not), and he made a successful career in the US and abroad (although, contrary for Asch and Singer, he was never nominated to the Nobel Prize). Moreover, he was an author in only one language – English. Many of his novels do not deal with any specific Jewish or Polish experience, and his life was occluded by so many mystifications that for years it was impossible to distinguish between facts and fiction: the process of separating the two was never completed. Having become the president of the American branch of PEN twice, Kosiński also held a different position in American literature circles. It would be unimaginable, for instance, that any Jewish magazine could have blocked his publications, as happened with Asch. His single language career made him primarily an American writer; he was analysed and interpreted within English departments, with his cultural background neglected or misunderstood.

Certainly, Kosiński himself did much to construct what he became: a successful American writer who used his country of origin freely, with no special attachments. When he found it suitable, he simply fabricated stories to achieve his goals. Although a privileged Polish Communist young scholar who was given a scholarship to the US, he presented himself as a victim of the Communists who had created numerous obstacles to prevent him leaving or re-entering Poland. And even if he was

harboured safely during the Second World War by Polish Catholics who gave him and his parents a safe shelter in Dąbrowa Rzeczycka, he presented himself, directly and indirectly, as a victim of the Holocaust, as a wandering child separated from his parents. However, it is this Polish background, which for a long time has been ignored, that illuminates his writing. I will merely touch upon two significant points.

The first one involves Kosiński's most famous and, perhaps, most shocking novel, *The Painted Bird* (1965). Its hero – a young boy, a “Jewish or Gypsy stray” – goes through traumatic experiences among degenerate East Europeans during the Holocaust. The experiences are described in the book's introduction. The novel depicts historical events such as the German occupation, trains to concentration camps, and partisan activity. The misunderstanding and later outrage regarding the novel came from the autobiographical aura that Kosiński invented and that, despite later clarifications, is still taken for truth in many respectable literary sources.

It was Elie Wiesel, a child of Holocaust survivors himself, who gave credibility to Kosiński's account by stating that the writer had told him that the novel was based on his own experiences as a child during the war (Sloan 1997, 223). Since the mid-1960s, Holocaust narratives had come into being as a distinct genre. It is not surprising that Kosiński, not having achieved any attention as Joseph Novak, the author of two collections of sociological essays, switched to this potentially more marketable topic of interest and story line. He would need a biographical legend to support his Holocaust story, since it is hard to imagine that it would have won many readers as a Holocaust testimonial if it had been written by somebody who as a child lived safely throughout the war in the Polish countryside, protected by Polish Catholics who had risked death for housing him – a fact which Kosiński only admitted twenty years later and in his unique self-centred manner (Kosiński 1992, 34-35). It seems surprising that no feature of the story made interpreters question its veracity from the very beginning. Neither the unrealistic chain of ordeals that the little boy suffers, nor the much wider perspective than his age would seem to allow, created any suspi-

scions. In contrast to the Jewish heroes and Russian or German soldiers, all the Polish characters depicted in the novel are degenerates. These portraits also raised no suspicions nor did the novel's accumulation of atrocities, sadistic violence, and sexual perversions. Appearing as they did in a novel that was presented as an autobiographical account, it is odd that no one questioned their verisimilitude. Initially the terms "account", "confession", "testament", "document" were key words in the book's reception (Sloan 1997, 223). We have to bear in mind that, at the time of the novel's publication, it was not customary to examine it against any realistic or ethnographic background. Holocaust literature was just gaining momentum, and its victims – maltreated Jews – were usually idealised as heroes in the literature of the time. It is also worth noting that at the same time that Kosiński was writing his autobiographical account, Singer was accused of depicting Jewish communities in too negative a light (Adamczyk-Garbowska 1994, 35). Even though Singer's stories were set in the pre-war period, the Jewish characters' flaws appeared shocking after the experiences of the Holocaust.

However, degenerated animalistic Poles, deprived of any culture and morality, were not considered too shocking. For example, in the fifth chapter of Kosiński's novel the reader finds a scene during which a female character called "Stupid Ludmila", who "live[s] with her huge dog as with a man", tries to force a six-year old to have sex. At another point she has sex with two men, one after another, in plain sight of the other villagers, including a child. A moment later, a group of village women beat her mercilessly and rape her with a bottle filled with "brownish-black manure". They finally kick her to death, with an initial kick being especially spectacular: "one of them kicked the bottom of the bottle sticking out of Stupid Ludmila's groin" (Kosiński 1976, 55).

When the scandal regarding the lack of any true biographical background for his story broke, Kosiński sought in an afterword to the second edition (1976) to universalize it by pointing out how loosely factual references are inscribed into the novel. The boy is anonymous, and the brutal villagers speak some strange "dialects" that the child cannot understand. Actually,

the language of the villagers is understood enough by the boy for him to be able to repeat in detail what they say, and what they say about Jews tends to consist of outrageous antisemitic clichés¹¹. They physically and sexually abuse the Jews all the time (like in two cases of Jewish girls temporarily sheltered by two villagers). Many of their names, contrary to what Kosiński claims in his afterword (“I had made sure that the names of people and places I used could not be associated exclusively with any national group”; xv), are clearly connected with Polish culture – for instance, “Lekh” is Lech (which is, by the way, a name of a legendary founder of the Polish nation), and “Stupid Ludmila” is Ludmiła, a traditional name that every Polish reader will recognize¹² (etymologically it means, “beloved by the people”, which, given that she was brutally murdered by “the people”, adds one more element to the possible interpretations of the novel). This female character’s fate also adds an intertextual dimension: in *Chłopi* by the aforementioned Władysław Reymont, a village girl, Jagna, is accused of immorality, and is driven from the village on a manure cart, while being physically and verbally abused. Reymont was awarded the Nobel Prize for his novel in 1924. He could not be an unknown writer to Kosiński, educated as he was in Polish schools and universities in Łódź, the city to which Reymont devoted another one of his famous novels¹³.

¹¹ “They said the Lord’s finally reached the Jews. They had deserved it long ago, ever since they crucified Christ. God never forgot... They were being justly punished for the shameful crimes of their ancestors, for refuting the only True Faith, for mercilessly killing Christian babies and drinking their blood” (Kosiński 1976, 96).

¹² “Ewka”, a typical Polish nickname from Ewa, is another overtly animalized character, who seduces a boy of 10 and has sex with a buck, as well as with her own brother and father (146-151). A girl named Ewka was a young playmate of Jerzy’s from Dąbrowa (Sloan 1997, 60), and another character’s name, Labina, was the name of a servant at Kosiński’s hiding house in Dąbrowa. In fact, many other characters’ names are based on real people the author knew, such as Lech (Lech Tracz) or Makar (Julian Makar) (Siedlecka 2011, 174-175).

¹³ *Ziemia obiecana*, dealing with complicated Polish-Jewish-German relationships in the capitalistic city of Łódź in 1890s, describes a brutal fight over money that turns monstrous, and its bankers and investors become deeply inhuman. An anecdote that contextualizes Asch’s position toward Polish literature can be evoked here. Once he met a Stockholm rabbi who was asked by the Nobel Committee whether Reymont was antisemitic. The rabbi denied the allegations to Asch’s great pleasure

The action of Kosiński's novel does not take place in a completely anonymous landscape, since it clearly is a caricature not only of the East-European countryside, but specifically of the Polish countryside, such as it was described in Asch and Singer: "A rotting crucifix, once painted blue, stood at the crossroads. A holy picture hung on the top, from which a pair of barely visible but seemingly tear-stained eyes gazed into the empty fields [...]. The huts, sunk halfway into the earth, with low-slung thatched roofs and boarded-up windows, stood along both sides of the packed dirty road" (15). What makes the whole biographical background even more of a hoax is the fact that in his afterword, placed as an introduction to the second edition of the novel, Kosiński again presents such animalistic villagers, now rooted in New York: "a generation removed from thatched huts, rank marsh grasses, and ox-drawn plagues, they were still the peasants I had known", and who had wanted to beat him "with lengths of steel pipe" (xviii) for his novel, but who were bravely and smartly defeated by the author himself.

I do not believe it is worth distinguishing the facts from Kosiński's mystifications, since they are intertwined¹⁴. Nor do I care to discuss whether or not Kosiński had the right to write what he did, since this question seems to belong more to the moral than to the literary realm. As Jerzy Jarniewicz put it, Kosiński created his own "imaginative, though controversial, reinterpretation" of the Holocaust (Jarniewicz 1997, 111). I am only claiming that Kosiński's Polish background and the realities that he described in the novel – as well as in his afterword and in various essays – are important factors in our understanding the novel. It is worth noting, however, that Kosiński allowed only his Polish villagers and the Kalmuks to be thoroughly rendered as bestial in the novel. Whether *The Painted Bird* should be regarded as a Holocaust classic, as Elie Wiesel and subsequently

since he agreed that Reymont's writing was "true to facts" (Sitarz 2013, 273).

¹⁴ Two non-fictional works, a Polish one covering the war period by Joanna Siedlecka and an American one by James Park Sloan dealing with Kosiński's life, agree on the theatricality of all of Kosiński's biographical constructions, especially the ones dealing with his Holocaust experiences and their aftermath (even if sometimes the authors give contradictory facts and/or explanations).

others were ready to believe, the “first major Holocaust hoax” as some have claimed, or a “mythic tale that happens to be *chronologically* set in Poland during World War Two” (Baumann 2014, 20), as Baumann has recently insisted, it seems counterproductive to avoid examining elements in it that are strongly connected to the Polish language, culture and history. Such an approach leads only to more misunderstandings¹⁵.

Another scandal connected with Kosiński’s method of creating his literary world also needs to be addressed and put into the Polish context in order to balance possible readings and interpretations. Accusations were directed against Kosiński for plagiarizing a pre-war Polish novel, *Kariera Nikodema Dyzmy* by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz (a great hit in the prewar Warsaw). These accusations seem baseless to me. It is true that the basic storyline is the same as one finds in Kosiński’s *Being There* – a man from nowhere by pure chance becomes somebody in 1930s Warsaw political circles and in 1960s America, respectively. In both novels the same situations appear, and in both a miraculous change of a simpleton’s life is used for harsh social satire. Yet the main characters are as different as the countries’ political and social relationships were in their given time – only in the American story could the television industry play such a significant role. It seems to me that the level and tenor of the accusations of plagiarism came primarily from the fact that Kosiński never spoke of the cultural background that informed his work. In a book of collected essays, polished almost until his death, we can find only one general sentence on the value of his Polish background, put in the form of a self-monologue: “Listen, Kosiński... You received a very special gift from the country called Poland, in the centre of Europe, in the centre of culture” (Kosiński 1992, 7). In the same essay, dated 1989, only one Polish poet – Aleksander Wat, one of Poland’s most important modernist poets of Jewish origin – is evoked,

¹⁵ Baumann, who advocated for its universality, in the very same essay states: “So, it is a wholly false and forced reading to say that *The Painted Bird* is a targeted critique of Nazism. False, because if *The Painted Bird* is a directed critique of anything, it is far more a critique of the Catholic church than of the Nazi state” (Baumann 2014, 11).

in a specific self-aggrandizing reference to Wat's praises of Kosiński (unknown to biographers). Nothing else is ever said about Kosiński's knowledge of Polish literature, his tastes, readings, and literary precursors, as if he were a miraculous child who created works of art out of nothing, and came from nowhere. To my mind, it is mostly this image that caused the exaggerated reactions regarding his supposed "plagiarism". After all, intertextuality is a common literary fact, and can be used more or less creatively. In this case, Kosiński did quite a good job. But he unnecessarily hid his hypotext. However, problems with understanding his production go deeper than literature. *Kariera Nikodema Dyzmy* was, in fact, one of his favourite stories, whose pattern Kosiński used throughout his life – as his American biographer, the Polish-American writer Janusz Głowacki, has confirmed. Kosiński himself adopted Dyzma's behaviour and tricks to achieve what he wanted (Sloan 1997, 66-67). Thus, without the original Polish story, not only Kosiński's novel, but his whole life cannot be fully understood, nor can we fathom the masks that he put on again and again, until his death by suicide.

By presenting three Jewish American writers in this essay, I wanted to offer examples of how varied the writing of a supposedly single group of authors can be, and how simplified a notion of "Jewish American writers" can appear, even in the case of the Jewish American authors coming from one country. Jewish-Polish-American writers as a group certainly become even more differentiated when we consider the wide variety of authors and works which belong to such a group, such as Joseph Opatoshu's and Joshua Singer's Yiddish writings on the one side, and Leopold Tyrmand's Polish and English texts on the other. Notwithstanding their differences, these writers' relationship to their home culture needs to be examined in its entirety. As I tried to demonstrate, there are at least three dimensions in which their Polish origins meaningfully supplement possible interpretations of Jewish-Polish-American writers' works: biographical (inevitably meaning racial, historical, political and cultural), linguistic (including language transformations, adaptations and translations), and intertextual (embracing all kinds

of textual memory and its evocations). Authors do not function in an empty space; their literary fate is determined by a specific combination of factors, with a memory of their native heritage on one side, and the reality of their new society and its rules on the other. The final literary product cannot be understood without interpreting all the ingredients that make a particular author and his world.

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Chapter 10

Marjanne E. Goozé

The Holocaust Memoir as American Tale: Ruth Kluger's
Still Alive

Ruth Kluger's memoir *Still Alive: A Holocaust Girlhood Remembered* was published in 2001 by the Feminist Press at the City University of New York as a part of the Helen Rose Scheuer Jewish Women's Series. This information alone situates the book as an autobiography by a Jewish woman speaking from a feminist perspective. The publication page tells readers: "An earlier version of this book was published in German in 1992 as *weiter leben: Eine Jugend*"¹. The German book is dedicated to the students and friends at the University of Göttingen in Germany, where the University of California system had a study abroad program she directed. Kluger was at the time a professor of German Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She began to write the memoir in 1989, after being severely injured by a bicyclist in Göttingen, while she was on a planned two-year stay². In the dedication to the first version, Kluger refers to the memoir as "ein deutsches Buch" – a German book intended for German-speaking readers. The German-language memoir was a great success, winning multiple prizes and spawning numerous translations. Kluger did not allow her publisher to commission an English translation, wishing to wait until her mother's

¹ In the English version the author spells her surname "Kluger", without the umlaut, but in her publications in German her name is spelled "Klüger".

² The dedication in German is to "Den Göttinger Freunden [...] ein deutsches Buch" (the friends in Göttingen [...] a German book).

passing (Kluger 2001, 210). Later she composed this version. She explained this process in the Epilogue to *Still Alive*: “What you have been reading is neither a translation nor a new book: it’s another version, a parallel book, if you will, for my children and my American students. [...] I have written this book twice” (210). This essay concentrates on *Still Alive* as an independent text, written as a Holocaust memoir for an American audience, and in particular aimed at feminist readers, or more specifically Jewish feminist readers. Dedicated to her mother, Alma Hirschel, who died at age ninety-seven in 2000, the book is further marked as one that tells the story of a “Holocaust Girlhood” and not as a male-oriented survivor story in the line of memoirs by Elie Wiesel or Primo Levi. The subtitle, in fact, summons echoes of Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl*.

I concur with several scholars who assert that *Still Alive* should be treated independently from *weiter leben*, because it re-contextualizes her story within the American cultural archive³. Caroline Schaumann notes how Kluger’s cultural translation “attempts to make the Holocaust relevant for an American audience by embedding it firmly in the American experience” (Schaumann 2004, 326). Nancy K. Miller, writing of both versions, puts the memoir in the category of “women’s family memoirs” (Miller 2004, 388), and I will add that the contentious relationship depicted between Ruth and her mother is framed by Kluger’s understanding of American second-wave feminism. Nina Fischer wrote an article in 2012 designating *Still Alive* “as Jewish American Autobiography” (Fischer 2012, 29), elaborating in detail how this text is written for an American audience, which I would further narrow to a primarily female American audience. Sheridan states that the book “projects a female implied reader” (Sheridan 2014, 77). Kluger herself observes that women will read her book “since males on the whole

³ There is a large body of critical reception on *weiter leben* alone, but I will limit my consideration to essays that treat only both texts, or just the English-language book. Erin McGlothlin compares the two books, but argues that they need to be analyzed together (McGlothlin 2004, 47). For her, a major difference between the two is how the reception of the Holocaust changed in the decade that separates their publication (48).

tend to prefer books written by fellow males” (Kluger 2001, 71). Fischer includes stories of the Holocaust as a part of the Jewish American experience: “Her life story is one that comprises motifs of Jewish American immigrant writing. Antisemitism and Jewish suffering in Europe are the building blocks of these texts, as much as the difficulties of migration, the encounter with the new country and integration into American society” (Fischer 2012, 30).

Holocaust memoirs and fictions have become a part of the American memory community since the late 1970s. As Kluger points out in her narrative, survivor stories were unwelcome in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s (Kluger 2001, 94). Holocaust Studies inform us that the 1978 American TV mini-series *Holocaust* and the inclusion of Anne Frank’s diary in school curricula initiated an increased interest in the subject. Furthermore, Steven Spielberg’s 1993 film *Schindler’s List* and his subsequent initiative to videotape tens of thousands of survivor testimonies demonstrated an increasing desire among younger American Jews to engage with the Holocaust. Most significantly, the opening of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC embedded it within American history in a particular way. James Young considers how the Holocaust becomes incorporated into an American memory culture of victimization that includes the enslavement of African Americans and the genocide of Native Americans (Young 1999, 81). Daniel Levy and Natan Sznaider offer an extensive analysis of the Americanization of the Holocaust in their book, *The Holocaust and Memory in the Global Age*, devoting an entire chapter to it (Levy – Sznaider 2006, 131-190). They point out how the Holocaust has been universalized, removing it from its national and local contexts, with both positive and negative effects.

Kluger accomplishes the transformation of her German memoir to an American one in several ways. The first is by adding references to American literature by women in the epigraphs to most chapters. Emily Dickenson (Kluger 2001, 13), Adrienne Rich (171), and Maya Angelou (203) mark Kluger’s affiliation with iconic American women writers – lesbian, Jewish, and African American. While other writers are given prominence at

the beginnings of chapters, all are by women with the exception of W.H. Auden (61). The book also takes from the first version an opening epigraph by Simone Weil (6). One contemporary German woman writer, Ingeborg Bachmann, is included at the beginning of the chapter titled “Germany” (132). Scattered throughout the memoir, Mark Twain, Toni Morrison, Pocahontas, and Woody Allen are mentioned. She embeds her experiences into an American context through analogies with United States history. In attempting to explain her foreign childhood experiences, Kluger reverts to comparisons with slavery and racism in the United States that sometimes seem forced, perhaps bordering on the reductive and essentialist⁴. For her readers, she connects her own trauma to American ones, such as slavery, racism, the Vietnam war, and sexual abuse (Schaumann 2004, 330). When describing how she, her foster sister Susi, and her mother escaped from a death march, Kluger reflects in a parenthetical statement: “Later, in college, I read about fugitive slaves and thought, I’ve been there, I know many variants of what they felt, better than the historians and the novelists. Only Toni Morrison, much later, got it marvelously right” (Kluger 2001, 141). Kluger also debunks the American mythology of the war that claims its purpose was to save Jews (149-150).

While skeptical of equating Holocaust experiences with other historical events, she states that she does not “reject all comparisons” (65). Erin McGlothlin describes her approach as “rhetorical practices of *conjunctio* and *distinctio*, of comparison and differentiation” (McGlothlin 2004, 62). To me, these comparisons indicate an attempt to connect with her American readers, especially those who came of age in the 1960s. Kluger balances between the two, asserting the distinctiveness of her experiences, while making comparisons her readers can understand. She is a believer in the possibilities of communication and education: “We would be condemned to be isolated monads if we didn’t compare and generalize, for comparisons are the bridges from one unique life to another” (Kluger 2001, 64). She again uses the

⁴ Sheridan observes that Kluger’s memoir may be seen by some, including herself, of “espousing gender-based essentialism” (Sheridan 2014, 77).

metaphor of a bridge to highlight the chasm between her memories of Auschwitz-Birkenau and those of her German friends and colleagues, asking: “if we can never say ‘our memories’, then what’s the good of writing any of this” (93).

In an effort to communicate with her American readers, Kluger’s historical and literary references in the German version are quite different. Fischer emphasizes in her article: “The replacing of references from one culture with those of another changes the text tremendously while simultaneously enriching it for an American readership by employing elements of the shared cultural archive” (Fischer 2012, 45; see also Schaumann 2004, 326). Also, for her American audience, she must explain places in greater detail. For example, she alters the German chapter titles that name individual camps such as Auschwitz-Birkenau with more generalized words – “Ghetto”, “Death Camp”, and “Forced Labor Camp” – that she then explains more fully. Most importantly, in what is my main point, the narrating I and the narrated self in the autobiography present themselves from a uniquely American standpoint in this book. Kluger has clearly been impacted by her life experiences after her arrival in the US in 1947.

Even though Kluger reframes her memoir for the American cultural archive and while Holocaust memoirs and fictions have become very much a part of the American communal memory, Kluger’s narrative consciously refuses to participate in what has been called “the Americanization of the Holocaust”. Hilene Flanzbaum published a collection of essays with this exact term as her title. Alvin Rosenfeld, who similarly titles his essay, observes that American representations of the Holocaust tend to “individualize, heroize, moralize, idealize, and universalize” it (Rosenfeld 1997, 123). Kluger’s references to American authors, culture, and history might be misinterpreted as a part of this trend. Caroline Schaumann addresses Kluger’s references to the African American experience in detail, analyzing how Kluger’s “empathy” could be misunderstood (Schaumann 2004, 333-334). As I see it, Kluger transfers the Holocaust from the European to the American cultural archive, and in doing so contextualizes the Holocaust for her readers, at the

same time highlighting but not equating the horrors of the Holocaust and American experiences. There is comparison, but also distinction.

In her narrative, Kluger repeatedly avoids any nostrums regarding moral lessons of the Holocaust, thereby dodging a common pitfall of universalizing or Americanizing the Holocaust. She includes responses from Germans she knows and from friends who are reading sections of the book as she writes them. In these dialogues she insists that her experiences in Theresienstadt and Auschwitz served no higher individual moral purpose for herself and offer nothing for others. She explains to a young German how the experience of Auschwitz did not necessarily make someone a better person: "What did he expect? Auschwitz was no instructional institution, like the University of Göttingen, which he attends. You learned nothing there, and least of all humanity and tolerance. Absolutely nothing good came out of the concentration camps [...]. They were the most useless, pointless establishments imaginable" (Kluger 2001, 65). She refutes any sentimentalizing of human relationships as well. When others presume that the hardships she and her mother endured created "strong bonds", she replies: "But this is sentimental rubbish and depends on a false concept of suffering as a moral education" (52). Finding no moral lesson in the camps, she speaks against what she sees as concentration camp tourism and the preservation of these sites (63-66). As of the writing of the memoir, she had refused to return to Theresienstadt or Auschwitz and did not register as a survivor (19). Registration and receiving reparations would have meant identifying as a victim. For Kluger, however, only the dead are the "true victims" (138). She does not identify as a victim precisely because she survived. In this way, Kluger seems to accept the kind of hierarchy of Holocaust suffering that Sidra Ezrahi calls into question, where the sufferings of camp survivors and survivors in hiding and through other means are negatively compared to those who died (Ezrahi 2004, 52-54). Her refusal of the label of victim positions her outside of a universalizing culture of victimization that Levy and Sznajder discuss (Levy – Sznajder 2006, 81).

Furthermore, Kluger's memoir avoids exclusive definition as a Holocaust memoir, since, in spite of the subtitle, it does not limit itself to her Holocaust girlhood, but may be considered mostly as a whole life testimony. Any seemingly redemptive happy ending of liberation is undercut by a continuing story. Kluger denies readers the pleasure of an ending by continuing her narrative through her life in Germany and early years in New York. Her reflections on her life as a German literature professor and her interactions with Germans over the years, as well as her stay in Göttingen, are interspersed in the narrative. These recollections also disrupt readers' expectations of a survivor story by adding multiple complications, not the least of which is her attachment to the German language and her friendships with ethnic Germans. The extension of the story of her "Girlhood" by itself defies the conventions of a Holocaust testimony, as Kluger herself recognizes when she states that "these are not the adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Nigger Jim, floating down the river on their raft, experiencing a somewhat sinister but mostly humorous journey" (Kluger 2001, 138). Kluger's journey is not presented as a male-centered adventure story. Linda Schulte-Sasse notes how this aspect and others may account for the book's lukewarm reception in the US: "*Still Alive* stages an assault on a Holocaust *qua* 'high' drama paradigm" (Schulte-Sasse 2004, 470). And it does this "with two oppositional strategies, the intermingling of a Holocaust story with personal recollections that are too close, and with a narrative attitude that's too far away" (474). It was only in the 1990s and 2000s that interviewers of survivors and scholars began to stress the importance of the whole life testimony, of not reducing the entire life experience to the trauma of the Holocaust.

Kluger's narrative also undercuts Holocaust memoir conventions that insist on linearity. The story is essentially chronological, each section of the text labeled by a location: Vienna, the Camps, Germany, New York, and the Epilogue. But interspersed within the narrative are reflections on later events in her life and on the writing and memory processes themselves. The narrator of *Still Alive* also speaks with an American tone of voice: the text is full of contractions, for example, thus cre-

ating a conversational tone that speaks to the American reader in a way her erudite German does not. Even her name has been changed for English speakers.

She was born in Vienna, Austria in 1931 to an assimilated Jewish family. She was called Susi, but claimed her legal first name, Ruth, after she became aware of the discrimination against her as a Jew. Her mother had been married before and had a son, Schorshi, who lived with his father in Prague, in Czechoslovakia. Schorshi did not survive: he was deported to Theresienstadt and then murdered in Riga (today the capital of Latvia). In March 1938, Austria became part of Hitler's Third Reich and Kluger's life changed as the family faced increasing restrictions. Ruth's father had been a doctor. He left the family for Italy and then France, because it became known that he had performed an abortion for a Catholic woman. Eventually he was arrested in France as a Jew, deported east, and murdered. Right before the beginning of the war in 1939, Ruth had the opportunity to join a *Kindertransport* (transport of children) to England, which had agreed to take in several thousand Jewish children, but her mother, having been separated from one child, could not part with her. Ruth's life became increasingly chaotic, as she attended eight schools in four years. Her mother worked in the Jewish hospital and they were among the last Jews to be deported from Vienna on "the so-called hospital transport of September 1942" (Kluger 2001, 58). This transport took them to the Theresienstadt ghetto outside of Prague. In May 1944 she and her mother were sent to Auschwitz-Birkenau, where they spent a short time in the family camp at Birkenau until the end of June 1944. Ruth was only twelve years old when her mother was selected for the Christianstadt work camp. Instructed to lie about her age and claim she was fifteen, Ruth disobeyed and was not chosen to go with her mother. Ordered by her mother to go around and get in line again, she was spared by a non-Jewish prisoner, who convinced the SS officer to take her, even though she knew she was not yet fifteen. At Christianstadt they survived together and fostered another girl, Susi. They were sent on a death march by train and foot westward as the Soviet army approached in January 1945. The three escaped from

their group in February, managed to get false papers, and make their way westward into Germany at the end of the war, where they encountered American troops. Running away became for Kluger a key response in her life to many stressful situations. At the beginning of the memoir, she explains: "Because running away was the best thing I ever did, ever do. You feel alive when you run away. It's the ultimate drug, in my experience" (16). This statement at the outset of the memoir informs the reader that the narrator is a woman who did not conform to the gender conventions of her time.

At this point, readers might expect the book to end with encountering the American troops, followed by a brief summary of Kluger's later life, but it does not. The text of the memoir begins on page 13 and ends on page 214. Their liberation by the Americans takes the reader to page 150. Kluger's chronological narrative continues with two more sections and an epilogue. In the first, she discusses her life in postwar Germany, where she began to study at the university in Regensburg, although proper schooling had ended before leaving Vienna.

In the fourth section, Kluger depicts the difficulties she experienced arriving in New York City in 1947 and the reception she received by relatives. At Thanksgiving an aunt told her: "You have to erase from your memory everything that happened in Europe. You have to make a new beginning. You have to forget what they did to you. Wipe it off like chalk from a blackboard" (177). Kluger was baffled by her relatives, who were insulted by her lack of gratitude. They exhibited no understanding of her trauma. Most hurtful was their unwillingness to even hear about it. The men, including her Viennese psychologist Lazi Fessler, also did not want to hear about what she had endured. Kluger asserts that these men felt guilty about leaving their female relatives behind in Europe (187). Unlike other students whose war experiences were validated, at Hunter College in New York City Holocaust survivors found a "denial of their 'prior lives'" (182). In *unterwegs verloren*, she explains how survivors were viewed among Jews and non-Jews skeptically, whereas the actual victims were the dead: the living were too painful a reminder of the dead (59).

She was encouraged to become an American girl, taking on “ladylike” decorum and dress. In spite of her lack of formal education, she earned a Bachelor’s degree in English from Hunter College in 1954 and began writing poetry in English. She had been writing German poems since she was small. Some are included in the memoir. Her mother soon remarried; Ruth went to study in Berkeley, California, where she married a former D-Day parachutist, who at the time was a history professor, and had children with him.

The Epilogue picks up in the early 1960s with Kluger as a part-time librarian and a single mother of two sons. She then decides to pursue a PhD in German at the University of California, Berkeley, which she received in 1967. German for her did not mean the language of the perpetrators, but that of Jewish-German intellectuals and writers like Kafka, Freud, and Einstein (205). She states: “German, strange as this statement may sound, is a Jewish language” (205). She also concentrated in her initial research on early modern and baroque literature, avoiding contemporary literature for a long time. She does speak at length, however, about her friendship with the German novelist Martin Walser and mentions his controversial remarks about the need for Germans to move beyond the Holocaust (169).

Kluger held several positions at American universities, but is most known for being one of the first tenured female full professors at Princeton. Later, she took a job at the University of California, Irvine (her mother married for a fourth time and settled in suburban Los Angeles), where she resided until her death in 2020. Kluger considered herself an American and saw California as her home, although this declaration of a Californian home is only explicitly stated in her second memoir, *unterwegs verloren* (Lost along the way), published only in German in 2008 (Kluger 2014, 152). This second memoir has not been translated, unfortunately. In it, she offers a clear indictment of the treatment of women faculty and students by the American university system.

Still Alive closes with an explanation of how she came to write this new English-language version, this parallel memoir. In 1989 in Göttingen, West Germany, she was supported by

friends who helped her recover from serious head trauma. The German-language book is dedicated to this younger generation of students who, according to Kluger, understood their own history and had turned away from its evils. Because the memoir is so highly critical of her mother and their relationship, she thought that her mother would not see the German book, but a cousin in Switzerland sent her a copy, and her mother was “hurt by the criticism” (Kluger 2001, 210). Foiled in her attempt to shield her mother from her depiction as mentally unstable, Kluger still waited until her mother died in 2000 to compose the English version. The book is dedicated to her, but, as she states, it is also for her own children and her American students (210). The book closes then by looking forward to younger readers, and even mentions how her four-year-old granddaughter Isabela and her mother got to know one another (214). In this way, on the last page, Kluger traces a matrilineal line – skipping over her two sons in a way – from her mother to herself and then to her granddaughter. For Kluger, family is woman-centered.

At the beginning of this essay, I asserted that the memoir is a Jewish American feminist autobiography. Kluger’s gender-specific point of view leads me to this assertion. The narrator’s memories and modes of narration have been shaped by her subsequent experiences in the United States. Feminist theorists of autobiography such as Smith and Watson, as well as many others such as myself, have addressed how women’s personal narratives often challenge male-dominated autobiography theories⁵. Kluger, who is writing her memoir after the publication of what have become canonical Holocaust texts by men such as Elie Wiesel and Primo Levi, is highly cognizant of the now familiar format and of readers’ expectations. The only story by a female that was well-known in America is that of the teenager, Anne Frank, who is renowned for having had a positive attitude toward life. Kluger both fits her narrative within that of a survivor and a teenaged girl, while at the same time refusing

⁵ Smith and Watson 1998 provide an extensive overview of feminist autobiography practices. Gooz e 1992 examines a decade of books devoted to defining feminist autobiography theories.

to conform by telling a whole life story and by refuting moral platitudes.

For Kluger, her more than forty years living in the US shapes her portrayal of her younger self. Without explicitly referring to Berkeley's Free Speech, the Civil Rights, or Women's Rights movements, she experienced these first-hand. As an academic in a male-dominated profession, Kluger, as we learn in her later memoir, *unterwegs verloren*, faced a good deal of gender discrimination. The voice that explains how she felt discriminated against as a girl displays an American feminist consciousness. She speaks in terms easily recognizable to those familiar with feminist texts of the 1980s, writing of her escape from captivity in terms of self-actualization and liberation: "And yet: on that evening I experienced the unforgettable, prickly feeling of what it means to reconstitute yourself, not to be determined by others, to say yes or no as you like, to stand at a crossroad where there had been a one-way street, to leave constraint behind with nothing in front, and call that nothing good" (Kluger 2014, 130).

Kluger comes across to some female readers as cantankerous and grouchy. She never pretends to be a nice, compliant, feminine girl. Her feminist consciousness emerges immediately in the memoir, as in her statement about running away. She is always haunted by the knowledge that her deceased brother, Schorshi, as a first-born male child, would have been privileged. She announces: "I would have liked to be a man, and preferably not a Jew" (Kluger 2001, 185). She, as a Jewish girl, had no ritual role in Orthodox Judaism. Not permitted to say the Kaddish (memorial prayer) for her father, she writes that "Poetry is more helpful" (31). The roles allotted to women cannot address trauma, "Recipes for gefilte fish are no recipe for coping with the Holocaust" (30). Although her family was, as she says, "emancipated, but not assimilated" (43), religious identity became increasingly important to her for a short time in Vienna and Theresienstadt. Upon reflection, however, her stance towards Judaism is viewed through a feminist lens. At the Passover Seder, a ceremony commemorating the Jews' flight from Egypt, Ruth, as the youngest child, believes she should be al-

lowed to ask the four questions allotted to the youngest. But she is denied because she is a girl (44). Holidays are “good things for men and children, and scarcely for women” (44). Therefore, she concludes, “I must confess that my Jewishness is really nothing to be proud of” (44).

Kluger was sixteen when she immigrated to the United States. In the New York chapter, her feminist stance becomes most prominent. Her mother had not raised her to be feminine and, because she was never a pretty child and knew it, she resisted all attempts to mold her. She did not, as she explains, know “how to dance, giggle, or talk the kind of sweet nonsense expected of female teenagers” (175). Pushed to conform, she holds on to her contrary stance, frequently wandering the streets of Manhattan alone at night: “My upbringing had taught me to be antiauthoritarian, skeptical, and inclined to question and contradict. It was an attitude that I had needed in order to maintain whatever shred of self-esteem I had managed to salvage” (175).

Kluger and her mother had been left in Vienna to fend for themselves. The book delves into her complex relationship with her mother whom Kluger portrays as a mentally unstable and paranoid woman. She sums up her mother’s illness when she explains how her mother suggested they throw themselves against the electrified fence in Birkenau on their first day and when describing the decision to volunteer to transfer to another camp:

My mother had reacted correctly to the extermination camp from the outset, that is, with the sure instinct of the paranoid. Her suicide proposal of the first night is evidence of her understanding. And when I wouldn’t go along with her then, she managed to take the first and the only way out. Time has proved that she was right all along, and yet I still think it was not her reasonableness but an old and deep-seated sense of being persecuted which enabled her to save our lives. (104)

The mother-daughter conflict may be considered a hallmark of American feminist autobiography, and Kluger’s Holocaust narrative proves no different.

The final element that demonstrates how Kluger’s memoir is an American feminist text is her definition of war and Nazism as entirely male. She asserts in the first pages: “Wars, and hence

the memories of wars, are owned by the male of the species. And fascism is decidedly male property, whether you were for it or against it. Besides, women have no past, or aren't supposed to have one. A man can have an interesting past, a woman only an indecent one. And my stories aren't even sexy" (18). In one brief passage, Kluger links violent masculinity with expectations of masculine and female behavior: in particular, with women's sexuality. She later repeats her claim that Nazism was male: "The Nazi evil was male, not female" (115). While historians would certainly object to this denial of any female responsibility, there is no doubt that Kluger is reflecting a view of male violence commonly held by American feminists, particularly those in opposition to the Vietnam War, in the 1970s and 1980s.

In the end, Kluger's Jewish American autobiography traces a matrilineal line from her mother through herself to her granddaughter that her female readers can follow as she traces the early stations of her life through the lens of an older woman. It is a memoir of a Holocaust survivor and the life story of an American feminist who advocates emphatically for women's self-determination and independence.

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Chapter 11

Paolo Simonetti

“Sounds Like Jew Talk to Me”: Assimilation and Alienation
in Bernard Malamud’s *The People*

It isn’t what it’s talking about that makes a book
Jewish – it’s that the book won’t shut up.

(Philip Roth)

In the 1940s, when he was living in New York trying to make ends meet, Bernard Malamud was stuck by the incipit of a joke he had heard from a friend. The joke dealt with the Jewish prescription of using different cutlery and utensils for milk-based and meat-based food, and began like this: “Once there was a Jewish Indian...” During the crucial moment of a hunting expedition, this particular Native American who happens to be Jewish is charged by a buffalo, but upon raising his weapon he realizes with dismay that he has taken the wrong tomahawk. More than forty years later, Malamud took inspiration from this joke for the basic idea of his last novel, *The People* (1989). His daughter Janna recalled that Malamud was particularly fascinated by the idea of a hypothetical Jewish Native American because, according to her, “it mirrored his own foreign/native being perfectly” (Smith 2006, 249).

Malamud’s parents emigrated from Ukraine to the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century. Since he was born in America, he always considered the term Jewish American “schematic and reductive”, as he declared in many interviews throughout his career: “I was born in America and respond, in American life, to more than Jewish experience” (Lasher 1991, 64). When dealing with Malamud’s (and other Jewish

Americans') "hyphenated" identity, we must keep in mind what Leslie Fiedler wrote in 1964:

The moment of triumph for the Jewish writer in the United States has come just when his awareness of himself as a Jew is reaching a vanishing point [...].

[...]

[...] at the moment serious Jewish writing comes to play a central part in American life, the larger Jewish community is being assimilated to certain American values which are inimical to everything for which that serious writing stands. (Fiedler 1964, 66, 93)

In this sense, the term "Jewish American literature" is an oxymoron, and this contradiction is well reflected in a number of Malamud's characters. Malamud has represented different types of Jews in his fiction: Russian Jews, American Jews, Italian Jews, German Jews... black Jews, red Jews – even a Jewish crow (in his short story "The Jewbird") and a Jewish gorilla (in the novel *God's Grace*). His protagonists often adopt multiple identities that allow them to move across borders and barriers, in a process of constantly negotiating relationships and belongings which are often linked to precarious and provisional identities. In a typical Malamud story, the individual self is presented both as a unified whole and as a contradictory, conflicting multiplicity.

The People was left unfinished when Malamud died of heart failure on March 18, 1986. At the time of his death, he had completed a preliminary draft of sixteen of the planned twenty chapters, leaving a large number of handwritten notes and schemes indicating in broad terms the plot's further developments. In 1989, Malamud's editor Robert Giroux published the fragment of *The People* and the schemes sketched by the author for the remaining four chapters, together with sixteen previously uncollected short stories. Despite the hesitant and sometimes excessively rough writing, Malamud managed to depict with few essential brushstrokes, in the one hundred or so pages he completed, the contradictory, tragicomic nature of his protagonist, Yozip Bloom, a Russian Jewish peddler who immigrated to America in the 1870s only to unwillingly find himself at the head of a Native American tribe, the Nez Perce, who called themselves "The People".

Taking the cue from Fiedler's nostrum and other similar statements – such as Isaac Rosenfeld's 1944 description of the Jewish writer as “a specialist in alienation (the one international banking system the Jews actually control)” (Rosenfeld 1944, 36) – this essay aims at reading Malamud's *The People* as a particularly keen reflection on the historical situation of first- and second-generation Jewish American writers in the second half of the twentieth century. These authors found themselves in a historically unique position: not only were they “specialist(s) in alienation”, as Rosenfeld put it, but they suffered from a threefold alienation, just like the protagonist of *The People*. In fact, Yozip is caught between three different traditions, cultures, and languages: the millennial Jewish heritage of Eastern Europe from which he comes, the striving confidence in progress and expansion proper to the young nation where he hopes to make his fortune; and the ancient traditions of the Native American tribe he joins in order to guarantee its survival. The case can be made that, in the same way, Jewish American writers were constantly negotiating between their Jewish, American, and Jewish American identities.

The People can be seen as a peculiar Western that deals with some of Malamud's recurring topics, such as the father-son relationship, the endurance of the Jewish people, and the possibility of pacifism in the midst of a war. Most of all, the novel offers a strong reflection on the social and moral contradictions inherent in immigration and assimilation. Significantly enough, Malamud's novel also explores the migrants' efforts to remain faithful to their own traditional values and habits in a society deeply marked by individualism and rapid change, while at the same time they struggle to adapt to the customs of their new country. In so doing, Malamud relocates contemporary concerns into nineteenth-century America, exposing the paradoxical nature of the young nation's democratic principles that were proudly trumpeted during the Gilded Age – a period of rapacious greed, political corruption, rampant speculation and unfettered capitalism that nonetheless saw the United States rapidly become a powerful nation, ready for imperialist overseas expansion.

In 1870, as the narrator states at the novel's beginning, "the country was astonishingly young and fertile" (Malamud 1989, 4); like thousands of settlers, prospectors, adventurers, businessmen, confidence men, bandits and desperados before him, Yozip, a vegetarian and a pacifist, has lived in the US for five years without a definite purpose, and is still waiting for the documents attesting his American citizenship. He is, quite literally, in a liminal position, or, as Nathaniel Hawthorne would say, "in the gateway between the old world and the new" (Hawthorne 1970, 11): no longer Russian and not yet American. In the New World, "he felt the moment had come to invent his fortune", but at the same time he considers his displacement as a limitation: "He often cursed himself for his restlessness because it added nothing to his life but restlessness" (Malamud 1989, 4). He is initially bent on following in the footsteps of the pioneers, moving westward along the American frontier, but when he finally reaches the Pacific Ocean, Yozip "gave a short hooray and stopped to weep at the water's edge" (4). Malamud makes it clear from the very beginning that Yozip fails to adopt the philosophy of Manifest Destiny in which the nation put so much faith. The narrator asks in Yozip's voice: "If a man did not know what to do next, could you call that a destiny?" (5). This lament expressed (and still does) the experience of thousands of immigrants in America and throughout the rest of the world.

Of course, Yozip's historical and literary sources are manifold. First of all, he embodies the wandering Jew (his surname, Bloom, is the same of Joyce's modern Ulysses), although his movements are characterized by extreme clumsiness and self-abuse, recalling both the wanderings of the *schlemiel*, the fool of the Yiddish tradition, and the random path of a quixotic *pícaro*. For the idea of a "Jewish Indian", Malamud took inspiration from the myth of the lost tribes of Israel (especially the legendary "red Jews" mentioned by German medieval sources). The figure of Yozip is probably based on the tradition of the so-called "Jewish redface", a particular form of vaudeville (somehow similar to the "Jewish blackface") that challenged the processes of assimilation, often in the form of comedy or

parody, and relied on the Jewish impersonation of the Native American as the American *par excellence*. From this perspective, Malamud's "Jewish Indian" comes to ironically identify himself with the true inhabitant of the New World.

The Western novel is a traditional American literary genre. However, in the postwar period, according to Leslie Fiedler, "the long dominance of the Western and the detective story is challenged by that largely Jewish product, science fiction" (Fiedler 1970, 68). At the same time, in Fiedler's opinion, Jewish American writers were also trying to subvert or utterly rewrite the literary figure of the Native American; Fiedler argues that "the Jewish writer, trying to imagine the *Goy* he longs to be, or at least to contemplate, succeeds finally in re-inventing the mythical redskin out of James Fenimore Cooper, which is amusing enough" (98-99), since "James Fenimore Cooper, greatest of American mythographers, tried to identify the evil Indian of the *Last of the Mohicans* with Shylock, and, in one of his last novels, portrayed the Indians as New World Jews re-enacting the crucifixion in the midst of the wilderness" (71).

Fiedler wrote these comments in 1964. In 1958 Malamud published a short story entitled "The Last Mohican", included in his National Book Award winning collection *The Magic Barrel*, about a Jewish refugee in Rome, Susskind, who stalks a student of art history, Fiedelman, eventually stealing the bag containing his dissertation. The title of the story alludes, of course, to Cooper's famous novel. Malamud suggests here that the uprooted Jewish refugee retains the wisdom and moral values stemming from an ancient tradition which, though doomed to extinction, inspires maximum respect (after all, he is the last of his people). Yet Susskind is not only the hunted victim, he is also the hunter: just like the Native Americans in many Westerns, he repeatedly ambushes Fiedelman, anticipating a sure victory. Some thirty years later, in *The People*, Malamud crafted a very different type of "Jewish Indian", a cross-cultural, transracial character, who defies American society with his Jewishness.

The clash of different cultures and traditions is a constant element in Malamud's fiction. At the end of *The Assistant* (1957), the young Italian-American Catholic Frank Alpine decides to

be circumcised and so converts to Judaism. Malamud's characters always manage to cross the boundaries imposed by society, each time overcoming religious boundaries, ethnic boundaries, cultural boundaries, racial boundaries, gender boundaries, and even boundaries between species, as in *God's Grace* when the last (Jewish) man on earth falls in love with a female chimp. Of course, this is hardly a smooth process, and its consequences are more often than not painful, whether it happens through assimilation, conversion, or death and regeneration. Even if this transformation is dictated by the intentional obliteration of one's past or triggered by the willed construction of a new self, sooner or later all of Malamud's heroes are confronted with a renegotiation of their identities. They struggle with a self that is never stable, but always temporary, uncertain and contradictory – maybe ultimately unknowable.

In *The People*, Malamud depicts an historical figure, Hinmah-too-yah-lat-kekt, popularly known as Chief Joseph, leader of the Native American tribe of the Nez Perce, and describes the historical events that brought about the tribe's expulsion from the valley in which they dwelled¹. In 1877, the Nez Perce were ordered by the United States government to leave the lands occupied by their tribe, under the armed threat of two thousand well-organized US soldiers; the Indian chief – who according to William Vollmann's version of the story was not even a war-chief – led his people through a dangerous one-thousand-six-hundred-mile-long march from the Blue Mountains of Oregon towards Canada, with four separate military units in pursuit. The Nez Perce repeatedly fought off the soldiers, demonstrating exceptional military and tactical abilities; then, after the decisive battle at Bear Paw Mountains in Montana, the natives eventually succumbed to enemy artillery and were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma. When he surrendered, Chief Joseph delivered a speech, made famous by the American press, declaring that he

¹ American writer William T. Vollmann has recently reconstructed the several phases of the Nez Perce's war in a massive historical novel entitled *The Dying Grass*, part of his "seven dreams" series of novels depicting violent and bloody episodes in the settlement of the North American continent that contributed to the formation of American identity.

was tired of fighting, and ending with the famous phrase "I will fight no more forever".

In Malamud's novel, however, the story is slightly different from the "official" report, since it is not Chief Joseph who guides the People in the epic march, having died some time before the outbreak of the war. Before his death, he appoints the Jewish peddler Yozip Bloom as the new chief with the name of Jozip. *The People* therefore falls into that particular subgenre, lying somewhere between historical novel and science fiction, called uchronia, or alternate history, where the writer imagines that some well-known historical event took place in a different way, leading to unpredictable outcomes and creating an alternative future. Nonetheless, in Malamud's novel, the protagonist's leadership is not enough to change the tragic course of history, because, in the end, the fate of the Nez Perce remains sealed: the Native Americans lose their final battle and are banished from their lands. Yet, we can say that *The People* offers a hopeful vision of redemption, and this is embodied precisely by the transracial condition of the protagonist.

Just like its protagonist, *The People* is a hybrid novel. Malamud has blended several cultural traditions and literary genres: the Western with its diverse modern and postmodern reinterpretations; the captivity narratives typical of the colonial period; the *Bildungsroman*, or the "novel of formation" distinctive of the nineteenth century; the legends and myths of the Jewish culture; biblical narratives; and even what has been termed Holocaust fiction. The purpose of historically twisting the Nez Perce war is not so much to challenge the recorded version of events, as to add further layers of meaning to the "official" interpretations, and to further complicate the historical context by presenting the foundations of the American nation from an original point of view, which is neither that of the winning WASP nor that of the defeated Native American. Unsure of his status as an American citizen, knowing that his affiliation with the Nez Perce tribe is only temporary, and still tied to his Jewish roots, the Jewish Native American Yozip/Jozip/Joseph experiences a tragedy similar to that suffered by thousands of immigrants who arrived in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century.

If this marginality were not enough, the final sentence of the novel depicting the Native Americans who are being forcibly displaced – “The moaning of the Indians began as the freight cars were moving along the tracks” (Malamud 1989, 97) – is strongly reminiscent of the trains that transported Jews to concentration camps during the Second World War.

Of course, Malamud is well aware of the similarities between the long, dramatic march of the Nez Perce and the exodus of the Jewish people. In this sense, the name of the tribe is particularly important. In his notes, Malamud specifies that the nickname “Nez Perce” is probably a translation of the Indian term “Tsupnitpelun”. This name was given to the tribesmen by French trappers in the eighteenth century; it signifies a “pierced nose” and evokes the old habit of tribe’s members who wore a dentium shell as a nose ornament. In order to become a member of the tribe, Yozip must face an initiation rite – “Maybe it’s like a bar mitzvah”, he thinks (19). During the ceremony, his nose is accidentally pierced by an arrow, and Chief Joseph tells him: “Your nose is pierced but you are not wounded” (23). The rite calls to mind the Brit Milah, or the Jewish religious circumcision ceremony. The Indian’s nose is ornamented and thus enlarged. Given the satirical and picaresque atmosphere of the novel, we cannot fail to observe that a big nose is a traditional stereotypical mark of the Jew.

The Nez Perce called themselves Nimíipuu (“we the people”). Besides recalling the chosen people of Israel, the name echoes the phrase “We, the people” in the preamble to the US Constitution, that should “establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for a common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty”. According to Malamud, peace is essential for the development of any democratic nation. After talking with the representatives of the American government, Jozip thinks: “They say they go by democracy, but to me it seems that none of them knows what it truly is” (63-64).

Throughout his novel, Malamud makes it clear that the complex dynamics of assimilation and alienation are strictly connected to language; they are tied to the migrant’s ability to learn and speak the language of his new nation. When Malamud’s

parents spoke English, they used ungrammatical sentences and mispronounced words, because their English was modeled on the syntactic structure of Yiddish, just like Yozip's is in the novel. As a boy, Malamud was often teased by his schoolmates for his defective pronunciation. He hence worked especially hard to learn how to speak and write correct English. Language acquisition became his escape from the cramped space of his parents' drugstore; it was his ticket to freedom.

When Yozip is worried because he cannot speak the language of *The People*, he asks Chief Joseph: "But how can I be an Indian if I was born in Zbrish, Russia? This is a different country, far away, where was born my father and mother. I live now in America, and also maybe I am by now a citizen". But the chief answers: "Peace is the word of Quodish [...] It is the best word" (15). What both the Indian and the Jew, the American and the Russian, have in common is a desire for peace that cannot be stopped by any proclamation of expansionism, but is guaranteed by the democratic promise of the United States Constitution. Peace should overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

Once Jozip becomes a tribesman, he is sent to Washington to plead the cause of Native Americans before the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. But the functionary replies with a speech that shows Malamud the satirical writer at his best by putting in the commissioner's mouth the rhetoric of Manifest Destiny. His pretentious rhetoric sounds like a comic blabber full of tautologies and clichés that satirize both the patriotic magniloquence of some politicians and the assumed gullibility of their audience:

You must understand that the United States of America is an expanding nation. We grow in great haste because our opportunities are manifold. We would like to set aside this valley you have so much affection for, but we must ask you to understand that our country's foremost need, far into the future, will be land. And more land. We are a great nation with an important future. Therefore, we have to ask you not to make requests we can't possibly fulfill, and which ultimately embarrass us. (32)

Jozip's Jewish origins represent a further obstacle to the Native Americans' cause. When he argues that the valley is the land where their ancestors lived, the Commissioner ironically asks: "When you refer to 'ancestors', [...] do you refer to Amer-

ican Indians or to Hebrews?” (32). It is, therefore, no surprise that on his way back, disgusted by the government’s hypocritical rhetoric and more adamant about becoming a spokesperson for the Indians, Jozip forgets to stop in Chicago and check for his citizenship papers.

Subsequently, a colonel of the US army explicitly accuses Jozip and the Indians of “impeding the manifest destiny of a young and proud nation” (45). Jozip is afraid that he cannot speak the language of the People well enough to plead their cause. The narrator explains: “He had not spoken as well as he would like, yet he heard dignity in the words he had said. ‘If you speak with your heart’, he told himself, ‘the words fix themselves together in the right way. They will say what you want them to say’ (46). Unfortunately, antisemitism and racism continue to mar all communication. The colonel replies: “Sounds like Jew talk to me” (46) – thus dismissing everything Jozip had said because of his foreign accent. A US soldier then incongruously adds, in an even more racist tone: “Nobody can trust these goddamn Indians in any way at all” (46). Yet, despite living in a society that violently represses those who are ethnically (and as a consequence linguistically) alien to it, the protagonist appears finally to manage its language. He intends to free his neighbors, the Indians, by legal means, and so he decides to study law. Unfortunately, Malamud did not live long enough to write the novel’s ending. As it stands, this inspirational denouement remains only a vague possibility.

Jozip’s concerns about his language’s inadequacy reflect very similar concerns Malamud felt in his old age. Before writing *The People*, he had suffered a severe stroke and had developed a form of aphasia which impeded his ability to formulate language correctly. He had occasional trouble finding the right word to put on paper, and so he struggled with every sentence he wrote. At the end of the novel, Jozip can proudly declare: “I speak the tongue of the People better than I do the tongue of the whites” (88). Malamud makes it clear that the novel in its last scene would have concluded with “a Hasidic dance of the recovered self”, but after a couple of lines the very last indication in his notes states: “Leave with an Indian talking” (99).

For Malamud, as for Jozip, language is the most cherished blessing, especially when it is in danger, threatened by the process of assimilation, by old age, by illness, and by the forces of racism and hatred which, like the American government in the novel, want to silence every dissonant voice, reducing language to a standardized and repressive flatness. In *The People*, a character tells Jozip: "It is not wise to stop talking. Some who do that, never say another word" (74). And this is not only valid for the nineteenth-century Jewish migrant, who is afraid of not being fluent in his new American language, but for every minority group in every age.

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Chapter 12

Charles Byrd

In Nabokov's Philosemitic Footsteps: Selected Russian-Jewish American Immigrant Novels of Gary Shteyngart and Irina Reyn

Russian-Jewish American literature has flourished in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. No less than ten authors come readily to mind, all born in the USSR to Russian-speaking families, but currently writing and publishing fiction in English in the United States¹. They are writers of the so-called “New” or “Fourth” Wave of Russian-Jewish American immigration, christened “the Beet Generation” (Gould 2008) in humorous allusion both to many Russians’ favorite winter vegetable and to the American Beat Generation authors’ reputation for bohemian non-conformity. They are so prolific that they have prompted the Russian-Jewish American journalist Masha Gessen to declare: “It is fashionable to be ‘Russian’, it is fashionable to write about it, it is fashionable to be the editor or agent of a ‘Russian-American writer’. Or rather, for an American writer today, it is best to be Russian” (Wanner 2011, 134). “Russian” is used here as shorthand for “Russian-Jew”; “Russian-American” for “Russian-Jewish American”. Gessen was writing in 2008, when many of the works of this boom had not yet been published. Traditional nomenclature identifies Jews emigrating

¹ Akhtiorskaya, Yelena (b. Odessa, 1985-); Fishman, Boris (b. Minsk, 1979); Krasikov, Sana (b. Ukraine, 1979-); Litman, Ellen (b. Moscow, 1973-); Reyn, Irina (b. Moscow, 1974-); Shrayner, Maxim (b. Moscow, 1967-); Shteyngart, Gary (b. Leningrad, 1972-); Ulinich, Anya (b. Moscow, 1973-); Vapnyar, Lara (b. Moscow, 1971-); Zilberbourg, Olga (b. Leningrad, 1979-). The list is by no means exhaustive.

from the Russian Empire to the United States between roughly 1870 and 1915 as the “First Wave”. Those migrating between 1916 and 1922 – most fleeing the Bolshevik revolutionaries – constitute the “Second Wave”. The “Third Wave” designates Russian Jews who left the USSR in the early 1970s; the “New” or “Fourth Wave” refers to those who departed even later, in the 1980s and 1990s. This most recent group of Russian-Jewish American authors can thus see themselves as inheritors of significant precedents, some of whom have gained mainstream appeal among American readers.

The famous Jewish American novelist Saul Bellow may be regarded as a product of the aforementioned “First Wave” of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Born in 1915 in Quebec, Bellow moved from Canada to Chicago with his parents at the age of nine, but his mother and father were Lithuanian Jews who had emigrated from the Russian capital city of Saint Petersburg to Canada two years before his birth. The non-Jew Vladimir Nabokov enjoyed a privileged, aristocratic childhood in pre-revolutionary Russia and a career as a Russian author among Russians exiled by the Revolution to Berlin and Paris. He then escaped the Nazi invasion of France by fleeing with his wife and son to New York in 1940. The work of these two authors forms the backdrop for subsequent Russian immigrant literary production. Later immigrant and newly Americanized Russian-Jewish authors would construct literary identities in the first two decades of the twenty-first century by aligning themselves with or discounting these preeminent precursors. It is particularly interesting to note the marked preference shown by contemporary Russian-Jewish American authors, from the past two decades, for the Gentile Nabokov over the Nobel-prize-winning Jew Bellow. The present study will examine references to Nabokov’s legacy as both a writer and an internationally renowned celebrity in four novels by the two most popular and commercially successful, “Beet Generation” authors, Gary Shteyngart and Irina Reyn. Commemorated by the portrait of Nabokov’s imposing face on a 1969 *Time* magazine cover, the rags-to riches life story of Nabokov in the United States is one of the most famous and inspiring of all twentieth-century immigrant narratives. Any

aspiring immigrant author would naturally dream of acquiring the great wealth achieved by Nabokov's bestselling *Lolita* (1955). The more modest career successes of Shteyngart and Reyn loosely parallel and "make Jewish" Nabokov's life model. Moreover, the novels crafted by Shteyngart and Reyn transform and Judaicize a number of themes and literary devices characteristic of Nabokov's writings.

A trilingual with an impeccable command of Russian, English, and French, Nabokov may be regarded as a pioneering exemplar of "transculture"; a term coined by the Russian-Jewish philosopher Mikhail Epstein, who has worked in the United States since emigrating from Moscow in 1990. In Epstein's view, "transculture" or "transculturalism" may be distinguished from the more fashionable American context of "multiculturalism", that is ridiculed by Shteyngart in the character of the oafish, obese Russian-Jewish protagonist of his second novel, *Absurdistan* (2006), who majors in the midwestern American Accidental College's Department of Multicultural Studies and eventually is appointed Absurdistan's "Commissar of Multicultural Affairs". According to Epstein, "multiculturalism proceeds from the assumption that every ethnic, sexual or class culture is important and perfect in itself, while transculture proceeds from the assumption that every particular culture is incomplete and requires interaction with other cultures" (Epstein 1995, 303). In other words, "transculture departs from the multicultural model that posits aggregates of discrete subcultures (based on ethnic, racial, sexual or other differences), each of which seeks to establish and maintain its own pride. Rather, the transcultural approach asserts the fundamental *insufficiency and incompleteness* of any culture and thus its need for radical openness to and dialogue with others; it proposes the need for *humility* rather than pride" (Epstein 2019; italics in the original). In a nutshell, "transculture can be defined as an open system of symbolic alternatives to existing cultures and their established sign systems" (Epstein 1999, 24). From a transcultural perspective, it can be inferred that migration is not the traumatic event it is often thought to be. Rather, migration becomes less about the loss of a native heritage and more about one's capacity to craft fu-

ture engagements with new cultures. In other words, migration is less a process of abandonment than a process of acquisition.

“Transculture” is especially valuable when considering recent Russian-Jewish immigrant experience because it emphasizes intercultural dialogue as the very engine of identity and because it resists calcifying homogenizations of any single, dominant cultural or ethnic tradition. As beneficiaries of the sophisticated, multi-state Soviet educational system, which has long emphasized childhood foreign language training, most Soviet Jews were at least moderately proficient in languages other than Russian before leaving the USSR. As Jews, though often highly secularized, all were aware of Hebrew as an independent language specific to Jewish identity and many received education in it. As multilingual members of the Soviet intelligentsia, Russian Jews, even as children, were conditioned to become suspicious of the propagandistic totalizations of Soviet Russian culture and to seek dialogue with the West for alternative sources of information. Thus, almost by definition, Soviet Jews could see themselves as choosing among a variety of incomplete cultural traditions to achieve a sense of wholeness even before abandoning the USSR.

Epstein describes Nabokov as a “transcultural” author, but such a classification warrants elaboration, especially given Nabokov’s unusual biography and literary output. Russian culture proved more than insufficient for Nabokov; it became dangerous for him. As a candidate for the firing squads of the Red Terror, he was forced to flee the Ukraine and Russia’s Crimean Peninsula for Western Europe in 1919, earning a Bachelor’s degree in Slavic and Romance Languages at Cambridge University before settling in Berlin for fifteen years. Though not Jewish himself, Nabokov married a Russian Jew, Vera Slonim, in 1925. She was to exert a profound influence on Nabokov’s migratory life as well as on his seventeen novels, almost all of which are dedicated to her. There is a growing scholarly consensus that one may speak of a consistently philosemitic orientation in Nabokov’s writings and his life during his years in Russia, in Germany and later in the United States and again in Europe. Nabokov’s father, Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, who deeply influenced the budding author, vehemently opposed antisemi-

tism and, after a pogrom in the city of Kishinev, published a famous article, "The Bloodbath of Kishinev", denouncing state-sponsored atrocities against the Russian Jews. The younger Nabokov's emigration out of Germany and France as well as his immigration to the United States in 1940 were motivated by his desire to find refuge for his wife and child. Even during the rise of Nazism, while still living in Germany, Nabokov was sensitive to Jewish persecution. He made a point of visiting Jewish businesses marked with gold stars and thus targeted for boycotting (Boyd 1990, 400). Having benefitted from the assistance of Jewish-Russians during his time in Berlin and subsequently in France, Nabokov made financial contributions to several Jewish organizations (Shrayer 1999, 77). Later, while in the United States, he complained directly to discriminatory motel managers, insisting that they should admit Jewish clientele (Ivry 2013). In fact, *Lolita* makes reference to such antisemitic hotel policies (Nabokov 1991, 261) and includes a short satiric caricature of an antisemitic fictional character, John Farlow (79). The two finely wrought New York Jewish émigré parents, dealing with the plight of their mentally-ill son in a hospital, ground Nabokov's short story "Signs and Symbols", making it perhaps his most moving work of short fiction, and the only one to have earned an entire book of scholarly chapters devoted to it (Leving 2012a). One scholar writes of a whole "gallery of Jewish characters" in Nabokov's fiction (Shrayer 2013). In contrast to the Jewish American Saul Bellow's depictions of Jews which are often negative, Nabokov only presents Jewish characters in a positive light. His Russian American friendliness to Jewish culture adds yet another transcultural dimension to his already trilingual cultural upbringing and may account for his positive reception by the present generation of Russian-Jewish American writers. When Nabokov migrated from the United States to Switzerland, where he lived for the last sixteen years of his life, he eschewed any proud, totalizing sense of American identity and put his American experience in constant interplay with French, Swiss, English and Russian cultures². In Switzerland,

² His famous, 1966 boast from Switzerland in an interview, "I am as American

Nabokov's Judeophilia remained constant. He befriended and corresponded with the Israeli ambassador to Switzerland and agreed at least in principle to visit Israel, even though he never made the journey. Describing Nabokov's time in Switzerland, Yuri Leving has written: "the philo-Semite in the family appears to have been the writer, not his wife" (Leving 2012b).

The contemporary transcultural Russian-Jewish American novelist most readily paired with Nabokov is Shteyngart, who alludes to Nabokov's works on many occasions. Popular reviews comparing Shteyngart to his illustrious Russian-American predecessor are too numerous to cite. The only monograph entirely devoted to one of the new wave of current Russian-Jewish American writers, Geoff Hamilton's *Understanding Gary Shteyngart*, notes that one of Shteyngart's principle satiric targets is "*poshlust*" (Hamilton 2017, 24-25), a term to which Nabokov devotes a memorable, often quoted chapter of his book, *Nikolai Gogol*, and glosses as "philistinism" (Nabokov 1981, 309-314). In *Absurdistan*, Shteyngart refers to himself obliquely through the caricature of a Russian-Jewish émigré author "Jerry Shteynfarb", a "weasel" "who thinks he is the Jewish Nabokov" (Shteyngart 2006, 63). Such a device of parodying one's own authorial name calls to mind Nabokov's rechristening of himself as "Vadim Vadimovich N.", in *Look at the Harlequins!* (1974), to cite only one of many such examples. Later in *Absurdistan*, the protagonist's friend, an American Russophile by the name Alyosha-Bob, delights in using an electric fan to destroy the pages of one of Nabokov's novels: "Hey, look at this, guys. Fucking *Ada*. Take that, Nabokov! You sixteen-karat bore!" (174). Why associate a "bore" with a preponderance of gold ("sixteen-karat")? Derision on the part of the character here masks admiration on the part of the author. Such a device of the revisionary creative reading ratio

as April in Arizona" (Nabokov 1990, 98), while suspect, is only playfully prideful. Why choose to live in Switzerland when claiming American identity? How can any single month be identified in the abstract with a distinctive cultural tradition? Furthermore, many Americans and other English-speakers reflexively associate April "with showers". The connotations of the month are semantically inconsistent with Arizona's generally dry climate.

of “tessara” is defined by Harold Bloom as the “antithesis” and “extension” of a prior author’s work (Bloom 1973, 14). It will be shown that both *Absurdistan* and Shteyngart’s prior success, *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* (2002), contradict yet ironically update the peculiar counterfactual geography circumscribing Nabokov’s *Ada, or Ardor: A Family Chronicle* (1969). A subspecies of the fantastic, counterfactual geography posits the existence of unreal countries and treats them as facts in the tradition of Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (1726). Nabokov’s counterfactual geographies fantastically relocate elements of Russian physical space outside the Motherland in imaginary realms. The counterfactual geographies of Nabokov’s Russian-Jewish American followers imitate this model, but impart to it distinctively Jewish elements.

Nabokov’s first grand experiment in counterfactual geography, *Pale Fire* (1962), invents the pseudo-Scandinavian, magical kingdom of “Zembla”, from which the insane literary scholar Charles Kinbote rapturously claims to have emigrated before settling in the United States. An echo of Zembla is audible in the synoptic description of Shteyngart’s no less fanciful country of *Absurdistan* as “Norway on the Caspian”. The extravagant, interplanetary setting and political boundaries of *Ada* are, however, much more complex. Nabokov would have us believe in an alternative planet, “Antiterra”, on which both America and Eurasia are combined in a heady amalgam of toponyms and inhabited by erudite trilinguals wielding not only Russian and English, but also French. It is in his introductory descriptions of Antiterra that Nabokov coins the suggestive term “Amerussia”, which combines the names of the two countries dearest to him with a nuance of bittersweet nostalgia through phonetic allusion to the French adjective *amère* (bitter). The creative space of nostalgia demarcated by “Amerussia” is a neglected cornerstone not only of Nabokov’s poetics, but also those of his most popular Jewish-Russian-American followers.

Like “Antiterra” and “Amerussia”, the imaginary setting of “Prava”, in which much of Shteyngart’s *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* is located, allows for an effusive cross-referencing of American, Russian and other cultural themes. Shteyn-

gart's novel begins with the portrait of Vladimir Girshkin, a New York Russian-Jew, who, like his author, has recently emigrated from Leningrad to the United States. A picaresque, womanizing con man in the tradition of Bellow's Chicago-Jewish *Augie March*, Girshkin migrates from New York to Prava, capital city of the country known as "Republika Stolovaya", or as Vladimir notes, "The Cafeteria Republic" in Russian (Shteyngart 2006, 187). A trace of Nabokov's interplanetary setting for *Invitation to a Beheading* may be detected in Shteyngart's lone later reference to "Planet Stolovaya" (407), but viewed contextually, such a reference is clearly hyperbolic. "Prava" has been dismissed as a "transparent caricature of Prague" (Wanner 2011, 96), but the irreality of Shteyngart's phantasmagoric metropolis is much more complex. The original inhabitants are marginalized by the American and post-Soviet Russian expatriates as well as other ethnically defined criminal gangs that dominate the city, and yet they do not speak Czech, but Stolovan, an invented language. The collected writings of the former dissident Czech statesman Václav Havel's appear in Prava, but only in Stolovan translation and, in a nod to American pop culture, with an introduction by "Borik Hrad, the so-called Stolovan Lou Reed" (387). Shteyngart's "Stolovan" parallels Nabokov's whimsical creation of an independent "Zemblan" language for *Pale Fire*. The Soviets building the world's tallest statue over Prava may be read as directly alluding to the enormous Prague Stalin Monument, constructed in 1965. While the Pravan monument, like that of Prague, is said to have been blown up using dynamite, the Prava statue leaves intact an enormous left foot as an object of scorn and ongoing political controversy. Although many of the references to Russian and Soviet history date from the twentieth century, Shteyngart's Prava is full of allusions to details of the post-Soviet experience that Nabokov did not live to see. Moreover, unlike Nabokov's "Zembla" or his "Antiterra", Prava nurtures the American antihero Girshkin's generalizing epiphanies of Russian-Jewish identity:

A knowledgeable Russian lazing around in the grass, sniffing on clover and munching on boysenberries, expects that at any minute the forces of history will drop by and discreetly kick him in the ass. A knowledgeable

Jew in a similar position expects history to spare any pretense and kick him directly in the face. A *Russian Jew* (knowledgeable or not), however, expects both history *and* a Russian to kick him in the ass, the face, and every other place where a kick can be reasonably lodged. Vladimir understood this. (365; italics in the original)

Prava and the Republic of Stolovaya turn out to be even more transculturally inflected than Nabokov's imaginary places.

Absurdistan's imaginary and extravagant geography appears in its very name. Here, the protagonist is not a US citizen, but a highly Americanized, American-educated, Russian Jew, Misha aka "Moshe" Vainberg, aka "Snack Daddy", hopelessly in love with a "South Bronx girlie girl" (10), "half Puerto Rican. And half German. And half Mexican and Irish", but "raised mostly Dominican" (32), with the latter term referring to the Catholic order, not to the people of either the Greater Antilles Dominican Republic or Lesser Antilles island Commonwealth of Dominica. An obese giant whose Rabelaisian stature suggests his consumption of many diverse cultural traditions, Vainberg is deprived of a US visa and trapped in the Russian city of his birth which he repeatedly calls "St. Leninsburg", all because the US police have pegged his criminal father for the assassination of an Oklahoma businessman. Vainberg junior eventually acquires a Belgian passport and migrates to Svani City, the capital of "The Republic of Absurdisvani", or Absurdistan. Note a loose parallel with the incomplete Prague orientation of Prava, for "Absurdistan" was Havel's preferred satiric designation of communist Czechoslovakia (Janicek) long before Shteyngart's composition of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*. Intimations of the Bohemian capital in both Prava and Absurdistan ironically suggest common use of "bohemian" as a metaphor for non-conformism. To the Russian elements of Absurdistan consistent with depiction of it as a formerly Soviet, Russianized Central Asian republic are added discordant, clearly counterfactual American dimensions:

Svani City clung wearily to a small mountain range. We took an ascending road away from the gray curve of the Caspian Sea until we reached something called the Boulevard of National Unity. We found ourselves, in a manner of speaking, on the primary thoroughfare of Portland, OR, where I had once misspent a couple of weeks of my youth. (119)

“National Unity” is later undermined as a strictly propagandistic concept, as the country is shown, despite its Commissariat for Multicultural Affairs, to be on the brink of civil war among religious sectarians, including Christians, Jews, and Muslims. *Absurdistan* can thus be read as a spoof on the pretense of multiculturalism; the novel ultimately argues for the need for individual cultures’ humility in the face of others, consistent with Epstein’s theory of “transculture”.

Next to Shteyngart’s extraordinary combination of toponyms, Reyn’s New York setting may initially appear straightforward, but is in its own way evocative of Nabokov’s “Amerussia”, and harbors its own transcultural complexities. Reyn has explicitly acknowledged Nabokov as an inspiration. In an interview she gave, Nabokov tops the list of Russian greats that Reyn offered in response to the question “Other than Tolstoy, who are some authors who have influenced your work?” (Reyn 2008, 247). In some ways Reyn hews truer to Nabokov than Shteyngart. *The Russian Debutante’s Handbook* and *Absurdistan* are festooned with Rabelaisian American and transliterated Russian obscenities, but Reyn’s occasional depictions of sex are lexically prim, and match Nabokov’s adage: “I despise the corny Philistine fad of flaunting four-letter words” (Nabokov 1990a, 113). Reyn’s debut novel, *What Happened to Anna K.* (2008), refers several times to Nabokov’s novel *Pnin* (1957), a sustained, eponymous portrait of an awkward Russian émigré struggling with English and immersion in American everyday life. Like any immigrant to the United States, Pnin has difficulties learning how to drive a car, finding a quiet place to live and gaining permanent employment in his chosen career. Published as a series of *The New Yorker* installments before appearing in book form in 1957, *Pnin* introduced American readers to the macaronic device of spicing a text predominantly composed in English with nuggets of Russian, transliterated into Roman alphabetic letters. This technique is now automatic for both Shteyngart and Reyn.

As its title playfully suggests, Reyn’s book updates, makes Jewish, and transposes to New York City the major plot lines of Leo Tolstoy’s *Anna Karenina* (1878), in what is ultimately

a “serious parody” or “transdiegetization”, to cite the terms coined by Gérard Genette (Genette 1997, 296). The role of Tolstoy’s heroine is played by the Moscow-born Russian Jew Anna K. (née Roitman), recently married to Alex K., an eventual cuckold who fails to fathom the depths of his wife’s passionate soul. After becoming a mother, Anna K. begins to doubt her attractiveness and becomes bored with her husband. She then embarks on an exciting, adulterous romance with the Ashkenazi Jewish American David Zuckerman, whose name hints at the many Zuckermans of Philip Roth’s novels, but whose characterization more obviously reconstitutes Tolstoy’s handsome and daring lover, Aleksei Vronsky. Shteyngart’s Girshkin, too, plays “Count Vronsky for the downtown nobility” in New York (Shteyngart 2002, 104), but this is an isolated reference. As in Tolstoy, so too in Reyn’s novel the lovers’ first enrapturing encounter occurs in a train station. In Reyn’s hands, the famous horse-race accident that Anna witnesses in Tolstoy’s novel ingeniously reappears in David’s fall while running the New York City Marathon. Much of the pleasure of reading *What Happened to Anna K.* lies in the author’s skillful use of intertextuality and the readers’ ability to recognize details from Tolstoy’s masterpiece in the novel’s twenty-first century, transcultural Russian-Jewish American context. Tolstoy’s episode of the lovers’ adventures in Italy, to cite another example, finds an engaging parallel in David and Anna K.’s Alaskan vacation cruise. The leitmotiv of Anna Karenina’s “light, resolute step” (Tolstoy 2011, 62, 75) recurs in the opening description of Anna K.’s no less noteworthy gait: “What set her apart from the others, at least in her own mind?... Her walk, perhaps, delicate, thought-through” (Reyn 2008, 1). Both Tolstoy and Reyn lavish attention on their brunette heroines’ curly hair.

The author’s decision to update *Anna Karenina* and make it transculturally American suggests a Nabokovian inspiration. Although not a fan of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* (1869), Nabokov considered *Anna Karenina* “the supreme masterpiece of nineteenth-century literature” (Nabokov 1990b, 147), and devoted a reverent series of university lectures to it (Nabokov 1981, 137-235). Pnin’s fellow professor, Bolotov, also a Rus-

sian émigré, is depicted perusing a tattered copy of *Anna Karenina* “for the seventh time” and deriving “as much rapture” as he did “sixty years” earlier in childhood (Nabokov 1989, 122). Yet Bolotov must consult Pnin for the answer to an arcane question about the timeline of Tolstoy’s novel. Pnin’s immediate and lengthy response to his colleague’s query, demonstrating an extensive knowledge of the work’s minutest details, leads one to assume that Pnin might have read the novel even more than just seven times. In short, Nabokov’s novel presents *Anna Karenina* as a *sine qua non* of Russian cultural consciousness. Nabokov’s encyclopedic *Ada* even parodies in its first sentence the famous opening of *Anna Karenina*, “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” (Tolstoy 2011, 1): “All happy families are more or less dissimilar; all unhappy ones are more or less alike” (Nabokov 1990a, 3). The stream of consciousness that precedes Lucette’s suicide in *Ada* echoes that which leads to Anna’s self-destruction in Tolstoy’s novel (Boyd 1995, 11). Moreover, the conceit of Americanizing a major Russian classic is far from alien to Nabokov. *Lolita* has been read by Priscilla Meyer as an Americanization of Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. This critic claimed that the rivalry between Nabokov’s Humbert Humbert and Clare Quilty parallels that of Pushkin’s Eugene and Vladimir Lensky; she also noted that the Pushkinian prototype of Tatiana Larina is bifurcated in the double characterization of Nabokov’s Charlotte and Delores Haze (Meyer 1988, 17-23).

In Reyn’s *What Happened to Anna K.*, the adulterous lovers’ passions are ignited by reading Nabokov’s *Pnin*. Their shared love for *Pnin*, a copy of which David gives to Anna on their first date, unbeknownst to Anna’s husband, is foreshadowed by earlier and more general references to Nabokov in the novel. Anna is said to have imagined herself in grandiose teenage whimsy as “the most idiosyncratic émigré mind since Nabokov” (Reyn 2008, 11). In premarital adulthood Anna’s suitors are “Philip Roth/Updike/Nabokov (sometimes Henry Miller) disciples who finally saw her as the heroine of their future, unwritten novels” (46). When David and Anna converse at a New Year’s party, another character imagines them talking about “Nabokov nov-

els no one has heard of (more obscure than *Lolita*)” (72). The romance comes to fruition with a “ruse”: “that she wanted to take *Pnin* out for a test drive, a book he had raved about” (74). The reflexive American automotive metaphor of the “test drive” is ironic, given *Pnin*’s failing his first driving test and inability “to combine perceptually the car *Pnin* was driving in his mind and the car he was driving on the road” (Nabokov 1989, 113). The plea for a “test drive” leads in Reyn’s novel to “the borrowing of a book – *Pnin* to be exact – the exchange taking place at an Upper East Side café” (Reyn 2008, 73). This eatery is revisited later and described as “the crammed café where she and David had once used Nabokov as a pretext” (121). In the earlier café episode, David flirtatiously inquires: “It’s not the first novel you think of when you think of Nabokov, is it?” (Reyn 2008, 74) – an obvious allusion to *Lolita*’s eroticism and popularity. Much later, jealous and alone, Anna hacks into David’s computer to discover that his e-mail username is “pnin76” (152). The number most likely refers to David’s year of birth, but may also be taken as a playful allusion to the year of the Declaration of Independence, to the origin of the United States and thus, in a roundabout way, to Reyn’s fascination with the Americanization of immigrants. The identification of David with *Pnin* and with 1776 calls attention to Nabokov’s prior master narrative of a Russian’s assimilation to the United States but, as will be shown, Reyn feminizes Nabokov’s prototype.

David’s username calls attention to several other thematic parallels between him and Nabokov’s eponymous male protagonist. Needless to say, David is in love with a Jew. *Pnin*’s enduring love is the Jew Mira Belochkin, who perishes at Buchenwald during the Holocaust, but who continues to haunt *Pnin*’s memory. David’s unstable professional position as an adjunct instructor of creative writing is reminiscent of *Pnin*’s vulnerability as an untenured faculty member who is fired at the end of Nabokov’s novel. They are both clumsy, intellectual antiheroes who harbor heroic romantic dreams. In the words of David’s father, “you, David, continue to be a romantic... You always did wish you lived in the nineteenth century. Love, tragedy, conquest, Napoleon” (182). *Pnin*’s Napoleonic context is activated

by the muralist Komarov's decision to paint Pnin's portrait over one of Napoleon's, in the Waindell College dining-hall. Both Pnin's and David's hapless academic flounderings are redeemed: David finally gets a tenure-track offer in creative writing from the University of Iowa; and Pnin miraculously reappears in a later novel by Nabokov, *Pale Fire*, as the Head of the Slavic Department in the fictional Goldsmith College. The migration of the same fictional character from one novel into another is typified by Honoré de Balzac's *La Comédie Humaine*, but is also a device favored by Shteyngart. Girshkin, the antihero of *The Russian Debutante's Handbook*, also appears in a marginal role as a student at Accidental College in *Absurdistan*.

While the deliberate pairing of the character Pnin with Reyn's David is most obvious, Reyn further identifies elements of Nabokov's émigré protagonist with Anna. The awkward Pnin is an unexpected master of croquet:

As soon as the pegs were driven in and the game started, Pnin was transfigured. From his habitual, slow, ponderous, rather rigid self, he changed into a terrifically mobile, scampering, mute, sly-visaged hunchback. It seemed to be always his turn to play. Holding his mallet very low and daintily swinging it between his parted spindly legs (he had created a minor sensation by changing into Bermuda shorts expressly for the game) Pnin foreshadowed every stroke with nimble aim-taking oscillations of the mallet head, then gave the ball an accurate tap, and forthwith, still hunched, and with the ball still rolling, walked rapidly to the spot where he had planned for it to stop. With geometrical gusto, he ran it through the hoops, evoking cries of admiration from the onlookers. (Nabokov 1989, 130)

Equally surprising for readers of Reyn's work is Anna's prowess at table tennis, displayed on her Alaskan cruise:

A fact David did not yet know: Anna was very good at Ping-Pong... Her stride to the table was meek, almost self-effacing. A rough day at sea made the table sway ever so slightly and the image of this woman dipped for most of the onlookers. All they saw were her curls, the curve of her breasts, her long, pianist's fingers. She volleyed a few minutes with a scrawny, teenaged boy, who was overdressed in slacks, a quilted vest, and dress shoes, and looked uncomfortable as he leapt for the ball. Then they played for points. The ball almost levitated against her racket.

David watched as Anna effortlessly wiped one person out after another. If he admitted it to himself, he would say he was surprised at her competi-

tive edge, with its tinge of malice. Safely, she would volley, safely, waiting for the moment to slam the ball, to ram it into the table with force. The opponents, mostly dads and their teenage sons, were helpless before the onslaught, their hands thrown up in the air. Woo, they would say with a grin, take it easy, miss, it's only a game. (Reyn 2008, 163)

In the second paragraph, the repetition of the word “safely” is noteworthy, and may be taken to suggest the rhythm of successive waves rocking the ship, but also hints abstractly at the migrant's quest for “safe harbor”. In the men's final complaint, “miss” is a pun of which Nabokov would be proud. It is at once a condescending, but here incorrect designation of an unmarried young woman – Anna is still married to Alex K. – and a seeming imperative, an entreaty to “miss a shot” in the game. Lovers of Nabokov's novel can return to it and discover in Anna's table-tennis skills an answer to the invitational question, “Ping-pong, Pnin?” (Nabokov 1989, 63), posed by one of Pnin's fellow instructors at Waindell College and memorable as a challenge for English-speakers to enunciate. Pnin rejects the invitation in broken English influenced by his better grasp of French: “I no longer play at games of infants” (63) – a remark that makes his love of croquet all the more surprising. Yet Reyn seems ironically to accept the invitation to Ping Pong in portraying Anna as a highly proficient player. At the same time as *What Happened to Anna K.* pairs Nabokov's Pnin with David, Reyn thus also feminizes the Nabokovian émigré prototype, interweaving characteristics in a complex interplay of masculine and feminine cultural codes.

Transcultural allusions to Tolstoy's novel are not limited to the constellation of parallels between the pair of adulterous lovers (Anna Karenina/Alexei Vronsky and Anna K./David Zuckerman). The idealized love of Tolstoy's Konstantine Levin for Kitty Sherbatskaia is reconstituted in Reyn's ultimately happy marriage of the Russian-Jewish-Bukharian New Yorkers Lev Gavrilov and Katia Zavurov. For starters, “Lev” is easily matched with “Levin”, both of which hint also at Tolstoy's Russian first name “Lev”. The geography of Russian-Jewish New York is given additional nuance through Reyn's attention to the large Bukharian-Russian-Jewish community there. The cradle of

Bukharian (“Bukharan”, “Bukhari” or “Bukhi”) Jewry was the city of Bukhara, located in today’s Uzbekistan, where a distinctive Jewish Bukharian culture and language flourished from the sixteen century onwards. Bukhori, a Tajik dialect of Persian, is laced with Hebrewisms. In Soviet times the Bukharian Jews became Russified and knowledge of Russian was expected; hence the now normative tricultural appellation of “Russian-Bukharian-Jewish” culture. With the dissolution of the USSR, the majority of Bukharian Jews emigrated, and today, approximately 150,000 reside in Israel and 60,000 in the United States, most of the latter in Queens, New York. Locals have nicknamed the Rego Park neighborhood of Queens, “Bukharlem”, a transcultural American portmanteau with African American as well as Dutch connotations. This immigrant neighborhood is one of the principal settings for *What Happened to Anna K.* Thus, Reyn’s novel not only makes elements of Tolstoy’s novel Jewish; it further makes a selection of them Bukharian.

Reyn’s identification of the distinctive Bukharian culture within Russian-Jewish-America is only the most obvious and sustained of her attempts to highlight Russian-Jewish American heterogeneity in places of residence. When Anna’s mother plans Anna’s wedding reception, early in the novel, the following arrangement of table seating is envisioned:

The Manhattan Russians in the front, closer to the stage – the best seats in the house – followed by the Outer Boroughs Russians, the California Russians, the New Jersey Russians, and so forth. The Midwestern Russians would be squirreled away. She didn’t blame them, of course, but what could the poor dears do, with nowhere to go in the evenings, among all that snow and industrial soot? How could they know you don’t wear turtle-necks to classy Brighton establishments? Or even worse, taking that single “good” dress out of mothballs, forgetting one has worn it to countless birthdays and anniversaries and weddings, the same too-small “special-occasion” dress, with its lacy arms, its mermaid shape, its matching fringe-heavy shawl? No, the Midwesterners would sit right there, Anna’s mother decided. (Reyn 2008, 4)

The extended, supercilious attention to Midwestern American Russians implies the possibility of equally elaborate distinguishing details for the other groups classified here.

Instead of embracing her own partial Bukharian family history, Anna distances herself from it: “Bukharians remained exotic to Anna, even if her own mother had been an exiled Bukharian in Moscow, so happily Sovietized that she has no desire to return to Uzbekistan” (39); “Anna always found Bukharian customs draconian, terribly repressive of women, probably influenced by living beside Muslims in those incomprehensible countries like Uzbekistan and Tajikistan” (Reyn 2008, 60). Just as Reyn’s Anna homogenizes Bukharian culture as other, she comes to do the same for her Russian self: “Anna’s Russianness was, once again, exotic, her separation from her husband even more so” (140). Unable to identify with her Bukharian and her Russian roots, Anna struggles to flourish in a third, American identity. By committing suicide under a subway train, she, too, meets the same fate as Tolstoy’s heroine. Jealousy, narcissism, wounded pride, aging, the refusal of a stultifying husband to grant her a divorce – the reasons for the suicide in *Anna Karenina* are complex and varied. To this already toxic mix Reyn seems to add a calcifying misconception about the nature of cultures: because Anna sees her ethnic identities as fixed and mutually exclusive, she is unable to achieve the transcultural consciousness expressed by Lev and Katia in embracing and growing beyond their triple heritages. Pnin, in comparison, is much less Americanized than any of Reyn’s major characters, but proves himself humbly open to the commingling of Russian and American cultures constitutive of his own transcultural identity. Ultimately, this flexibility enables him to flourish in the United States.

Reyn’s second novel, *The Imperial Wife* (2016), also focuses on the characterization of a Russian immigrant woman in New York. Tatiana (Tanya) Kagan is an appraiser for an auction house who oversees the authentication of Russian objects. Her profession centers on the problem of Russianness and how to validate it. In this novel, too, we find transcultural allusions to *Anna Karenina* and to Nabokov. Tanya is unjustifiably jealous of her husband Carl’s American creative-writing student Victoria, imagining her as Tolstoy’s heroine: “Outside the gate, we saw a hooded form smoking in the dusk, a series of loose black curls, languorous limbs over forlorn eyes. It might as well have

been Anna Karenina herself. ‘Is that Victoria?’ Carl said. *Of course*, I thought, this *would be Victoria*” (154; italics in the original). Earlier we learn that “Nabokov’s wordplay inspired” Carl “to try writing in the first place” (59). Although this is the only direct mention of Nabokov’s name in *The Imperial Wife*, the novel sustains extended discussions of transculturalism and parallels Nabokov’s complex, double-voiced narration in *Ada*. The counterfactual New York suburb of “Ramsdale, New Jersey” where Tanya’s parents live may be taken to echo the “Ramsdale” in *Lolita* where Humbert Humbert first meets the object of his obsessions.

A richly bejeweled medallion, said to have belonged to Catherine the Great, becomes a major element in the plot in *The Imperial Wife*, as Tanya makes every effort to arrange for its full authentication. The novel’s setting in contemporary New York circumscribes another extensive, embedded narrative: the story of the German- and French-speaking Princess Sophie Friederike Auguste von Anhalt-Zerbst-Dornburg’s emigration from Prussia, transformation into the Russian Empire’s ruler, and renamed Catherine (eventually to be known as Catherine II and then as Catherine the Great). The historical novel that Tanya’s temperamental husband writes, entitled *Young Catherine*, is an unexpected commercial success with its fictionalized American readership. *Young Catherine* is rich in historical detail and explains how the Princess Sophie was rechristened “Grand Duchess Catherine Daughter of Aleksei” (Ekaterina Alekseevna) soon after her arrival in Russia in commemoration of the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna’s mother, Ekaterina Alekseevna. Much of the interest of *The Imperial Wife* derives from its elaborate cross-referencing of one tale of migration and assimilation with another; the reader is invited to contrast the tale of Tanya’s assimilation into an alien culture and marriage to a foreigner with similar patterns in Sophie’s life. Such a focus on the history of Sophie’s royal eastward journey upends contemporary stereotypes of Russian migrants: that they move from East to West; that they are all impoverished refugees; that they are all even Russian. Because Catherine the Great is now as indissociable from Russian culture as kasha for breakfast, the

attention Reyn gives to her German origin suggests the degree to which transculturalism influences the formation of cultural and intercultural identities. We might contrast the ability of the German Princess Sophie to assimilate and become integral to Russian history and culture to Nabokov's failure to develop close friendships with Germans during his sixteen-year period of residence in Berlin. It was not that Nabokov was indifferent to German culture. He studied German as a teenager for two years, loved scientific works in German devoted to butterflies, translated some of Heinrich Heine's lyrics into Russian, and had proficiency in spoken German sufficient for everyday purposes. One of Nabokov's few sympathetic depictions of a German character, Kurt Dreyer from *King, Queen, Knave*, "points towards his creator's readiness to appreciate the humanity of the German other without compromising his aversion to the sad circus of the Weimar era *Polizeipräsidiums*" (Shvabrin 2018, 91).

Tanya, like Anna from Reyn's previous novel, is caught between incompatible notions of discrete, calcified definitions of individual cultures. As Carl heatedly argues for a trial separation and readies himself to leave, Tanya makes the following assessment:

He leans over to kiss me. A real Russian woman would have taken advantage of this kiss. She would have opened herself like a flower, kept him tethered under the guise of vulnerability. She would have stopped at nothing to keep him – phantom pregnancy, guilt, threats. A real Jewish woman would have decided this was the end of the world. A husband taking time to think would be nothing less than disaster, because life makes the most sense through a lens of fear, caution. But in being both these women, I am neither. (Reyn 2016, 21)

Carl is initially angered by Tanya's perverse refusal to allow him to touch the bejeweled Order of Catherine held by her auction house. Ultimately, Tanya's desire for affirmation from her American husband leads her to a self-destructive act that is no less histrionic than the suicides of Anna Karenina and Anna K. Regretting her prior reluctance to permit Carl to touch the Catherine medal, Tanya – an erstwhile shoplifter – steals it from its new owner and brings it to Carl just as the novel ends,

leaving readers to assume she will be arrested and most likely rejected both by her husband and the country to which she has come as an immigrant.

As in *What Happened to Anna K.*, so too in *The Imperial Wife* the interfacing of ethnic codes is paralleled by a similar juxtaposition of distinctive masculine and feminine cultural perspectives. In both Reyn's *The Imperial Wife* and Nabokov's *Ada*, readers confront a duality of male and female authorial claims. Despite its interplanetary counterfactual pretensions to science fiction, much of *Ada* is a chronicle of family life ostensibly authored by its trilingual male protagonist, Van Veen. This family history is, however, enlivened by frequent chatty interpolations from his wife, Ada, marked by parentheses and often her name. Yet readers are invited to wonder if and how Ada's voice is woven directly into the passages seemingly authored by her husband.

In *The Imperial Wife*, Carl gives Tanya a draft of what later becomes his novel *Young Catherine*. Here is Tanya's description of her five months of labor revising her husband's manuscript:

I wouldn't say rewrote, that's a huge overstatement. In reality, after consulting some self-help books on writing fiction, and getting carried away with the story, I turned my attention to it during lunchtime at work. Once I began, with Carl's research as the foundation, words flowed freely out of my own memories of those early years in America. The foreign streets of Rego Park, the kids at school who detested me for being geeky and Russian. That endless solitude of my room with the fantasy of a single best friend, a beloved confidante, all those disappointing boyfriends of my twenties who never grew up, who never stepped up to the plate, who were never strong enough for me. Didn't I also believe I was destined for greatness merely because I was transplanted from one place to another? (268-269)

The distinctly American baseball metaphor of boyfriends never "stepping up to the plate" is defamiliarized when we imagine Tanya bringing it to her descriptions of the non-committal hesitation of Peter III, young Catherine the Great's reluctant suitor. Coming as it does just five pages before the end of Reyn's novel, Tanya's confession of authorial participation invites a retrospective rereading of the Catherine episodes with a view to determining the precise nature of Tanya's contributions. In

much the same way, Nabokov cajoles us to reread *Ada* in an attempt to discern Ada's vocalizations from Van's.

In conclusion, both Shteyngart and Reyn may be regarded, metaphorically speaking, as the Judeophile Nabokov's transcultural, literary offspring. They imitate and Judaicize not only what they perceive as the model Russian immigrant writer's (Nabokov) success story; they also transform and make Jewish the literary theme of Russian immigration into the American way of life that first found expression in Nabokov's *Pnin*. Shteyngart's attitude to his illustrious literary predecessor is at times agonistic, illustrative of Bloom's theory of intertextuality as a symbolic competition of sons with their fathers. Earlier I suggested that Shteyngart's works are consistent with Bloom's "tessara", the antithesis and completion of a prior author's work. One of Shteyngart's characters attacks a copy of *Ada* in a literal, physical way; but Shteyngart's counterfactual geography extends and updates the fanciful notion of "Amerussia" first articulated in that novel. The masculine rhetoric of Bloom's poetics has been superseded by an inclusive, feminist theory of the "anxiety of authorship" in women's prose (Gilbert – Gubar 1980, 49), but Bloom's delineation of individual "ratios" of literary revision remains valid. In what seems to be another example of "tessara", Reyn identifies her tragic heroine with *Pnin* as if to polemicize against the masculinity of Nabokov's Russian émigré prototype; yet in this effort Reyn expands Nabokov's transcultural potential, making it inclusive of women. It remains to be seen if authors of the current Russian-Jewish American literary boom other than Shteyngart and Reyn will continue to engage with their Russian immigrant precursor Nabokov.

While it seems tempting to classify Russian-Jewish American writing as "tricultural" or "multicultural", "transculturality" is favored here to suggest a sense of irreducible heterogeneity. As Epstein contends, to deploy the term "multicultural" is to posit a series of discrete, self-sufficient, individual cultures. To call Russian-Jewish American authors "tri-" or "multi-" cultural risks homogenization of Russian, Jewish, and of American cultures as separable entities. "Transculture" reminds us that each is a complex sum of heterogenous parts, that, for exam-

ple, Russian culture includes German elements; or that Jewish culture embraces Bukharian components. Could one say much the same of “transnationalism”? Nabokov has been briefly positioned under this umbrella (Trousdale 2018), but the precise relation of “transculture” to “transnationalism” in consideration of Nabokov’s works has yet to be defined.

Since all practitioners of transcultural writing discussed in this essay, as well as transculturism’s principle theorist, may be regarded as highly privileged members of the Russian-American intelligentsia, one may wonder if a sophisticated education in more than one language is a necessary prerequisite for such forms of literary expression. One may also further speculate whether migration must be a precondition. The rhetoric of Epstein’s formulations tends to be more expansive: “Transculture offers a universal symbolic palette on which any individual can blend colors to produce an expressive self-portrait. As a transcultural being, I can adhere to any ethnic or confessional tradition and decide the degree to which I make it my own” (Epstein 2020). One may object that neither a variety of ethnic traditions nor a diversity of religious faiths is available to less privileged social classes. How might we speak of transculturalism in the work of uneducated, monolingual writers? Does the migrant literature specific to cultures and ethnic traditions other than those of Russian America and Russian American Jewry ultimately yield to transcultural analysis? These are of course much larger questions and offer rich possibilities for future scholarship.

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Part III

Canon, Pedagogy, and the Other

Chapter 13

Fred L. Gardaphé

Art of the State: The Politics of Multiculturalism in American Literary Studies; or, Who Hung the Rembrandt on the Multicultural Mural?

In the old days it was simple.
A medicine person could get by without all these things.
But nowadays...
At one time, the ceremonies as they had been performed
were enough for the way the world was then.
But after the white people came, elements in this world
began to shift; and it became necessary to create new
ceremonies.
I have made changes in the rituals.
The people mistrust this greatly, but only this growth
keeps the ceremonies strong.
(Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*)

Our world is ever changing, and like the old medicine man Betonie who finds a way to heal Tayo, the protagonist in Leslie Silko's novel *Ceremony* (1977), a narrative strongly rooted in the oral traditions of the Navajo and Pueblo peoples, national cultures too must adapt to rapidly changing world orders. The protagonist, a man of White and Laguna Pueblo ancestry, returns from World War II with severe post-traumatic stress, described at the time as battle fatigue, and is cured by the medicine man, like Tayo also of mixed Navajo ancestry. Betonie, therefore, knows that there is no such thing as cultural purity and his success is based on his ability to draw from the varied ritual traditions of his own ancestry which he then adapts to the modern multicultural context.

Many of the academic intellectuals that I have come in contact with over the years mock my attempts to see America through a multicultural paradigm. They either believe that it is a passing fad and are therefore dismissive, or they are confused by it. Such colleagues of mine, perhaps, secretly hope that this fad would eventually pass and their agendas would once again be vindicated within academic and intellectual discourses. They possibly do not take multiculturalism seriously because, if they did, they would have to both admit their ignorance of other cultures and would have to let go of their hegemonic grasp as cultural imperialists.

This essay looks at the evolution of multiculturalism within the contexts of literary studies and criticism, and a politics of representationality through the example of Italian American writers and the contributions such an often under-recognized canon of American literature contributes to a multicultural approach in the study of literatures and cultures. I know that thinking, breathing and doing things multiculturally is the only hope we have of changing the present. I also know that there will only be a future in this country if multiculturalism is taken seriously. One group that is definitely taking multiculturalism seriously, albeit in a combative and destructive way, is America's neoconservative right; recently their efforts to dismiss multiculturalism have increased; these efforts are fueled by the millions of dollars they spend on political and social propaganda designed and packaged to infiltrate our minds through our daily cultural experiences; and one of the ways their propaganda reaches us is through home invasion via the US mail.

A few years ago I was presented with the following questions by a direct mail ad-letter from a magazine that bills itself as the "only magazine that tells you what is right and what is wrong with our cultural life today". I present them because I believe they are indicative of a way of thinking that needs to be confronted if we are to have a true cultural democracy that will help us identify the ideological hegemony that has formed our so-called political democracy. The questions were: Do you have the feeling nowadays that something has gone terribly wrong with the Arts? Do you sometimes have the impression that our

culture has fallen into the hands of the barbarians? Does it make you angry when you see museums putting on shows that are trivial, vulgar, and politically repulsive? Are you appalled when leading universities abandon the classics of Western thought for the compulsory study of “third world” propaganda? Are you offended by the claim – recently supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts – that the Western tradition of classical music (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, et. al) is now to be considered nothing more than the narrow “ethnic” interest of a remnant of European immigrants? Are you apprehensive about what the politics of “multiculturalism” is going to mean to the future of our civilization?

The magazine that posed these questions is *The New Criterion*, founded by Hilton Kramer, former chief art critic at *The New York Times*, and Samuel Lipman, pianist and music critic for *Commentary*. This neo-conservative organ of the dominant culture takes its name from the leading magazine of the 1920s and '30s, started by T.S. Eliot in 1922 and called simply *The Criterion*. Their goal (as was Eliot's) is to produce criticism untouched by popular opinion and socio-political movements, as stated in one of its earliest communications:

The time has surely come for criticism to turn its back on this intellectual vaudeville act, which wears a fancy radical face when performing for the public while at the same time – backstage, as it were – availing itself of all the advantages and preferments that our society offers in such abundance. It is time to apply a new criterion to the discussion of our cultural life – a criterion of truth. (Kimball et al. 1982)

This is the language of defense in a turf war that is designed to protect the inner sanctum of the hegemonic Judeo-Christian mythology. This sanctum is insulated by a surrounding ideology that is manifested through a hegemonic culture that presumes to absorb the many cultures that make up the US. And like most American wars, this one is being waged on the turf of the other. The battlefield is the audience of millions of Americans through which lines are drawn between “High culture” and “Low culture”, between Culture (with a capital “c”) and Multi-culture with a hyphen. The war is being fought with words fueled by fear and measured by tired notions of critical standards that

are as stale as the air inside Mathew Arnold's coffin. The battle is for power over others through culture; and whoever is able to control the definition of multiculturalism will win the war. Among the arsenal of weapons are critical standards that disguise their real intent, which is political control. The dominant critical methodology of the past, which essentially boils down to treating art independent of its social, political and often historical contexts for a so-called emphasis on aesthetics, has been extremely useful in both alienating art from the people and keeping the discussion of art inside the courts of high culture, and away from the reality of the streets. This attempt to separate art from ideology has also been successful in protecting the myths behind the ideologies.

In an article critiquing the schools of criticism that have grown in response to hegemonic, Anglo-American-based criteria used to measure the value of cultural products, Alan Wald argues to the following conclusion:

In the end we must recognize that there is no such thing as "American Culture"; any attempt to force a methodological unity (in terms of critical terms and "aesthetic value") at this point will only reinforce the present relations of domination by new means. [...] The complex social formation known as the US is the home of many cultures – each internally riven by class, gender, region, and in some cases color stratification – and each with a reservoir of widely varying social and economic power to defend its interests. (Wald 1987, 31)

In other words, Wald advocates the abolishment of absolute critical standards that have been successful in maintaining the power of the dominant Anglo-American culture over minorities and ethnic American cultures. We must understand the simple fact that standards and criteria by which all contributions to culture are measured are constructed as vehicles of, as well as barriers to, power; simply positing new standards and criteria can be just as dangerous, especially if they merely imitate the methods of the old hegemonic powers.

The old hegemony of power over others begins in this country's Christian myth of origins and the idea that some one group must control the masses in a democracy. Good and evil, right and wrong, rich and poor, us and them, were identified, separat-

ed and rewarded or punished by the socio-economic institutions erected. Such institutions, built on the foundation of supposed universalistic beliefs, have been fortified over time to repel any Manichaestic alternative. And because this Christian notion of duality is by nature anti-dialectic, the power of any society dominated by Christian capitalism goes to those who through monopolistic means assert their worldview over others.

In the United States this all began with the massacre of Native Americans, continued with the enslavement of African Americans, and haunts us through this very day through institutionalized racism. Such foundations can only remain stable as long as the Christian mythology that feeds it remains safe from attack behind the walls of culture. Without a viable challenge, the artificial oppositions inherent in Judeo-Christianity will continue to divide and conquer our society by powerfully enforcing oppositional camps which are based on arbitrary distinctions such as: Black vs. White, East vs. West; North vs. South; Self vs. Other; High Culture vs. Low culture; Mass culture vs. Elite culture. Although the key to much post-modern deconstructionist thought and criticism has been to break down these barriers, more often than not it has only rearranged the barriers using the rubble of the old to build illusions of the new.

Multiculturalism is a viable challenge to the US American Judeo-Christian hegemony detailed thus far. In our efforts to install a real cultural democracy in the country we cannot do anything but take multiculturalism seriously. This does not mean that we need a revolution in which Multiculturalism battles Culture in America; nor does it mean we need a renaissance of an older way of thinking. What is needed is the birth of an entirely new way of thinking, of experiencing, and of critiquing, and this is what multiculturalism offers. We need new standards that begin with the idea that the goal of culture is not power over people; it means empowering people. And we know that the changing of critical standards is and always has been determined by political action.

A politics of multiculturalism seems to be the only viable means towards any conception of egalitarian equity in a pluri-cultural and pluri-ethnic national context. This is truly the

most generative way of approaching the question of a national culture in contemporary America: multi-culture is our culture; and today's organic intellectuals are in the process of making this happen. As organic intellectuals gain power in their communities, the tendency, as Gramsci has warned us, is for them to unite with the bourgeoisie and become traditional intellectuals who do no more than reinforce the dominance of those in political power; this is accomplished when those organic intellectuals – be they rap or rock singers, intellectual superstars, best-selling writers or artists, or famous sports stars – are granted a shift in class status through economic rewards. Strong opposition may pave the way for such a balance, but more than forming an oppositional coalition of minorities, multiculturalism must – and this is its greatest challenge – unite the whole of American culture. It must challenge minds not to simply resolve problems, but to synthesize solutions; synthesis is where new things are realized.

There are many reasons why a strongly unified Left has never developed in this country, but whatever the attempt, the key to the Left's failure has been its own inability to successfully deal with the many cultures that make up what we have come to call American culture. We saw this first through the women's movement, then the Civil Rights movement, and now through the multicultural movement. This inability has led the Left into the greatest trap set by monologic notions of Culture, and that trap is racism. One of the reasons why we have failed is that we have failed to listen, to read and to see our culture as the multi-culture that it is. Time and again we can read this failure in the prose of such African American writers as Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, Zora Hurston, Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed; in Native American writers such as Gerald Vizenor and Leslie Marmon Silko; in Asian Americans such as Frank Chan and Maxine Hong Kingston; in Italian American writers such as Pietro di Donato and Helen Barolini; and the list goes on. In all these writers we can read the failure of an American Left to understand and confront racism as it considers class issues.

A recent example of this current scholarship can be found in the multi-cultural arena that has devoted much time to the

examination of ethnicity. It is important for each ethnic group to express its identity; work by Werner Sollors and William Boelhower has helped us see the values of the ethnic/American dimension in American culture. However, the real issue is not whose work is or is not represented in the museums, libraries, bookstores and other places where cultural currency is minted, marketed, and negotiated; the real issue is our failure to see ethnicity as merely a stage in the process of transcending nationalism.

If there is a common ground that can be said to be truly American, it is that we are all in one way or another related by racism. Racism in the US is a direct product of nation building, something Benedict Anderson pinpoints as follows:

official nationalism was typically a response on the part of threatened dynastic and aristocratic groups – upper *classes* – to popular vernacular nationalism. Colonial racism was a major element in that conception of Empire which attempted to weld dynastic legitimacy and national community. It did so by generalizing a principle of innate, inherited superiority on which its own domestic position was (however shakily) based to the vastness of the overseas possessions. (Anderson 2006, 150)

Multiculturalism defies generalism as it projects the particulars of a variety of cultures. And this is one reason why Rembrandts are considered to be more valuable than our murals. For the purposes of this essay I use literature as my primary example, but similar cases have and can continue to be made for all the arts. The dominant culture has remained powerful so long as it retained the right to value or devalue the work of others. It is when the other begins to speak, to write and to criticize that multiculturalism comes of age. And that age is now.

In “The Ethnography of Literacy” John F. Szwed pointed to the example of Black poets, published by the Broadside Press of Detroit, who, “using unorthodox spellings and typography, have been dismissed as simply semiliterate by critics not familiar with the special conventions developed to deal with black dialects and aesthetics” (Szwed 1981, 20). Such attacks are not limited to African American writers alone: similarly uninformed reviews have appeared concerning Italian American writers. Writing about Josephine Gattuso Hendin’s first novel,

The Right Thing to Do (1988), novelist and critic Jane Smiley attacked the novel for lacking a distinctively Italian/American cultural context. In her review, Smiley writes, the “immigrant Italian world of Queens is more advertised in the jacket blurb than present in the text” (Smiley 1988, 20). Such criticism expresses a distinct lack of insight and obviously arises from the critic’s unfamiliarity with Italian/American culture. It also reveals her dependence on stereotypical information that informs her sense of Italian/American culture. Hendin’s novel, as I have argued, represents a re-invention of Italian American ethnicity (Gardaphé 1987, 83). It is not set in “an immigrant world”, nor should a reader expect it to be. It is obvious that Smiley has spent more time with the book’s jacket than she has with what it covers. Elizabeth Cross Traugott (1981) demonstrates that similar attitudes concerning linguistic features are presented by “mainstream” critics in their writing about the performance of minority writers. It is unfortunate that such uninformed and irresponsible criticism often becomes the first public impression of multi-cultural American texts. The failure of critics such as Traugott and Smiley to not only responsibly read writers of an “other” culture, but also to recognize their cultural differences as strengths, is typical of a dominant pattern of Anglo/American hegemony in American culture, a pattern which William Boelhower describes in *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature*:

Presuming that he was projecting his cultural values on an empty space, a “tabula rasa”, the possessed Euro-American could not but begin his American experience with a difference to be removed, tamed and cancelled. The initial confrontation between the Indians and the first Europeans set the pattern and the typology of the basic American cultural dynamics of unity versus diversity. (Boelhower 1987, 13)

This dynamic of unity versus diversity presented by Boelhower echoes a classic observation made by one of the earliest cultural critics of Western Civilization, Giambattista Vico:

When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things and cannot even explain them by analogy with similar things, they attribute their own nature to them. The vulgar, for example, say the magnet loves the iron. This axiom is a piece of the first, namely, that the human mind,

because of its indefinite nature, wherever it is lost in ignorance makes itself the rule of the universe in respect of everything it does not know. (Vico 1968, 70)

Vico's observation suggests that there exists a dominant tendency in humans to define the unknown (which often can be read as "other") in terms of the known (which can be read as "self"). This tendency is, as I will argue, the same notion set forth by the many of the theories proposed by early literary critics and scholars: the dominant trend until recently has been to create universal categories and criteria by which literature is then criticized. As a consequence, even such illustrious writers such as Gay Talese fall prey to the power of the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic in a *New York Times Book Review* cover article back in 1993.

When Gay Talese raised the question "Where Are the Italian American Novelists?" on the front page of the March 14th issue of the *New York Times Book Review*, I believed that he might be bringing, for the first time, national attention to the possibilities that there might be a literary tradition that is distinctly Italian American. However, hindered by his lack of familiarity with the vast body of literature created by American writers of Italian descent, Talese reduced the experience of Italian/American writers to his own, and offered a number of explanations which sound plausible, but which, in reality, do not reflect my belief that you are what you read. Since he had not read Italian/American writers, he could only ask the question. The history of the reception of literature produced by Italian Americans can be seen as in a microcosm through the Talese episode. From the earliest contributions found in Italian language newspapers to the first appearances of Italian/American writers in mainstream American publications, the poetry and prose produced by American writers of Italian descent has been viewed as singular achievements by anomalies.

Benedict Anderson tells us that products of nationalism that help to define and maintain the nation include the census, official maps, and museums:

Interlinked with one another, then, the census, the map and the museum illuminate the late colonial state's style of thinking about its domain. The

“warp” of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth. The effect of the grid was always to be able to say of anything that it was this, not that; it belongs here, not there. It was bounded, determinate, and therefore – in principle – countable. (Anderson 2006, 184)

I would add to Anderson’s catalogue of nation-building tools the canon of literature taught by the state and the critical aesthetics used to evaluate works that might enter that canon. We cannot forget that our critical standards are extensions of our ideological orientations which are in turn extensions of a mythological foundation. The answer to the creation of new critical methodologies that embrace the multi-culture lies in the work of such critics as Houston Baker and Henry Louis Gates Jr., who unite high and low culture to give a picture of a total culture, of how blues informs literature, and of how street culture presents us with ways of reading. Multicultural thinking invites knowledge of the other as presented by others. This knowledge of and sensitivity to other cultures requires an incredible amount of work. However, it is work that must be done in order for us to see how others deal with duality as being complimentary, instead of oppositional. The recognition of the simultaneous presence of good and evil, man and woman is necessary to achieve balance in Native American and in Asian American culture (yin and yang); to be American is not necessarily to be Christian. We must realize that, as Alan Wald has said, there is no such thing as American culture, and so there can never be one type of American.

By all means let the Rembrandts continue to be hung, but no longer at the expense of obstructing our critical view of the multicultural murals, for in those murals are our hope for collective interaction based on a common sense of humanity.

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Chapter 14

Franca Sinopoli

“Transnationalism” and/or the Canon in Comparative Literary Studies¹

In a volume published in 2018, Ben Hutchinson, professor of European Literature at the University of Kent, addresses “The Futures of Comparative Literature” by emphasizing how the paradigms of transdisciplinarity and transnationality are currently and globally the two cornerstones of the discipline (Hutchinson 2018, 115). Beyond the more firmly established tradition of “inter-arts studies”, which tend to function in a strictly national context, the paradigm of transnationality is actually more inclusive of the different methods of comparison. In fact, it appears to have overcome national and colonial prejudices, offering itself as an antidote to prejudicial hierarchies found in literary studies. It is no coincidence that attention increasingly focuses on the multilingual dimension of individual cultures and literatures, since the perspective is now continental, regional, and even national (for instance: cultural multilingualism not only in the United States or Canada, but in nations such as India or the Maghreb). If, in light of the recent exponential growth of migratory movement and the displacement of refugees, the twenty-first century can more clearly be defined as “transnational” par excellence, it should not be forgotten that the twentieth century had also been characterized (from its late nineteenth-century prodromal phase) by a long series of mass movements caused not only by modernization as well as by hun-

¹ Trans. Corina-Mihaela Beleaau.

ger, war, economic and cultural emancipatory movements, and political and racial persecution².

Therefore, even Comparative Literature has had to face change in its disciplinary paradigms, opening up (from the 1990s onward, and almost everywhere it is practiced) to new methods and objects of investigation, such as cultural, postcolonial, and migration studies (see Bernheimer 1994). Above all, the model of comparison itself can no longer disregard the multilingual dimension, and must deal with the unfolding of a wide range of literary phenomena of a translingual (see Kellman 2000) and increasingly transcultural nature, characterized by a so-called “creative transpatriation”³.

For example, in the case of studies dedicated to Italian “transpatriation”, in both Italy⁴ and abroad⁵, the recent popularity of conferences devoted to the recoding of categories addressing vast literary and cultural phenomena, Italian emigration and/or immigration to the Americas and other continents, provides ample evidence of a paradigm shift. From a comparative standpoint, concepts such as “mobility”, “diaspora”, “migration”, and “transnationalism” prove to be useful in reconfiguring cultural production of both old and new migratory experiences. These concepts also contribute to the reconfiguration of the literary corpus, in terms of its interaction with various linguistic-cultural contexts, its superceding, more or less explicitly, of the historiographic classifications based on the center-periphery paradigm, or what the Italian American historian, Donna R. Gabaccia, has described as an imposition of the national

² In this light and with an increasingly general, as well as historical and timely metaphorical meaning, one should reread Slezkine 2004.

³ The expression comes from Dagnino 2015.

⁴ For example, the results of the conference on *Emigrazione italiana: Percorsi interpretativi tra diaspora, transnazionalismo e generazioni*, held in Turin in 2004, are collected in Tirabassi 2005a. For the literary production deriving from immigration in Italy, see Pezzarossa – Rossini 2011.

⁵ See the New York conferences, *Migrating in and out of Italy* (John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, New York, 25-26 February 2011) e *Lingue migranti: The Global Languages of Italy and the Diaspora* (John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, New York, 26-27 April 2013). As an example of the complex dimension of migration and its numerous narratives, see Burns – Polezzi 2003 and Sinopoli – Tatti 2005, both the result of two conference meetings.

paradigm (see Gabaccia 2003 and 2005). In this context, as Maddalena Tirabassi argues, developments in global sociology have been particularly enlightening, because "transnational migrants are holders of divided loyalties, dual citizenships or nationalities [...], and they exercise a soft power of hybridization through the establishment of lifestyles and local institutions that draw from both their original societies and the new homelands" (Tirabassi 2008b, 9; see also Tirabassi – Audenino 2008). We can, therefore, examine in a new light the cultural production born from the recent emergence of what can be seen as a pervasive transnational dimension.

Some theoretical interventions, elaborated in recent years in the field of European literary comparative studies, are aimed at the study of cultural and literary transnationalism (see Thomsen 2008 and D'haen 2012). They offer interesting reflections on inclusion and exclusion policies that are active in the construction and transmission of the literary canon (both nationally and at the level of continental Europe). In particular, they offer innovative modes of thinking about the meanings of terms such as "transnational" and "canon". They also shed light on the productions of contemporary literary authors (both men and women) who have multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, live and operate in a specific national context or, in different time periods, move from one nation to another, or even follow intercontinental trajectories. Therefore, we find ample space to examine the cross-cultural influences among more general theories of transnationalism, as they are conceived in different disciplinary fields, and in particular, the ways that comparative studies, interested in the phenomena of literary worldliness, typical of the twentieth century and of the present century, can address literary transnationality, particularly in the Italian context.

If transnationality has, in fact, affected Western literatures⁶, especially those historically linked to an imperial and colonial past (I am thinking in particular of Portugal, Spain, England,

⁶ Here, other forms of cultural transnationalism inherited and determined by the history of other world empires are not taken into consideration, above all with regard to the modern era, such as the Soviet and Chinese contexts. For a global view, see James 2006-2014.

France, Holland and, to a lesser extent but with post-colonial implications no less significant and devastating, Italy and Germany), it means that it can be considered as one of the concrete forms through which the global paradigm develops as prefigured almost two centuries ago by Goethe. The transformation of the erudite idea of literary worldliness into a hypothesis and a method of research, aimed at connecting literary specificities to the world context, has influenced criticism in the last decades of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the new millennium. A good example is the project on the global scale of the novel in modern times led by Franco Moretti (see Moretti 2001-2003). The link between world literature, reception and translation was also at the center of one of Susan Sontag's last works, "The World as India" (2002), a lecture on literary translation presented at the Queen Elizabeth Hall, in London. After having introduced two central presuppositions to the idea of literary translation, namely that translation functions as a consequence of an "evangelical" motivation, since "the aim of the translation is to expand the circle of readers of a book considered important" (Sontag 2007), and that this process entails an ethical investment since translating, as a task, is anything but mechanical and aims at realizing the implicit translatability of a work, Sontag confronts the question of the weight of the international *lingua franca* (English) in the contemporary world. A symbolic weight, of colonial origin and of neo-colonial perspective, transforms a particular language into a privilege for those who practice it as mother tongue and an obligation for all others who use it in everyday life, as a *lingua franca* for connecting with the world. In his famous 1952 essay "Philologie der Weltliteratur" ("Philology of *Weltliteratur*"), published during his exile in the United States, Eric Auerbach did not avoid asking himself the following questions: What consequences does the globalization of a language have on the plurality of languages? and what is the case for translation? According to Sontag's perspective, the effect is the depletion of the variety of accessible literatures in English translation, which conversely corresponds to an increase in books published in English and then translated into other languages, indicating a

progressive loss of interest of the American public for European literature and the greater reception of literature written directly in English, even if produced in other countries. In the fifth part of her lecture, and taking up one of the meanings developed by Goethe, Sontag argues that "world literature" relates to "the idea of a world audience of readers who read books in translation" (Sontag 2007), without however being able to confront complete disillusionment in the era of globalization, due to the linguistic hierarchization, paradoxically encouraged by the worldwide spread of English as a *lingua franca* (Auerbach 2003, 57-58). Sontag writes:

as many have observed, globalization is a process that produces unequal benefits for the various peoples on earth, and the globalization of English has not altered the history of prejudices about national identities. One of its consequences is that some languages – and the literature that is produced in them – continue to be considered more important than others. An example, *The Posthumous Memoirs of Bras Cubas* and *Don Casmurro* by Machado de Assis and *El cortiço* by Aluísio Azevedo, three of the best novels written in the last part of the nineteenth century, would certainly be as famous as a masterpiece written in late nineteenth century if, instead of being written in Portuguese by Brazilian authors, they had been written in German, French, Russian, or English. (Sontag 2007)

From this perspective, by taking the myth of the tower of Babel as a metaphor for world literature, Sontag presents a different interpretation, updating it in the light of the negative consequences of linguistic-cultural globalization:

The ancient biblical image suggests that we live in our differences, emblematically linguistic, on top of one another – like Frank Lloyd Wright's dream of a mile-high apartment building. But common sense tells us our linguistic dispersion cannot be a tower. The geography of our dispersal into many languages is much more horizontal than vertical (or so it seems), with rivers and mountains and valleys, and oceans that lap around the land mass. To translate is to ferry, to bring across.

But maybe there is some truth in the image. A tower has many levels, and the many tenants of this tower are stacked one on top of the other. If Babel is anything like other towers, the higher floors are the more coveted. Maybe certain languages occupy whole sections of the upper floors, the great rooms and commanding terraces. And other languages and their literary products are confined to lower floors, low ceilings, blocked views. (Sontag 2007)

Discussions of World Literature took on very different forms in the last decades of the twentieth century, at times recovering and updating Goethe's main pronouncements of such innovation. A good example can be seen in the volume emblematically titled *Où est la littérature mondiale?* (2005) by Christophe Pradeau and Tiphaine Samoyault. Also, one finds another form of an internationally inflected literary criticism elaborated again in the French context, in Pascale Casanova's *La République mondiale des Lettres* (1999). Two other volumes originating in the United States also addressed the idea of globalization as a critical way of reading literary texts: the first is a monograph by David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (2003), and the second synthesizes discussions resulting from the publication of Casanova's book. The latter volume, by Christopher Prendergast, bears a very explicit title, *Debating World Literature* (2004). It has the merit of inspiring Franco Moretti's rejoinder, published in the *New Left Review* in 2000. Another topic of discussion in the North American academic and cultural environment concerns the idea and method of "distant reading" operating on a large scale and therefore aimed at micro- or macro-textual structures (devices, themes, tropes, literary genres; see Moretti 2005) and at the relationship between Western canonical literatures and those of the so-called "Third World"⁷.

In addition to the titles mentioned above, we must bear in mind that, at least since the 1980s, a whole series of contributions in journals or collective volumes have repeatedly proposed renewed reflections on the idea of World Literature. They largely refer to the question of whether or not a Third World Literature⁸ exists. As an example, we can recall a well-known 1986 intervention by Fredric Jameson, dedicated to "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", published by Duke University's magazine of cultural studies *Social Text*. The

⁷ An interesting and updated discussion of the main North American contributions on the idea of World Literature, starting from the teaching practice of WL courses from Wellek onwards, is to be found in Cooppan 2004. For a critical reading of Moretti's essay and method, see Prendergast 2004 and Caesar 2007. Further criticisms of the idea of "World Literature" have been elaborated by Apter 2013.

⁸ See the bibliography of Cooppan 2004.

American Marxist critic related the birth of "Cultural Studies" to the need for an updated revival of the old Goethian *Weltliteratur* with reference to the literature of the third world, then defined as "postcolonial":

Today the reinvention of cultural studies in the United States demands the reinvention, in a new context, of what Goethe long ago theorized as "World Literature". In our more immediate context, then, any conception of World Literature necessarily demands some specific engagement with the question of third-world literature. (Jameson 1986, 68)

In the history of twentieth-century literary criticism, from a certain moment onwards, it is practically impossible to speak of World Literature, without addressing literary production from a transnational and postcolonial perspective. One must also address issues of its reception and consumption in western societies, starting from the assumption that Third World cultures "are all in various distinct ways locked in a life-and-death struggle with first-world cultural imperialism" (68). However, as Silvia Albertazzi (2000) notes⁹, taking into account postcolonial production by referring it only to "colonial" discourse risks relegating the former to the limited perspective of the latter, as immediately noticed by the postcolonial theorists of non-Western origin (in response to Jameson and in general to European and North American intellectuals), in terms of "appropriation" and "cultural imperialism" (see Prasad 1992).

Returning to those volumes dedicated to the recovery of current ideas of canonical and transnational /world literature, we have already mentioned that these cultural operations work on different levels. On one hand, in the *Debating World Literature* and in *Où est la littérature mondiale?* we see a group of scholars at work who tackle a somewhat elusive critical theme from different perspectives and from their "specialities", reckoning once again with the long-standing tradition inaugurated by Goethe. On the other hand, in the two monographic studies by Casanova and Damrosch, the authors try to propose a unitary vision of the theme, basing it on completely different texts and contexts,

⁹ On the postcolonial canon of literature, see Pèrcopo 2001.

such as the French and the American ones. Pascale Casanova wants to change perspective on the usual criticism of modern literary classics, combining singularities and historical conditions of production within a global literary space (see Bourdieu 1971 and 1998):

L'objet de l'analyse de la République mondiale des Lettres n'est pas de décrire la totalité du monde littéraire ni de prétendre à l'exhaustivité d'une impossible recension de la littérature mondiale. Il s'agit de changer de perspective, de décrire le monde littéraire "à partir d'un certain observatoire", selon les termes de Braudel, pour se donner des chances de changer la vision de la critique ordinaire, de décrire un univers que les écrivains eux-mêmes ont toujours ignoré. Et de montrer que les lois qui régissent cette étrange et immense république – de rivalité, d'inégalité, de luttes spécifiques – contribuent à éclairer de façon inédite et souvent radicalement neuve les œuvres les plus commentées, et notamment celle de quelques-uns des plus grands révolutionnaires littéraires de ce siècle: Joyce, Beckett et Kafka, mais aussi Henri Michaux, Henrik Ibsen, Cioran, Naipaul, Danilo Kiš, Arno Schmidt, William Faulkner et quelques autres¹⁰. (Casanova 2004, 15)

Here, the idea of the republic of letters is established at a global level, although not in an exhaustive, but rather in a competitive sense: for the most part the canonical works of literature dealt with by Casanova belong to Western cultures and are strongly hierarchized among themselves. In fact, they are embedded within a long tradition engaged in struggles for supremacy¹¹. The model presented by the French scholar, therefore, hierarchizes the system of the literary republic in which

¹⁰ Our translation: "The object of analysis of World Republic of Letters is not to describe the wholeness of the literary world nor to claim the exhaustiveness of an impossible review of world literature. It is a question of changing perspective, of describing the literary world 'from a certain observatory'. In Braudel's words, one should give oneself the chance to change the vision of ordinary criticism, to describe a universe that the writers themselves have always ignored. And to show that the laws which govern this strange and immense republic – of rivalry, of inequality, of specific struggles – contribute to shed new light and often radically new perspectives on the most commented works, and in particular those of some of the greatest literary revolutionaries of this century: Joyce, Beckett and Kafka, but also Henri Michaux, Henrik Ibsen, Cioran, Naipaul, Danilo Kiš, Arno Schmidt, William Faulkner and a few others".

¹¹ In this regard, one could refer to an analysis of the differences between the kind of "singularity" and "competitive spirit" conceived by Casanova and those exposed by Bloom (1994).

the circulation of texts, especially those belonging to literatures seen as "peripheral", is circumscribed by the great capitals of world culture (primarily Paris), which alone grant them their status as literary works (24). Casanova questions the idea of a peaceful and quiet universal literature, that is blind in the face of historical and political conflicts. Rather, eccentric writers or those of the so-called "suburbs" such as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o or Naipaul, Octavio Paz or Beckett, to name just a few, enter into discussion.

Damrosch's volume, *What is World Literature?*, is based on three different principles that determine its structure: the circulation, translation, and production of works. His book provides an interesting inversion of the priority traditionally given to the three key moments of a literary work (usually taken into consideration starting from production, and then considering circulation). Thus, the truly global works consist of those that acquire value in the translation process and World Literature itself becomes not a canon of texts, but rather a way of reading them, "a form of detached engagement with worlds beyond our own place and time" (Damrosch 2003, 281). This premise leads us to recall a similar claim by John Guillory, according to which "canonicity is not a property of the work itself, but of its transmission, its relation to other works in a collocation of works" (Guillory 1993, 340). In the introduction to the volume, Damrosch examines not only the origin of Goethe's term *Weltliteratur*, but also the various forms in which the idea occurs today in different cultural contexts, such as India, the Americas or the countries of Far East, like China. Assuming that "even a genuinely global perspective remains a perspective from somewhere, and global patterns of the circulation of world literature take shape in their local manifestations" (Damrosch 2003, 27), the volume deals with the way in which World Literature has been built on/transposed to the interior of a well-defined cultural and temporal space: the American twentieth century. The aim here is to capture the transformations that literary works undergo once translated and re-contextualized in cultures other than those in which they were produced. In this perspective, the contribution of the Casanova volume acquires a specific function,

that of witnessing one particular, albeit relevant, way of reading the globalization processes of authors and literary works within a specific cultural context, such as that formed by the relationship between France and the rest of the world during modernity. Therefore, Damrosch claims that

world literature is not an infinite, ungraspable canon of works but rather a mode of circulation and of reading, a mode that is as applicable to individual works as to bodies of material, available for reading established classics and new discoveries alike. This book is intended to explore this mode of circulation and to clarify the ways in which works of world literature can best be read. It is important from the outset to realize that just as there never has been a single set canon of world literature, so too no single way of reading can be appropriate to all texts, or even to any one text at all times. The variability of a work of world literature is one of its constitutive features – one of its greatest strengths when the work is well presented and read well, and its greatest vulnerability when it is mishandled or misappropriated by its newfound foreign friends. (5)

After all, the *Weltliteratur* library and canon are two concepts that can only be partially superimposed in the history of the idea of World Literature¹², from the nineteenth century onwards, since if the first refers to a concrete method of materialization and circulation of the corpus of the works by authors belonging to different literatures and cultures, the concept of canon is always a historical-cultural construct, preceding its literary phenomenology, although of great impact on its production and reception, as well as on the very idea of literature and on its longevity and efficacy within the system of human cultures. Precisely for this reason, the concept of the canon should always be framed within a dynamic between “historical” and “aesthetic” that can deter the danger of its ahistorical and dogmatic reading.

¹² For a broader and more recent discussion of World Literature, see D’haen 2012, particularly the first (“Naming World Literature”) and second (“Goethe’s *Weltliteratur* and the Humanist Ideal”) chapters. See also Sinopoli 2010, De Zordo – Fantaccini 2011, Benvenuti – Ceserani, 2012, chs. 2-4.

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Part IV

Multiculturalism from Other Perspectives

Chapter 15

Thomas E. Peterson

Weltliteratur and Literary Anthropology: The Case of Italian American Literature

As I told the editor of this volume when she first spoke to me about the idea for this project, and specifically the cluster on Italian American literature, my only area of expertise here is actually from the opposite direction, as I am studying a group of modern Italian *letterati* who in the course of their careers published studies of American culture or American literature, some of whom came to the States and others who did not. I am referring to Emilio Cecchi, Mario Soldati, Elio Vittorini, Cesare Pavese, Giulio Antonio Borgese, Guido Piovene, Renato Poggioli and Gaetano Salvemini. But it seems now, after the conference that inspired this present volume and considering the papers that emerged out of it, that the circle has closed for me, so that I can put into perspective the common bond existing between those traveling in either direction, and between the social classes, and the fact that even as the dream of America that was pursued by the vast majority of Italians coming to America between 1880 and 1920 was partly illusory, the Italian imagination and the Italian passions continued to prosper. This bond is clearer to me after reevaluating the contributions by Camboni, De Angelis and Lowe in particular. It concerns the idea of a myth – or a horizon of expectations, as De Angelis says – that is indeed compromised for many, collapsed for some, but a myth that retains the potential for renewal, for *life*.

Of course, there are many stories of Italians who set out to America only to return years later, broken in mind and body.

My Italian readers will have heard Francesco Guccini's song "Amerigo" about his grandfather's brother who migrated to America and worked as a coal miner, only to return, penniless and old, before his time; and they know the poet Emanuel Carnevali who migrated to New York as a teenager and scraped bottom for years – while gaining the respect of Pound, Williams and Zukovsky, among others – before contracting encephalitis and returning to Bologna where he died at age 43. His fate was like that of the characters in di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* that John Lowe evoked, where one of the immigrants exclaims: "Work! Sure! For America beautiful will eat you and spit your bones into the earth's hole! Work!" So then, let me proceed in responding briefly to these three papers specifically, although my reflections find reverberations in all the essays included here on Italian American Literature.

In Marina Camboni's paper we are introduced to the Italian immigrant's experience of conflict between the individual and the society, that is of integration into a culture in which the constraints of civic belonging threaten one's autonomy. The means she adopts to negotiate this problem in two works – Maso's *Ghost Dance* and Viscusi's *ellis island* – is the idea of the person as distinct from the idea of identity. And since Camboni cites Paul Ricoeur's book *Soi-même comme un autre*, I thought it would be useful to mention two definitions of the self that Ricoeur puts forward there that are critical to our analysis. In the context of a discussion of the morality of institutions, the plurality of peoples and the autonomy of the self, Ricoeur compares two definitions of the self: the self as *idem*, as reflected in the tendencies to remain the same over time, and the self as *ipse*, as reflected in the ability to change over time and to engage true selfhood. These two versions of the self are connected to two types of justice, one existing on the plane of norms, regulations and morals, meaning deontology and rules, and the other level – that of the *ipse* – existing on the plane of the ethical and teleological. How common mores are insured in society relates to the distinction between the two types of justice. Thus, for example, the Golden Rule is only viable in the individual who engages the self as *ipse*, implicating the "dialectic of *self* and the *other than*

self” (Ricoeur 1992, 3). I think when Camboni discusses the status of the person in *Ghost Dance* and *Ellis Island*, it is consistent with this distinction and this respect for the other and, indeed, for oneself as other. The two books obviously contrast in genre – *Ghost Dance* is an experimental novel and *ellis island* is a “surreal poem” – but they both provide allegorical versions of the “story of American colonization and immigration”. In Carole Maso’s book, the ghost dance of the title, which the grandfather Angelo Turin learned from the Sioux natives, projects an attitude toward redemption – even when deemed to be futile – that carries forward the resistance and beliefs of the immigrant in a way consonant with the beliefs of the Native Americans; the grandfather experiences the trauma of emigration directly, as an impact on his body, a fact that is externalized when he destroys his vegetable garden. Yet he has preserved the form of his dance and passed it on to his son and granddaughter. Such a transmission is possible, Camboni suggests, when the immigrant not only refuses to become a cipher – a non-person – but also refuses to assimilate, opting instead for the path of self-realization. For this process, the role of art and the imagination is primary here as is the retention of emotional and ethical sensitivity, conceived here as a generational process that comes to a head in the figure of Vanessa, who “believes the work of art is the locus where private and public emotions converge”. As a young girl in 1964, Vanessa saw her father weeping as he viewed the *Pietà* on display in New York and witnessed African Americans participating in a nearby sit-in, where white racism reared its ugly head, a racism seemingly ineradicable from the tissue of American society. Just as Angelo realized that the Sioux ghost dance gave him a way to reject his subaltern status and become a person, his granddaughter inherits that capacity and applies it to a critique of evil whereby she would emulate the love and pity symbolized for her by the mother figure in the *Pietà*.

With respect to *ellis island*, here too is a kind of ghost dance, “a human wheel turning”, replicating in verse the “wheel of mass migration” in such a way as to confirm, in Camboni’s words, “how diasporas and migrations not only happen in time but [...] produce a palimpsest of times where affinities and simi-

larities as well as connecting nodes are made visible". The reader of *ellis island* quickly understands it is not a depiction of that place, but a searing dithyramb about the entire Italian American experience, and the passionate intention of the Italian American to retain his bond with the earth and with other life forms: "they live close to the sky and speak plainly with animals as sentient beings". If, in Maso's critique of universal evil, the narrator concludes that the past and the future are in conflict, leaving one in a state of suspension, or rather in a state of revolt whose reason for being is the need to preserve one's personhood and one's imagination in a hostile world, Viscusi is less pessimistic in his projection of the "migrant's desire to project life into the future". Nevertheless, both authors seem to project the possibility of residing "between" two worlds in recognition of what Camboni states is the "inability to fit into identity narratives created within the land of origin as well as those one is assigned in the land of arrival". So, in the case of both Maso and Viscusi, there is a kind of suspension, indicating the separateness of the person from the formalism of the status quo, meaning the self that does not change, for the sake of an extension toward the Other with the wholesome intent of respect and solicitude and "re-claiming of the land as the common ground".

Valerio Massimo De Angelis begins his essay with Henry Roth's novel, *Call it Sleep*, where he highlights the Statue of Liberty as seen by the immigrants coming into New York Harbor; the stern feminine figure symbolizes the difficulties ahead, in the first instance being plunged into the "heterotopia of the Lower East Side". De Angelis then transitions to Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964), a work based on the matriarchal Italian family, in contrast to the patriarchal family of his much more successful book, *The Godfather*. But it is the former book that exposes the mythic dream of American success and its disappointment; it achieves this end not by frustrating the dream of economic success but granting it and showing how hollow it ultimately is. The characters of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* have made it to the middle class by putting their bodies on the line, becoming wage-slaves, robotic versions of *homo economicus*, and moreover by collaborating with the Mafia, leading here to the lament of Lu-

cia Santa: “AMERICA, AMERICA, BLASPHEMOUS dream. Giving so much, why could it not give everything?”¹. In this passage cited by De Angelis, I cannot help but hear an echo of Carnevali, “The revenge of Love, O America! / How cheap is the sorrow of man! / People eat it with their bread; / It costs little in America – / It doesn’t count”. While Carnevali was obviously writing poetry, he was distrustful of the avant-garde and of modernism generally; a similar thing might be said of Puzo whose deconstruction of the myth of immigration relies on a traditional form of narrative, but which nevertheless uses that to convey a disturbing anthropological content – the unmasking of the American dream. Thus, as De Angelis suggests, the story of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* is neither fortunate nor about a pilgrimage, but rather concerns the prostitution of immigrants’ bodies at the altar of capitalism.

John Wharton Lowe has given us a rich treatment of Italian humor set against the backdrop of the immigration wave of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He begins by looking at the life of the New York theater and how it was altered by immigration. I have taught the story by Sciascia that Lowe refers to – concerning the delusion of a group of would-be Sicilian migrants who are deceived by a con artist who takes them to sea for eleven days only to deposit them back in Sicily. Lowe explores the Irish American theatre of Harrigan, where Italian characters were stereotyped: think gangsters, checkered tablecloths and a mandolin. But there is also the multiple languages of the New York tenements put on stage as well as the ritual of eating loudly and abundantly as a sign of the robustness of the immigrant community. As a newcomer to Italian American literature, I am grateful for this synopsis of the field’s early history set in the context of other ethnic classics. And also the critical point concerning the difficulty of using humor in texts of revolt, how some time is required before that can be done. Keeping this principle in mind, *Christ in Concrete* is seen as the exception

¹ And I am reminded – perhaps capriciously – of Leopardi’s fateful lines in “A Silvia”, *Canti*, 173: “O natura, o natura, / Perchè non rendi poi / Quel che prometti allor? “ (“Oh nature, oh nature, / Why do you not fulfill / What you promised before?” – my translation).

that proves the rule, given that Nazone's tragic death is preceded by the comedic chapter "Fiesta" with its abundant scurrilous humor. Having established this historical background of Italian Americana as it developed with other immigrant art, Lowe jumps forward to a text from 2006, Mark Binelli's *Sacco and Vanzetti Must Die!* He illustrates in his analysis of this postmodern novel how even the most sacrosanct figures of an immigrant tradition can serve as comic subject matter for an irreverent and parodical revisitation of that tradition. Lowe notes how Binelli's novel works contemporaneously on diverse registers and exploits the tropes and personalities of vaudeville and other cinematic and theatrical genres in order to caricature an immigrant experience that has been lost or diluted in the haze of Americanization. Once he reinvents Sacco and Vanzetti – the martyrs of the labor movement – as a comedy team, the stage is set for a running sequence of literary shticks and travesties, with abundant references to the Italian anarchists. There is also a *potpourri* of Italian and Italian American history inserted ironically into Sacco and Vanzetti's material. Lowe closes his essay by expanding his view of this novel's experimental genre outward to include minstrel shows, dance and comedy, especially those featuring off-color content and racial stereotypes, reminding us once again how humor serves to underscore the tragic, or unreconcilable, elements of historical experience.

These particular essays concretize for me a series of thoughts regarding the field of Italian American Studies that I now propose from my own vantage point as an Italianist. The first of such observations I would like to put forward is that Italian American literature is a vast, porous and rich entity, impossible to generalize about or reduce to canonical/anti-canonical perspectives. I see it as a subcategory of the idea of *Weltliteratur* as envisioned by Goethe, and elevated by Erich Auerbach in 1952 as the focal point for dialogue among diverse cultural groups and natural literatures. The advances during and after Goethe's lifetime, incorporating the founding work of Vico and Herder, were aided by the "historicist humanism" that recognized and catalogued the expanding range of world literatures, giving philology its modern definition. This humanistic project was aimed

at “an inner history of mankind”, with philology leading the way. And while the possibility to reclaim this humanistic project remained after World War II, it is threatened by “an ahistorical system of education” (Auerbach 1969, 6). Auerbach also warned that there was a process of leveling and standardization underway in contemporary society that removes distinctions and “serves to undermine all individual traditions” (2). Greek, Latin and Bible studies have collapsed and one has witnessed “the desire to master a great mass of material through the introduction of hypostatized, abstract concepts of order; this leads to the effacement of what is being studied, to the discussion of illusory problems and finally to a bare nothing” (10).

As one looks at the debates and intellectual conflicts of our day, including the situation of migrant literatures, it is worth recalling Auerbach’s monition concerning the distortion of language to forward political ends. If one is to adopt a genuine philological criticism, one’s premises must be concrete and exact, drawn from texts; otherwise the critical topic will remain vague and abstract and there will be little hope for success. By the same token, the work of the philologue must extend to the larger context and the broader place of philology within the family of the scientific and humanistic disciplines.

How then to confront Italian American literature as part of *Weltliteratur*, a mosaic whose diversity and complexity is at risk of banalization in our globalized mass society? My approach is that of literary anthropology. I do not mean a sociology of literature or an essentialist view of cultural identity (the “Italian”, the “American”) but the culturally informed study of the literary work as a human document, independent of considerations of national canons or literary movements. As distinct from theory-laden schools of criticism such as post-structuralism or deconstructionism, literary anthropology brings no pre-constituted model or ideological position to its analysis of texts. Nor does it assay the text clinically as a detached artefact isolated from the human experience of toil and joy, suffering and redemption. As any anthropologist knows, the human problem, the problem of culture, must be approached empirically and locally, through the data and the accounts of native informants, just as it must be

approached ideationally and subjectively in consideration of the value systems of the ethos. The literary anthropologist works similarly, inquiring into the text's formal and linguistic makeup, its cognitive and aesthetic character, and the larger context or world it presumes to occupy or represent.

Wolfgang Iser's theory of literary anthropology is founded on his reflection on the human "needs" that literature expresses: "Since literature as a medium has been with us more or less since the beginning of recorded time, its presence must presumably meet certain anthropological needs" (Iser 1989, 263-264). Within that purview, the literary text is a cultural act addressed to a public that poses a heuristic question: it aims at discovery. By engaging the triadic relation of the fictive, the real and the imaginary, the author seeks to go outside himself and create another reality. Iser refers in this regard to "the transgressing operations of the fictionalizing act" (4). It is especially through the imaginary – in its interaction with the fictive – that authors reveal the plasticity of their identities and their ability to change over time.

My adoption of literary anthropology for the case of Italian American literature is consistent with Iser's parameters. It draws on the concept of myth illustrated in the first part of this essay. Indeed, it considers mythopoeic thought and the discussion of origins to be a conspicuous presence in Italian American literature and a constitutive feature of its anthropological character. As I noted at the outset, I am not a scholar of Italian American literature but of Italian writings about America and American literature during the middle third of the twentieth century. Nevertheless, these are reciprocal areas that share a cross-cultural orientation and historical background: the era of mass immigration to America (1880-1920), the rise of Fascism, and the catastrophic events of two World Wars. In either area, the scholar must be highly selective, sorting through large amounts of data in order to arrive at some new truths. To be clear, the existence of literary writings by immigrants does not in itself constitute a migrant literature. An actual literature begins when the human subjects who have learned and suffered from the constraints of cultural identity transcend those experiences and convey that new reality in literary form.

Allow me to briefly illustrate this reciprocity and common ground with an example from my research. It concerns a long poem by Giovanni Pascoli written in 1904 (see Peterson 2003). Based on a true occurrence, the 450-line “Italy” (the title is in English) in two cantos in Dantesque *terzinas* concerns a family that emigrated from the Garfagnana region in the Province of Lucca to Cincinnati many years earlier. Ghita and Beppe are brother and sister and have returned to Italy with their eight-year old niece Molly, who was born in America and is sick with typhus. The emigrants have lost their facility with Italian and the local dialect while the locals do not know English or their Italianized English jargon. Thus, one has a dispiriting loss of human bonds and communication among the family members.

The poem’s sociological and linguistic complexity is mirrored by its form. It possesses a hobbling rhythm that derives from the non-correspondence between its metrical and syntactic structures, a kind of doubling effect caused by the continuous enjambments and the recursivity and redundancy of the dialogue. In the following citation Beppe/IOE tells his niece to stay close to the fireplace because it is snowing:

Dicea: “Bimbina, state al fuoco: nieva!
Nieva!” E qui Beppe soggiungea compunto:
“Poor Molly! Qui non trovi il pai con fleva!”

Oh! No: non c’era lì né pie né flavour
né tutto il resto. Ruppe in un gran pianto:
“IOE, what means nieva? Never? Never? Never?”

(Pascoli 1995, 72, lines 98-103)²

Using his Italianized English words “pai” (*pie*) and “fleva” (*flavour*), Beppe comforts his niece who fears she will never return to America. When he uses the dialectal word “nieva” to say it is snowing (“neve” in Italian), the desperate Molly asks if that means “never”. Here, as throughout Pascoli’s *oeuvre*, the experimental manipulation of language is rightly seen as an act

² (“He said: ‘Child, stay by the fire: it’s snowing! / It’s snowing!’ And here Beppe added painfully: / ‘Poor Molly! You can’t find pie with flavor here!’ // Oh! No: there wasn’t any pie or flavor there / nor any of the rest of it. She broke down sobbing: / ‘Joe, what does «nieva» mean? Never? Never? Never?’”; my translation).

of revolt against a rigid linguistic system. As Giacomo Devoto has stipulated, while Italians in this era were slow to realize the extent to which the “expressive needs of humanity” were held back by adherence to a closed linguistic “system”, “L’autore che ha più coerentemente e audacemente dato via libera a questo indirizzo è stato Giovanni Pascoli” (“The author who endorsed this direction most boldly and coherently was Giovanni Pascoli”; Devoto 1974, 317).

Through his deviation from the standard linguistic code, Pascoli infused Italian poetry with a new lexical vigor and notion of what was possible. His use of phonosymbolism and the pregrammatical stratum of language changed the way in which the verbal experience of poetry confronted the wordless domain of nature, in all its vastness and particularity. When he replicated the language of the emigrants from Cincinnati he was engaged in an operation not that different from the poems where he replicated the songs of birds or dwelt on the chromatism of clouds at a specific time of the day. He was not acting as a naturalist but placing into relief the perceptual experience of nature as such, as against the conceptual networks of man including the false certitudes of a conventional bourgeoisie that had not developed into a modern middle class as had happened north of the Alps.

As a non-Marxian socialist, Pascoli saw Italy as the victim in the tide of emigration to America, a country whose sons and daughters had been lured away unjustly, leading to a rupture of its social fabric. His poignant depiction of the poor and illiterate in “Italy” was meant to denounce this phenomenon as it affected people reciprocally on either side of the Atlantic. Composed in the fictive, realistic and imaginary language of literature, Pascoli’s poem provides us with some insight into the precious nature of language implicit in *Weltliteratur*. It serves as a confirmation of Auerbach’s idea that when a linguistic patrimony is lost and regained on another, post-national level, one appreciates especially the transcendent quality of language: “our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation. The most priceless and indispensable part of a philologist’s heritage is still his own nation’s culture and language. Only when he is first sep-

arated from this heritage, however, and then transcends it does it become truly effective” (Auerbach 1969, 17).

It is this ability to elevate oneself through the arts of language that constitutes the proper mission of Italian American literature. The most authentic works of this literature explore the fact of migration heuristically as a universal human experience. It is only seemingly paradoxical that the fact of ethnicity becomes secondary in those works to the transformative power of the creative process.

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Chapter 16

Ulrike Schneider

Contextualizing Jewish American Literature

Jewish American literature is not the focus of my own research. My area of expertise is the field of German Jewish literature, a very complex and disputed term, which was conceived in the last decades of the nineteenth century and was highly discussed at the beginning of the twentieth. Already from the end of the eighteenth century, and the beginning of the Haskalah movement in Prussia, references by Jewish authors to German language and literature and the question of writing in German were the result of and response to the political, social and religious discussions about the emancipation of Prussia and other German states. At the height of the political and racial antisemitism in the 1880s, perpetuated by conservative nationalist and predominantly Christian groups, ideas of progress and equality began to take shape in the form of responses from Jewish intellectuals of the time. On the one hand there were those who persevered with the notions of “German-Jewish symbiosis”, while on the other the ideas of an independent position and homeland began to form in the beginnings of the Zionist movement. Until 1933, these were the two main positions with respect to Jewish-German identity and literature. Jewish authors who wrote in German saw themselves and to a large extent were seen as contributing to an intercultural German national literature, as envisioned in Goethe’s call for *Weltliteratur*¹. Alongside such an

¹ The most important representative of this concept at the beginning of the 20th century was Ludwig Geiger. In *The Jews and German Literature (Die Juden und die*

understanding of Jewish literature within the larger corpus of German literature, further exacerbated by ongoing political and religious antisemitism, Jewish literature also began to respond to the growth of Zionism. In contrast to the previous symbiotic or intercultural views of Jewish-German literature, developments in cultural Zionism meant that some authors began to envision Jewish literature as a distinct national literature separate from German or other European literatures. Reflecting on both biblical and historical Jewish subjects and themes, such literature became a powerful tool of literary self-representation for Jewish authors in Europe at the time. Any residual sympathies for ideas of Jewish-German symbioses came to a bitter end with the ascension of the Nazi Party in 1933. Following the Holocaust, as Sander Gilman and Jack Zipes opined, one could think of four major generational periods in the history of German-Jewish literature. For example, starting with the first generation of death camp survivors, one could map the evolution of the profound influences the Holocaust had across generations, through the third- and fourth-generations of younger writers who were born in and/or grew up in the former Soviet Union (see Gilman – Zipes 1997). Every generation focused on different key aspects of the impact stemming from the history or experience of the Holocaust, that were connected through a form of writing which was controversial in its questioning of historical events, hence the preponderance of the “leitmotif Auschwitz” (xxiii), which in turn pointed to new forms of antisemitism developing in Germany².

It is from the context of my own scholarly expertise in German Jewish literature and the profound influence that the history of the Holocaust continues to exert on the literary imaginations of Jewish communities both in Germany and across the world that I approach my contribution to this volume. And therefore, despite the different developments of Jewish Ameri-

deutsche Literatur), which was published in 1910 by the publishing house Reimer, he concentrated on the achievement of Jewish authors. Furthermore, he was the founder (in 1880) and, until 1913, publisher of the *Goethe Yearbook*.

² In a recently published article, scholars Luisa Banki and Caspar Battegay define the contemporary concept of Jewish German literature: see Banki – Battegay 2019.

can and Jewish German literatures³, particularly with regards to their varied historical and political circumstances of production, I would like to propose a focus on some similarities that connect them. The most immediate of these shared problematics is one of lexicon. While such questions more generally apply to all hyphenated ethnic and national identities, the terms Jewish American or Jewish German take on added complexities of a national identity that is at once inflected by cultural, political, historical and religious concerns. Therefore, a historical study of Jewish American or Jewish German literatures, as is the case with all hyphenated literary cultures, is also equally called upon to negotiate the varied historical experiences of the communities that produce them. Equally important to such considerations is a history of the terms themselves that are used to designate such hyphenated identities and their literatures – questions such as: who defines them, under what circumstances, and with what intentions and correlations. In a reading of the literatures themselves, one has to also take into account other factors such as the self-identification of authors as Jewish vis-à-vis how such an identification inflects their works, alongside matters of circulation, like where and how they are published, reviewed and eventually canonized, as Andreas Kilcher has addressed in his article “What Is ‘German-Jewish literature?’” (1999).

Keeping such a broader historical context in mind, I reflect on the idea of Jewish American literature that emerges from some of the studies presented in this volume. The essays collected here bring together very interesting examples of Jewish American literature from different periods and emphasize not only the significant contribution Jewish authors have made to American literature, but also the historical, cultural, and linguistic characteristics of their works, that draw from their diverse cultural backgrounds (Russia, Poland or Austria). Such diversities and complexities in both cultural and historical experiences that shape the lives of these authors often are manifested in their works through protagonists and characters who struggle between their Jewish and American identities – reconciling a

³ For the general discussion of the term “Jewish literature” see Wirth-Nesher 1994.

Jewish heritage of an often very specific nature with the challenges of assimilating into the mainstream national and cultural identity of their new homeland.

Marta Skwara concentrates on three Jewish American writers of Polish origin to expand on the problematic generalizations that underlie the designation of a “Jewish American” identity, especially in the case of American perceptions of Polish immigrants. In her readings of Shalom Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer, who are often identified as Jewish authors and very well-known throughout America and Europe, Skwara analyses the careers of these two writers as the first generation of Polish Jewish immigrants in America. Drawing on specific examples in their the works, she explores the impact the linguistic and literary heritage in Yiddish and Polish had on their writing – the integration of Polish and Jewish traditions, and the relevance of intertextuality and of the processes of translation for the broader American readership. Skwara also emphasizes how a complex cultural legacy is displayed in their use of cultural stereotypes, motifs and elements of a cultural memory specific to the Polish Jewish immigrant experience. Despite similarities, their works are also distinct from one another. As Skwara emphasizes, Asch’s focus on the immigrant experience was much deeper, and Singer “never devoted any work to the problems of assimilation in America”. The last of the three authors she examines, Jerzy Kosiński, marks a generational shift from the era of Asch and Singer. Kosiński was also a Polish Jewish immigrant in post-World War II America, but unlike his older compatriots he never wrote in Polish or Yiddish. Kosiński wrote primarily in English and presented autobiographical depictions of the Holocaust in his works, which were later discovered to be inauthentic. Skwara candidly and convincingly addresses the problematic nature of Kosiński’s popularity in America, especially given how his depictions of the Holocaust, largely fictionalized, have passed for testimonial. In doing so, she also engages with, and in part confirms, charges later levelled against Kosiński of having borrowed rather generously from testimonial works of pre-war European writers, less familiar to an Anglo-American readership, in crafting his own material on the Holocaust. The

author himself, however, never acknowledged such intertextualities or borrowings. In conclusion, Skwara sees Kosiński's fame in America as a Jewish writer of the Holocaust as symptomatic of the potential oversimplifications that can exist within a solely identitarian approach to immigrant fictions, where one is not called upon to consider larger biographical, linguistic, and intertextual dimensions in the study of the literature.

Marjanne Goozé's essay further investigates the problems identified in Skwara's study of Kosiński's Holocaust narratives by focusing on the publication and subsequent translation of Ruth Kluger's memoir, *Still Alive*. Born in 1931 in Vienna, Kluger survived the Nazi death camps with her mother, and the two women emigrated to the United States in 1947. In 2001, she rewrote, in an English-language version, her memoir published originally in German in 1992. As Goozé emphasizes, Kluger re-contextualised her memoir for an American readership, especially for a Jewish female American one. The topical structure of this American version was deeply influenced by the American feminist movement of the 1960s, and by the historical understanding of the Holocaust by mainstream American culture. The author draws comparisons between the sufferings Jews in Europe and the history of racism towards African Americans. According to Goozé, the memoir is represented by Kluger as the testimonial of a female Holocaust survivor, an emphasis one also finds in the German book. But in contrast, the American version is heavily inflected by the narrativization of the American feminist movement. For example, as Goozé explains in her analysis of Kluger's memoir, the American text abounds in allusions to American feminist mottoes and stresses a "matrilineal line" in the passage of historical experience from Kluger's mother to herself and subsequently to her own granddaughters and to female students and readers.

Doris Kadish illustrates such a position of in-betweenness with the example of the essayist, literary critic and co-founder of the *Partisan Review*, Philip Rahv, whose outsiderhood in America was more defined by his identity as a Russian immigrant than by his being Jewish. In comparison to Saul Bellow, she posits Rahv as an example of a "counternarrative" to em-

phasize the inherent heterogeneity within the Jewish immigrant experience in America. Rahv's unique position within American literature and the neglect of his work were also in part due to his strong Marxist leanings and his affinity with European literary aesthetics. Images of migrancy and exile – intellectually and politically – persisted throughout his life's work, despite his being “a member of an American intellectual elite”, as Kadish states.

Another essay in the cluster deals with Bernard Malamud's unfinished novel, *The People*, which was published posthumously in 1989. In his essay, Paolo Simonetti discusses Malamud's self-identification as an American writer and his eschewal of the term “Jewish American writer” as a “contradiction”. Such questions of identity – Jewish, American and Jewish American – are repeatedly played out in Malamud's novels and short stories. In what he describes as a “threefold alienation”, Simonetti explores the in-betweenness that echoes through Malamud's works in recurrent negotiations of Jewishness in America. Such mixing of different cultures and traditions also dominate the structuring of Malamud's last unfinished novel, which emphasizes such pluralities through adaptation from different genres. In this manner, the novel also explores the aesthetic dimension of the negotiation of hyphenated identities.

After briefly summarizing these few essays, I would like to concentrate on two substantial points. The first concerns the interconnectedness of these studies in their investigation of hyphenated identities and the canon of literature thereby created. All the authors discussed in these essays, male or female, draw upon diverse traditions, cultural backgrounds and religious or secular beliefs, showing their conversance with the various philosophical, aesthetic, and political concepts of these traditions. Such complexities and pluralities can be seen in all the essays collected here. Ranging across the history of Jewish American literature, starting with Asch, Rahv, Singer, Malamud, to Shteyngart and Reyn as well as in the fraught testimonial claims of Kosiński and Kluger, on the one hand these essays negotiate the complexity of the Jewish immigrant experience, defined through emigrations from Russia, Poland and Austria and the struggles of assimilation in America, while on the other

they show how such an assimilation leads to equally complex engagements with the local marginalities of the Native and African American experience. Whether fictional or factual, these literary representations all narrativize struggles inherent in the immigrant experience – the challenges of identification and self-identification. Each of the writers discussed in this volume deal with such alienation in their own unique ways – for Malamud it was, as Simonetti says, a “threefold alienation” – and with the heritage of native language, the adoption of a new language, the burden of cultural memory, or more specifically, in the cases of Kosiński and Kluger, the challenge of giving voice to the experience of the Holocaust for an audience largely removed from the experience of the horrific historical event.

However, such tensions manifest themselves not only in the challenges of self-identification, but also in the ways in which these authors are further canonized within larger constructions of Jewish and Jewish American literature. For example, if Shalom Asch and Isaac Bashevis Singer may be classified as Jewish American authors, such an identification tends to underplay their complex Polish-Yiddish literary and linguistic heritage. Although classified as Jewish American writers, they can also be recognized for their outstanding contribution towards the development of modern Yiddish literature and therefore be categorized as modern Yiddish writers. Furthermore, the translations of Singer’s works into English, or Kluger’s rewriting of her memoir in English for an American readership, also point to the problematic classifications of writers in a historiography of Jewish American literature.

The second point I wish to emphasize, which is closely related to first, deals with the structuring of these migrant fictions, and especially the representational aesthetics deployed by their authors. Singer and Asch incorporated elements of the Yiddish-Jewish literary tradition, but their texts were equally influenced by elements from Polish literature. Malamud combined, in his novel *The People*, legends and myths of Jewish culture with stories from the Bible, while also adapting elements from the American Western and detective fiction, and combining them with narratives from the colonial period and other literary

traditions. Thus, the linguistic and topical structure of the texts, using specific and established elements from a variety of traditions, reflects the sheer breadth and heterogeneity of the Jewish American literary tradition. As Goozé points out in her reading of Kluger's memoir, the author incorporates dialogue and essayistic prose as a means to engage not only with a predominantly Jewish female readership, but also to respond to Holocaust narratives authored by male writers. Her work foregrounds a definitively feminine subjectivity in Holocaust literature, which in her rewriting for an American feminist readership also engages ethnic and gendered marginalization within American culture and society.

I must admit that I have only read the German version of Kluger's autobiographical essay. When her memoir was first published in 1992, it provided a new perspective in the German literary discourse regarding the Holocaust narrative. Her use of intertextual references opened a dimension to this tradition of testimonial writing that was formed by her very extensive, critical, and polemical commentaries on literary representations of the Holocaust. Such an argumentative approach was unique within the field of German Holocaust literature. In the German text, Kluger invites a younger generation of readers to be "streitsüchtig" ("argumentative"; Kluger 1993, 142), not only because of the feminine perspective of her writing, but also because of her critical view of the German commemorative culture about the history of the Holocaust. This focus was almost completely absent in her English rewriting of the text. There is only another writer who can be compared with Kluger in this regard, the German-Jewish essayist Jean Améry, who published his Auschwitz-narrative, *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, in 1966. Améry perhaps influenced Kluger's German version of her memoir.

Finally, we may question the use of a hyphenated identity to classify these literary works and their writers. We might also wish to examine how American Jewish writers are influenced by concepts of transnationalism and may cross national, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. Their works might also reflect transnational and transcultural boundaries. Therefore, an examination

of the biographies of writers, of their texts and contexts, demand our attention and invite a methodical approach which recognizes the challenges and difficulties involved because the subject of hyphenated identities enriches every literature we study.

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Chapter 17

Sabnam Ghosh

Pedagogies of Immigrant Otherness

This volume seeks to place in relief some of the pedagogical and theoretical issues involved in asserting and practicing the “multi” in multiculturalism. The nature, capacity, and volume of “multi” cultural practices are important because of the role multiculturalism plays in delineating the category of “citizenship” in the United States today. Originating at a crucial time in the history of the nation’s conflict scenario, immigration legalities and inclusive modernization¹, the praxis of multiculturalism in the academy plays an important role in implementing what it means to be “American”. This volume concludes with a call to expand the paradigms of inclusivity in national “ethnic” representations, in order to, as Jenny Webb states in the final essay of this volume, “make more room at the table”.

What are the ways in which multiculturalism manifests itself in literary studies? We began our investigation with a discussion of how it’s methodology is defined and validated. It remains to be seen how its scope and methods are practiced. This essay evaluates some of the ways multiculturalism is conceptualized and practiced in the academy, literary circles and in classrooms. In particular, I examine canon formation, classroom pedagogies and the frameworks they provide for the understanding of “multiculturalism” in the US, especially as it relates to Italian Americans and Jewish American groups. While the above ques-

¹ See Figueira 2008, Chapter 1, for a history of the academic and literary roots of multiculturalism.

tions explore the larger multicultural conversation broached by this volume, a couple of contextual concerns remain regarding the ethnic inclusion of these groups. In the following discussion, I shall briefly explore the popular canons of Jewish American and Italian American literature as they appear in syllabi and anthologies, interrogating in the process the absence of the authors explored in the other essays included in the volume. I thereby hope to connect the larger multicultural discussions explored here to the reality of classroom instructions, canon formation and pedagogy.

One of the largest Ethnic Studies organizations in the US, MELUS or The Society for the Study of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States, lists on its website a selection of standard syllabi to showcase the diversity of “ethnic” American texts in American classrooms. These syllabi define the scope of what groups are considered “ethnic” in American classrooms and what selections are “popular” in these designated groups. The question that this collection of syllabi raises is the following: what does it mean to teach the “popular” texts of these different ethnic groups? In addition, how does one account for “ethnicities” that are not included in these syllabi? What is their status as accepted “ethnic” groups and how do we account for groups that are not included? This listing of syllabi is actually quite informative as it brings to light clearly what the academic canon considers “ethnic literature” in the United States under multiculturalism. It shows which texts are popular in US classrooms and how this marketing is abetted by the literary award industry. It also illuminates how these texts are commodified in order to codify what we “know” about the ethnicities that surround us. These texts compose the canon that defines the representation of respective ethnic groups in American classrooms today and in part delineates the “discourse” regarding subgroups.

The variety of “multi-ethnic” texts in the standard sampling of syllabi by the MELUS Action Board for Equity in Education (an interesting concept in itself) is made of almost exclusively Asian American and African American texts, plus some Native American and Mexican American ones. The selection of texts representing these ethnic groups is also quite standard. Texts

such as *No No Boy*, *Living Up the Street* and *Typical American* deliver a standard view of the history of Asian Americans and Mexican Americans in the US that focuses on the theme of “suffering” and “claim to victimhood”, originating out of migration and wartime experiences. Complex and contemporary texts such as *The Fifth Book of Peace*, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, *Comfort Women*, *Eating Buddha’s Dinner* and *Everything I Never Told You*, that provide a more nuanced understanding of development or growth within the ethnic experience in question, are not included in these syllabi. This grouping of assigned texts mostly fails to deliver insight into contemporary issues – hence, the multicultural experience does not address present-day migrant situations that students might actually inhabit in their lives. The problem of such an approach, as the Presidential panel at the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) conference in 2019 noted, is that this “only historical” sampling of literatures is stagnant and stipulates the multicultural experience while refusing it the fluidity that constitutes the “current” experience of multiculturalism. A similar situation can be seen in African American texts that focus on historical figures such as Fredrich Douglass who, while historically extremely relevant, do not offer a broad sampling of the African American experience. It has been my experience, in teaching an author such as Douglass, that students in Georgia have “read” his *Narrative* at several reprises by the time they reach college. But, in reality, they have not truly read it as a piece of literature and analyzed it as one might expect from a stylistic, historical, contextual perspective. Lip-service is paid to having read him without the accompanying respect to which this text is due. In essence, the syllabi can be seen to limit the conversation and not allow for any full realization of the “multi”- cultural- ethnic experience that the courses for which they are adopted claim to deliver. I am not in any way stating that the texts chosen are not useful or valuable. However, the conversation needs to be both historical as well as relevant, otherwise such texts assigned currently do not “start” a conversation, they just “stipulate” what some educators, with perhaps not the broadest understanding, think “needs” to be discussed.

Syllabi that do deal with Jewish American Literature present *Maus* as a very significant representation of the “Jewish American” experience. In addition to Art Spiegelman, Woody Allen appears to complete the Jewish American Ethnic canon. Authors such as Sholem Asch, Issac Bashevis Singer or Bernard Malamud are absent from the syllabi sampling. Philip Roth does, on occasion, appear. But, as we have seen, there are numerous neglected writers whose works are represented in the essays in this volume and who take as their subject the struggles of Jewish Americans with their identity as Jews, the Hebrew language and immigrant experience in the US. These are missing from syllabi. Doris Kadish questions the formation of the Jewish American canon and tries to fix a place for a critic such as Philip Rahv or, more significantly, the Jewish American Nobel prize-winning author Saul Bellow. She notes that Bellow’s popularity resides in his embracing of his Jewish identity, while claiming “secularism”. Although Bellow wrote in English, he “spoke Yiddish to the end of his life” and refused to assimilate. The struggle between one’s religion, whether Judaism or Catholicism, and Americanization appears as an acceptable dynamic of the “immigrant” experience; Americanness is preserved and ensured through the American spirit of freedom from religious observance. In a figure like Rahv, who shunned his Jewish identity and never returned to it in any of his intellectual projects, such a staunch disavowal does not seek to preserve the “difference” that American Jewishness is “meant” to proclaim. Shunning one’s religious identity does not adequately represent some perceived essence of immigrant identity, just as the assumption of multiple attachments, as found in Malamud, also detracts from this message. Malamud, as Paolo Simonetti examines, was fascinated by the idea of a Jewish Indian in his last uncompleted book, *The People*. As in the case of several of the authors treated in this volume, the Native American pops up as an interesting foil to the Italian Americans and the Jewish Americans. The appearance of Native Americans in so many of the works of immigrant fiction studied in these pages suggest just how Jewish American and Italian American authors seek to call into question accepted formulations of Americanness, such

as the ethnic author's ability to preserve an "inbetweenness" suggested by the hyphenated identity.

A thematic of naturalizing "inbetweenness" appears, according to Marjanne Goozé's analysis, in Ruth Kluger's *Still Alive*. Kluger, a highly successful academic and Jewish American author, related her experiences of the Holocaust in a memoir written with "Jewish Feminist readers" in mind. In her memoir, Kluger draws inspiration from a range of lesbian, Jewish and African American feminists, suggesting just how large the umbrella under which she yearns to place her memoir extends. In such a group, where victimization is truly leveled out, what does the construction of the "immigrant subject" mean? The strong association of second-wave feminism with the backdrop of the Holocaust lends a distinctly American sense of trivialization to her narrative. Kluger's place in a canon of popular Jewish American authors reflects the underlying ideological message of the canon as it is constructed. I argue that, from my analysis of syllabi, the canon of Jewish American writers highlights what Dorothy Figueira has conceptualized as the "commodity fetishization" of American ethnic identity. Although Figueira uses this term to unpack the commodification of postcolonial studies in American academia, the concept is equally applicable to our understanding of the formation of multicultural canons in US academe, since the term involves our "imagined access to the other" as packaged by texts that are felt (in English Departments, at least) to "deliver" the multicultural experience. The question then becomes: what kinds of discourses about "citizenship" and what kinds of "citizens" are we promoting, by inadvertently defining American ethnic identity through such a limited understanding of authors who are deemed (sanctionable) as Other?

Italian American authors are virtually absent from syllabi and curricula in Ethnic American Literature studies. Given their conspicuous absence from all ethnic American literature syllabi, it is even curious to frame Italian Americans as an ethnic group. What contributes to this absence, or dare I say "erasure", of Italian American presence from such American ethnic syllabi? Does their absence reflect the degree to which the multicultural canon has been racialized, even in the case of those ethnicities

such as Jews and Italians who have over time “become white”? Is color a prerequisite for inclusion in “multi” cultural discussions?

A pattern similar to that found in MELUS can also be found in conferences sponsored by the Critical Ethnic Studies Association (CESR). Their range of focus includes the same minority communities that are explored by MELUS: predominantly Asian Americans, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Mexican Americans and Native Americans. The choices of ethnicity focus conspicuously on “race” and “color”. It includes historically underprivileged minorities, with an emphasis on their “visibility” as minority communities. Does this suggest that “multi” cultures or “ethnicities” are limited to those minorities who are “visible” because of their racial features or color? Moreover, what are the sampling of issues discussed in these curricula? To what extent do they reflect the fashionable critical foci of privilege, hegemony and queering? As much as these issues deserve our attention, are they the main issues reflected in the cultures under examination? Does curricular hypervigilance with regard to race and color outweigh other key issues of struggle that have an equal claim to analysis? In any case, Italian American literature, like Jewish American texts, are conspicuously absent from the texts studied and the sampling of issues examined in these conferences. Their absence begs the question of which other kinds of intentional erasures exist in the discourse on “ethnicity” as presently configured in the American educational system.

The institutionalized absence of “immigrant” Jewish American and Italian American voices can also be seen in anthologies of Ethnic American Literature and World Literature – mainly in the genres of short stories, poetry and excerpted works – as well. In my recent reading of a short story collection entitled *American Short Stories*, edited by Lewis Sterner and Murray Rockowitz (1966), the only Jewish American voice is Irwin Shaw’s. Even in “A Reader’s List of American Short Stories”, a compilation of American short stories and their writers at the end of the book, Shaw is the only Jewish American representative, though he is presented in the capacity of an “American” author, as opposed to his hyphenated Jewish American identity that even his short

story “Act of Faith” reflects. The only other hyphenated voice is that of William Saroyan, who is distinctly known for his Armenian American background. Even then, Saroyan is popular for his whimsical depictions of American life, as opposed to his Armenian heritage. Clearly, the selection of short stories does not use immigrant voices in America to define “American” short story writers.

A short survey of anthologies from 1930 on reflects a similar ethic in the representation of Jewish American and Italian American writing. For example, the 1936 anthology *The Bedside Book of Famous American Stories* (edited by Angus Burrell and Bennett A. Cerf) has one story by an Irish immigrant, Fitz-James O’Brien. All the others are by American-born authors such as Washington Irving, Mark Twain, Dorothy Parker, etc. This bias is to be expected of an anthology taken from the canon. Cerf’s 1954 anthology, *Encyclopedia of American Humor*, includes some Jewish writers, but not immigrants. Again, since “American” is the operative word, this is not a surprise. *This Is My Best* (1942), edited by Whit Burnett, presents pieces chosen by “America’s 93 Greatest Living Authors”. Without looking up every author’s religion, I found these Jewish authors: Robert Nathan, S.J. Perelman, Lillian Hellman, and Irwin Edman. Another anthology, *A Call to Character* (edited by Colin Greer and Herbert Kohl, 1997), emphasizes moral tales. It is very inclusive, really a world literature anthology, but there is no emphasis on immigrant fictions. *Reading Rooms* (edited by Susan Allen Toth and John Coughlan, 1991), which anthologizes authors’ memories of libraries, includes some Jewish writers such as Alfred Kazin but has no immigrant presence. *Letters to Our Mothers: I’ve Always Meant to Tell You* (edited by Constance Warloe, 1997) includes American women writers of various ethnicities – Native American, women of color, etc. A few of the mothers who are addressed were immigrants. It all depends on the frame. Mark Strand’s *100 Great Poems of the Twentieth Century* (2005) is broadly international because that is his focus – established, world-class writers. Clearly, these anthologies bring up a very specific definition of American citizenship, where the immigrant is the invisible Other, more often than not

completely absent, thereby ignoring the constant undercurrent of immigrant tensions that are always present in American politics or erasing them from any standardized representation of what constitutes the canon, as is reflected in these anthologies.

Erotic Poetry: The Lyrics, Ballads, Idyls, and Epics of Love – Classical to Contemporary (1963), edited by William Cole, who at that point had done several other anthologies, including *A Cat Hater's Handbook* (so we know he is not to be trusted), is heavy on naughty (but not very) verse and songs from the British Isles, in particular the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. There is no immigrant voice, no representation of people of color (as far as I can tell from name and subjects), though a number of countries contribute – India, Turkey, France, Germany, Spain. Italy figures in the classical period with one excerpt from Dante. In the twentieth century we have what are now establishment poets, e.g., Cummings, Kunitz, Ignatow, Dylan Thomas, Crane, Hollander, etc, plus a few women – Levertov, Sexton, May Swenson. Stephen Spender contributes a tasteful introduction usefully linking sexuality and religion. Given the lack of representation of these immigrant groups it not surprising that Cole follows suit².

The function of “canonicity” in literature has always been a hotly debated topic. The purpose of canon formation, to draw from Foucault’s theory of power³, has always tended to streamline disciplinary discourse. The canon is reflective of the discourses of “power” in both humanitarian and capitalistic fields, such that a text and its “experience” are packed for consumption by marketing strategies and awards, book clubs and review presentations. What must be read and must be debat-

² I am very thankful to Ms. Elaine Fowler Palencia, award-winning author of several books of fiction and non-fiction for this research and information on anthologies. All her works and achievements are mentioned at <http://www.elainepalencia.com/index.htm>.

³ The role of “power” in society pervades all of Michel Foucault’s work, and especially the fact that “power is everywhere” – in the way we live the language we speak, the food we eat and the books we read (see Foucault 1994). I claim that these “epistemes” Foucault discusses underlie the formation of the canon in literature. These canons formed through the interaction between history and capitalism determine the sources of knowledge.

ed is made popular within a given canon. As Franca Sinopoli notes in her essay, trends of canon formation in the twenty-first century privilege concepts of “mobility”, “diaspora”, “migration”, and “transnationalism”. Multicultural canons certainly privilege such concepts. But beyond such buzzwords, what is the effect of such privileging? Given the tendency of canons to stagnate discourse, it is odd that multicultural canons who aim to be inclusive do not reflect a more varied and evolving level of experience. Multicultural canons are composed primarily of late twentieth-century post-World War II movements that prioritize the abovementioned migratory scapes, as well as a discrete set of accepted issues for discussion, as well as a “movement” exhibiting a certain kind of liberal nationalism that relies on visibility or the presence of “visible race” as the sign of “movement”. First, by focusing on the character of the “immigrant” as an in-between space, multiculturalism continues to construct the immigrant as forever a transitory unsettled figure. Second, the “movement” is marked by the presence of “color”, presenting colored people as the representatives of movement. Such constructions of the immigrant produces two different kinds of results. For one, the multicultural conversation seems to be forever beginning, because the unsettled disposed figure of the immigrant continues to resonate in different stories without any signs of settling down. Such an unstable portrayal of the immigrant projects “multi-ethnic” populations as migrant lots whose claim to citizenship and Americanness are forever in jeopardy. Next, owing to the trope of “movement”, former migrant populations such as Jewish Americans and Italian Americans, who once underwent similar movement, fall out of the American multicultural equation because they are no longer marked by their transitoriness.

Unfortunately, the trope of multiculturalism through “movement” does not adequately describe the twenty-first century context. Given that we are said to be moving towards what is considered a “post racial” society, “race” and “color”, the parameters of multiculturalism, do not adequately define the historical and circumstantial experience of marginalization as evidenced in current times nor do they reach back to include groups such

as Jewish and Italian migrants to the US in the twentieth century, who missed out on the initial configuration of “ethnicity” in inclusion policies. Though the discussion of a “post-racial” society might be particularly contentious in the aftermath of George Floyd’s death and the ensuing mobilization, the issues brought up by this volume around the fetishization and commodification of “color” and “race” in multicultural endeavors deserve our attention.

Figueira’s conceptualizations of “commodity fetishization” and “brahminization” are useful concepts to explain some potential problems involved in the current construction of multicultural canons in the US. According to Figueira, commodity fetishism has three components. It “involves a mystification or leveling out of historical experience. It also exhibits an imagined access to the cultural Other that entails the reification of people and places into aesthetic objects” (Figueira 2008, 68). Multiculturalism relies on a just such an experience to capitalize on the “cultural” other, whose ontological position, beliefs, myths and superstitions, to which it intends to provide access, only reifies and presents otherness as aesthetically defined. The position of the “cultural” other as “accessible” is one of the greatest claims of multiculturalism. The parameters of “race” and “color” provide an easy identification with the Other, who then can be lumped into different supermarkets, ethnic enclaves, cultural nights and celebrations both on college campuses and on the streets throughout America (see also Ghosh 2019). Specifically, the access to these “cultures” through literature also reflects such commodification, as the theorizations tend to neatly categorize people and groups into defined categories of identity conflicts, generational conflicts, patriarchal oppression, diasporic liberation, etc. Such categories provide access to the Other through this process of “brahminization”⁴. Both multicultural literature and its practitioners brahminize themselves by taking on the role as the spokesperson for the cultures they choose to

⁴ Figueira states that the term “*brahminization*” was first introduced by anthropologist M.N. Srinivas in the 1950’s to describe the process, also known as ‘Sanskritization’, whereby a group attempts to acquire the traditional symbols of high status (customs, rituals, lifestyles) of the local highest elite” (Figueira 2008, 68).

represent. They filter out voices that do not live with the accepted commodification of the Other or present a “reality” beyond the superficial characteristics assigned to given groups. The canons of their representation do not probe culture but rather they reduce it to a list of facts and behaviors, deemed significant and universal. Through this process, they then claim to understand the “interiority” of these cultures.

This attitude allows, as Figueira notes, college campuses and administrators to showcase diversity without real engagement. Webb describes this surface-deep phenomenon as a practice that reflects the “colonizing” practices within college campuses because they do not stipulate the hard work of learning languages or immersing one into another’s cultures. It is engagement without effort that has been institutionalized to allow the reader to claim knowledge of the “Other” without having to really engage that other. Such an attitude professes that “multi” culturalism involves culture in “translation”, rather than in all its specificities and messiness. The brilliant career of an author such as Jerzy Kosiński, as outlined by Marta Skwara, speaks volumes to the politics involved. Multiculturalism does not necessarily mean embracing multiple cultures, it rather means, in a nationalistic sense, the capability of being able to claim access to the “interiority” of a variety of cultures. Hence, *brahminization* found in multiculturalism becomes an effort to *codify* in a uniform body the immigrant experience. It is for this reason that this particular volume of essays seeks to reflect on the real diversity of what is too often presented as an even nationalized body of immigrant experiences. This point answers my earlier concern about the kinds of citizenship that multiculturalism facilitates. Instead of making the Other a valuable presence in a predominantly uniform society, multiculturalism turns it into a valuable commodity by professing a form of access that posits the Other as “attainable” once and for all through a set of practices without having to really invest in the Other.

The current system of multiculturalism, hence, fetishizes inclusivity through “color” in order to determine which color and which type of marginalization are worth the attention of the liberal white American constituency who is otherwise dis-

engaged from radical alterity. This pedagogy serves to promote the fetishized uplifting of certain minorities marked by “color” and “race”. It neither preserves multiplicities nor encourages their practices, beliefs or enhancements. The conversation must include both “color” and “culture” without necessarily problematizing or essentializing either category. Multiculturalism thus purports to be a mode of ethical living that validates the practice of one’s culture with no questions asked. Comparative Literature’s emphasis on trajectories, cultures, languages and genealogies stands in sharp contrast to multiculturalism. It has the potential to give it a more ethical and inclusive form than the present multicultural form as practiced in many English departments, given their mandate to unify and represent culture only through English.

Iphshita Chanda focuses on the element of “culture” as a distinct category of analysis for both the practice of Comparative Literature and multiculturalism. As I have already noted, “culture” is the capital of multiculturalism. Through this capital, multiculturalism proposes to unpack the Other, prepare it for consumption and reveal the interiority that a given culture possesses. It proposes “to teach” the Other in classrooms, discuss the Other in conferences, explore the Other in supermarkets, taste the Other in ethnic restaurants, witness the Other in ethnic gatherings, and listen to the Other when a “spokesperson” writes a novel or addresses a gathering. In these ways the institutionalization of “multiculturalism” knows the Other, who is simultaneously visibly defined by race and color. However, after having explored the various problems with the academic commodification of the Other, a simple question remains: are either “culture” or “the Other” really knowable by any set of categories or practices? Sinopoli and Chanda suggest that even the practice of Comparative Literature has its limitations. The Comparative Literature method proposes to reach the Other marked by culture as a mode of reading, as something we can “practice” to read but not necessarily decode, unpack or completely “just understand”. The endeavor to consume the Other or to teach alterity is a failed practice. What we can aspire to do is to develop a pedagogical toolset, for example by reading

through trajectories or genealogies, to move beyond our rigid notions and political attitudes, and to read and empathize.

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Chapter 18

Ipshita Chanda

Plural Cultures, Pluralist Ethics and the Practice of Comparative Literature

Local – locale, place and not nation – nationality, country, region, city – [...] these conceptual extremes [...] encompass a series of general opposites applicable to different situations: between the specific circumstance and the world, between the present and the absent, the experience and its sense, the I and whatever is alien to it, the perceived and the longed for, what is and what should be, what exists today and what is eternal.

(Claudio Guillén, *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*)

Must Comparative Literature with its implications of what Guillén¹ calls supranationalism (Guillén 1993, 3), consent to being defined by “cultural” identity, when the fundamental misconception of a nation with a single homogenous culture needs to be interrogated rather than pandered to? Can multiculturalism as a mode of engaging with alterity help us in better understanding the questions of reception, refusal and ambiguity, and in embracing difference with which literature (and life) confront us? Or is the discipline that we practice, a “war dance between essentialism and anti-essentialism” (Sayeed 2012), demanding an ethics of plurality and relationality, eschewing instituted binaries? I argue that “comparing”, as a frame for reading and a

¹ Guillén views supranationalism as a location away from the theatre of Comparative Literature’s “mainstream”, so to speak.

scholarly practice, is founded upon the fact of otherness. Alterity makes the act of comparison possible. Thus, the comparative approach means understanding and encountering the very fact of otherness (and not metaphorically the Other or an[y] other), concretized through situation and chronotope in literature. To impose “culture” as a distinct category of analysis, therefore, raises questions about the relation of the comparative approach to society itself and the ethics that govern our lives in it, as teachers, scholars, readers – human beings.

Some questions follow from this approach to comparison as scholarly practice and to comparative literature as an academic discipline. First, are society or literature reducible to “culture”? Secondly, does not an “ethical practice” break open the silence around the position of the “scholar” in our field, and in humanistic scholarship in general? Finally, do not the history of the discipline and the training it purports to impart enable the comparatist to encounter and understand otherness as the universal condition? Does this not demand a located understanding, a conversation with otherness, rather than an attempt to fix the other in a culture s/he is supposed to inhabit as distinct from the culture in which the reader or researcher is located? To me it appears that such a “comparative” approach alone can protect us from the tendency to assimilate or exoticise or ingest or represent or satirize (and this list is by no means exhaustive) the/ an Other. What then is the point of focusing upon cultural difference except to restate the obvious, i.e. difference, from which comparison is born? I would like to submit that confusions of ontology (what *is* comparative literature) and method (how do we *do* it?) have led to the infamous periodic crises of comparative literature, once looked upon as precursors to doom. But both crisis (Étiemble 1966) and death (Bassnett 1993, Spivak 2003) have been answered by remedies for everything (on multiculturalism, see Bernheimer 1994), saluting the existence of a many-cultured but single “world” (on World Literature, see Damrosch 2003) and leading to proposals for changed nomenclature and new categories of engagement (Guillén and supranationalism). And what about the stream of comparatists who, located away from Comparative Literature’s “mainstream”

history so to speak, are uneasily enslaved by the binary and equally uneasily grapple with the realities of living in a plural world, and are therefore impelled to rethink the categories by which our discipline is governed? I add my voice to the concerns raised by them in this volume, attempting to locate the practice of Comparative Literature within academia and outside in our engagement with the realities of the worlds in which we live. It is my belief that the relevance of the comparative approach lies precisely in questioning the existing categories of literary analysis and asserting a paradigm of plurality, however difficult that may be and however contrary to the entrenched conceptual categorizations popular in academia and literary scholarship today. That is the area addressed by this book, and hence I take this as the proper place for such an inquiry.

Since Comparative Literature is not a (or any) literature but a practice, all our attempts to cast the net wide enough to extend our area of engagement by constantly including writing by/about all forms of life on the globe or planet, will always leave room for debates about who is included/excluded from what/whom and/or why. Perhaps this is because we mistake a change in the canon for a change in the category. This erroneous belief is the problem that I seek to address in what follows, using the implications of the sociopolitical phenomenon of “migrancy” as a literary category as a base for my observations. Starting from the assumption that literature exists as a mode of expression of singular and therefore located experience which cannot be reduced to the general, the aim is to belabor the obvious point that the implications of a socio-political phenomenon, when translated into human experience, concretizes the peculiar and the particular, and does not often fit into the generalization that is necessary for conceptualization in the social sciences. “Migration” therefore is at most an occasion or an event, located in a spatio-temporal context and acquiring meaning in the light of history. As comparatists, our work addresses the role of language in the process of expression, squarely locating the textual practices of reading, writing and interpreting within the history of contact and relations between language-cultures. Such a process by which the reader/researcher is thus brought into the

area of research provides a key component of the comparative approach and simultaneously raises concerns of its ethical nature. Simply put, even unacknowledged, the processes through which the scholar/reader/researcher relates to difference are an inevitable part of the comparative approach. If a “method” for the comparative study of literature has to emerge from a basis in plurality; which is the reality of our world, then these are the issues that need to be kept in view in order to propose the re-drawing of categories of interpretation for textual practices, i.e. the reading and writing of literature. Only thus will we be able to raise the question of relevance in certain modes of textual practice that I have raised above, with respect to Comparative Literature as a form of praxis and as an ethics (Sayeed 2012, 31).

As migrant literature is the interpretative category at the center of this volume, let us understand what the word “migration” refers to, borrowing from my own focus and expertise, in the specific context of India and South Asia. There is no doubt an essential meaning that it carries, and the very nature of language-use does not allow us to decontextualise this meaning – especially when we are trying to use migration as a category to understand and speak about literature. Without going directly into the issues of identity and angst as *pregiven*, I would like to understand migration within the context in which it has impinged upon my life, and as it also has on the lives of millions in the subcontinent in 2020. This period has revealed to us a historical fact, obfuscated by its ordinariness: migration occurs for the exigencies of livelihood and survival. Thus, it is based upon a hierarchization of difference in the interconnected world built by global capital. Consequently, legislation stemming from exclusive and monocultural homogenous “nationalism” relates migration as a phenomenon to terror, dispossession, disenfranchisement and helplessness, striking at the very roots of “identity”, political and cultural, militating against pluralism, difference and the very ideas of relation, dialogue and contact.

Aspects of the phenomenon of migration appear far removed from what goes by the name of “migrant” literature in global languages, regardless of where the writers are located. How do

we understand, rather than “define”, migrant literature then? To contextualize this question, I would like to invoke the *shared* history of the South Asian subcontinent. The cause for the partition of the subcontinent was held to be the “two nation theory”, which claimed that the two largest communities in undivided India were irreconcilably different from each other, and therefore constituted two nations, predictably, exclusive of each other. The actual fact of centuries of cohabitation, and the evolution of a plural culture wherein it was often impossible to separate the strands of one from the other, was literally Greek to the colonial rulers nurtured on monocultural nineteenth-century nationalism. Decolonization accompanied and institutionalized the policy of such a division into two nations. The extent to which this process was ideologically driven rather than a “natural” cultural division became clear when, within 25 years, language over-rode religion as the binding force of society. Language became the cause for a further partition of the subcontinent into three nations, despite supposed similarities in religion and culture. One language, Bangla, was spoken in two nations, and international borders located the Bengali-speaking people in the newly formed Bangladesh which had first come into being as Islamic East Pakistan, and separated them from the so-called Bengali Hindus of India following the two-nation theory. To date, the “Bengali” Hindu who “migrated” to India has roots in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh, whether the migration occurred with the first partition of East Pakistan or after the birth of Bangladesh as a new nation. In these circumstances, “migrant” literature in Bengali becomes a rather untidy category, as does Bengali literature itself. Is Bengali literature to be defined by the language in which it is written or the nationality of the writer or the community to which she belongs? This is only one aspect of the tension that the category “migrant literature” brings to light.

Another language, Urdu, developed out of the depths of the Islamicate culture that existed in India and stood as testimony to the variety of influences across the language-cultures of this vast land. The reception of the language traditions of Persian and Arabic was far from homogenous and played a formative

role in the vocabulary, syntax and semantics of each and every “modern”² Indian language. However, due to the “two nation theory”, Urdu was identified with religion and culture, and efforts were made to wipe it out from one nation, India, because it was the national language of the other, Pakistan. Yet, Urdu was practiced as a literary language both in India and in Pakistan – so there may be no “migrant” writer in Urdu literature at all, or maybe all Urdu writers are migrants, because the language is not associated with a geographical region, but with an ethos. To continue the story, migrants left their homes in what became Pakistan and came to India because they were followers of a particular religion, but spoke and wrote in every language accepted by the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution which lists the official languages of India. Did these authors contribute to the “Indian” language literature in which their works were written, or were they, because they were coming from Pakistan, migrant writers? There were also migrants who emigrated to Pakistan leaving behind their homes in India, for the same reason; they too brought the “Indian” languages in which they wrote. Were they to be considered Pakistani writers, Muslim writers or writers of the language in which they wrote, which happened to be “Indian”, i.e. recognized by the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution? What, also, of those who came back to India because they espoused a plural culture as their ethos, those who were writers in Urdu? What of those who were Muslims and were

² These are the languages recognized by the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution, and are spoken across India; the Indian states were divided into different states on the basis of these languages. At last count, this Schedule admitted 23 languages as recognised by the Indian Academy of Letters, the Sahitya Akademi, for award of literary prizes every year, and as mediums of instruction in schools in the different states as well as the languages in which the different state governments could function; each of these languages combines the vocabulary and syntax of the local Prakrits (a cluster of Middle Indo-Aryan languages that existed alongside Sanskrit), the influence of Sanskrit, and Persian, Arabic and English borrowings. Besides, they are influenced by the languages of the neighbouring states. Some examples of this complex picture include Odia and Bengali, which have completely different scripts but are mutually intelligible; the scripts of Kannada and Telugu which can be deciphered by a person who knows either one of them and are partially mutually intelligible, and the Nagari script with variations is used by both Marathi and Gujarati, though these two languages are spoken by people of neighbouring states.

automatically supposed to belong to a different nation, even if they spoke Indian languages? These questions regarding national borders, human mobility, language and culture, and above all powerplays of politics and economics, characterize many more communities across the subcontinent: the Tamil speaking people of “Buddhist” Sri Lanka and the Nepali speaking people of “Hindu” Nepal offering just two more examples. Migration in this context cannot be detached from religion, language and culture, showing that it is not just a movement across borders. “Migrant” literature does not automatically come into being through displacement; movement and “migrancy” are not interchangeable categories, and one does not necessarily relate to the other.

This complex narrative of “migration(s)” underwrites the current politics and economic legislation of the subcontinent. First, in December 2019, India tabled and passed a law granting citizenship to “illegal” immigrants belonging to particular religious communities from the neighboring South Asian nations, pointedly excluding one of those communities which happens to be the largest minority in India itself. The logic was that these communities were persecuted by that religious community which happened to be the majority in those nation states from which the “others” were to be welcomed into India. The protests against such a blatant disregard of the requirements for citizenship as laid out in the Indian Constitution began when the bill was proposed and passed in the Indian Parliament, evolving into a nationwide agitation consisting of continued sit-in strikes for three months until the onslaught of COVID-19. The pandemic brought to the forefront another kind of “migrant”, introducing class and caste into the discourse of “migration” despite the ostensible sharing of “culture”. In order to tackle the global pandemic, India locked down all forms of transport and imposed, in four phases, physical distancing for months. The large daily wage labor force, comprising “migrant” workers from different parts of the country chasing employment in large infrastructural construction to daily lunch box supply chains to small corner grocery stores, do not share food, language and customs with the people living in the areas where they go to

work – but they are all Indians. They all equally share the rights granted by the Constitution, experience the poverty imposed by capitalist development, and are subject to the caprices of the same state and ruling class. Whether in the North or South, migrant workers have no shelter in their place of work to physically distance themselves and no livelihood if physical distancing and lockdown are enforced with the brutality befitting a colonial state. This truth struck the people of my class and persuasion once the lakhs (1 lakh = 100,000) of “migrants” began to walk thousands of miles to return to their homes on Indian roads they had helped build in their states of employment, to return to the states from which they had come. Seasonal migration in search of employment, migration across state and national borders for employment, the phenomenon of migration itself – all this is a world removed from the writing in English or other global languages by those who have left home and hearth in search of opportunities of a different kind elsewhere. Their struggles and successes, their lack of or perfect fit into their host societies, and above all their writing in the language of those societies make “migrant” literature as a genre quite marginal and elitist for reasons quite opposite to those discussed by the authors here.

In such circumstances, the following questions apply to the category of “migrant” literature when contextualized within a South Asian reality: can language be reduced to nation and vice versa? What happens to the writer using a plural language like Urdu which has no single region or nation assigned to it? Is not the automatic articulation of religion and language a reductive obfuscation of the movement of people bearing languages across the world? I allude to these details simply to problematize the homogeneity of national cultures, which politicize language use, the lack of an automatic fit between language, religion and culture, and above all the insistence on non-porous mechanical boundaries between these humanly realized “forms of life” (see Wittgenstein 2009). Social sciences may eschew the fuzziness of divisions for the supposed scientific rigor that they must exhibit as “sciences”: but can they do so, and should the same be claimed for a framework with which one understands and reads literature?

This book addresses the marginalization by racist WASP society of those who came to the United States as “white” European immigrants. The experiences delineated in the literatures considered by the writers here show that these groups were marginalized on account of their religious faith, among other things, by the host society, and consequently by the academia which serves it. On the contrary, the nature of “migration” is completely different in India and South Asia in general. The experience of Indian “migrant” writers is quite alien to the lives and concerns of a majority of migrant Indians, whether they are in India or across its borders with neighboring SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries. However, “migrant” literature in global languages is happily espoused by academic establishments in India, revealing what the authors collected here have pointed out in completely different circumstances – that the academe is both a reflection and perpetration of the stratifications of society, and the power of the category of analysis comes from its ability to accommodate elitist concerns. In the Indian classroom this capacity inevitably leads to the complete assimilation and submergence of difference of the deprived majority using marginalized languages. It is debatable whether the harrowing images of “migrant” laborers trudging across the boiling countryside have brought home the real picture of “migration” to Indian academics who inhabit the middle-class upper caste niches of society. Given the orientation of Comparative Literature as a disciplinary practice, precisely this question is of direct ethical concern, rather than the angst of an English-writing best-selling author longing for the pickles of home while ensconced in rainy East London or bitterly cold Chicago.

But this “migrant literature” written in English from the “post” colonial world more often than not embodies the “universal values” taught in a World Literature classroom in American academia. As Figueira points out in the introduction to this volume and elsewhere, the openness to the world in World Literature is based on an assumption that there are some core universal human values that will, by their own magic force, iron out, conceal, paper over or simply ignore difference in the name

of contentious sullen coexistence. This is an unreal demand which skews academic engagements away from what we experience, towards what we are taught to name as a “global” experience in a “global” language, whether in India or in America. In India, additionally, the majoritarianism imposed in the name of universal values is even more pronounced when those values have no pretense of being universal but are related specifically to a political ideology based upon religion, a reality that makes a mockery of the secular constitutional frame of the Indian state. The mild castigations of Catholicism, documented by many authors in this book, seem benign compared to the canker of Hindutva³ which has eaten into the heart of contemporary Indian society which the Constitution and centuries of practice imagined as plural. The economic outsider is an “other” in an Indian society pressed by unemployment and poverty. The social outsider is still a victim of the caste system. The religious other is slowly but surely being rendered a non-citizen, a national outsider. However, none of these questions arise in the faculties of Humanities within English-driven Indian academia, as “migrant literature” registers no presence of the migrant elsewhere than in the white West. Apart from the complexities of the situation and the demands of language and cultural familiarity it makes upon the scholar, perhaps Indian “migrant” literature does not exist because its forms are not technology bound or typical, or perhaps because it is not literature but orature. It is not written by migrants who are often illiterate and have no privileges guaranteed by the state. Their “stories” are written by “others”. I am suggesting here that our terms of engagement remain those laid out by academia elsewhere rather than in India, in languages other than those in which life is lived here and categories drawn from a philosophy of binaries established in a world view and conditions different from the natural plurality that obtains not only here, but in a number of neocolonial “globalized” societies across continents. Things are not as universal as some theorists would like to believe. This is the reason I argue for a review and

³ Codified by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar in the 1930s, the term refers to the political ideology that seeks the realization of an exclusivist Hindu Nation.

reconceptualization of the categories and methods of our reading and interpretation, a task that the comparative approach, including the ethics of encountering alterity, gives us.

The writers in this book point out the redirection of the canon that is needed for what is left out of mainstream white western academia where homogenized national literary production is favored over the voice of the marginalized other. These contexts in which we practice our discipline in Indian universities, and train comparatists for the future, force upon us the realization that for any concept to be a viable way of approaching and understanding cultural production in general and literary production in particular, that concept must be located in the nesting culture in which literature itself is located. A “reading”, metaphorically and literally, is an event of encounter between the language and ethos brought by the text and those that the reader brings to the reading. This implies a necessary preparation for reading which includes intentionality as well as language. Translation is a paradigm case of such an encounter which warns us that the respect for cultural values and the professed incommensurability of cultures on more than superficial levels cannot be ignored in favor of some vision of positivist objectivity. It is not viable to impose a “one size fits all” paradigm upon language that is the medium of our intersubjectivity and of our intentional relation with the world, especially since it usually translates into imposing the universal (Euro-American) standard upon actual practices and beliefs. As Wole Soyinka (2002) puts it, it is akin to judging a man by the standards of one society when he acts by the norms of another.

In my view, it is not a redirection of the canon that is needed for otherness to be recognized and hitherto marginalized voices to be heard in the halls of academe, but questioning the idea of the canon itself, as a goal of Comparative Literature scholarship. Language cannot but bear the culture of its users – it is the context that makes the words meaningful in use, relating it to the world which it seeks to understand and the milieu from which it grows and into which it feeds. I have tried to tease out the idea of “migration” from a perspective outside of Comparative Literature, and specifically how this discipline is practiced in

the US. This perspective is not what makes my approach comparative. In fact, it stops short of doing so, shifting it to a form of what Webb calls, in her contribution to this volume, “descriptive textual anthropology”. Rather, I would urge that we think of the next step – if the category we use to understand the lives and language-works of “migrants” is not their geographical location, but their encounter with otherness and their being encountered as others that literature brings to us through language. From the dynamic between the culture that they bring, the culture that they meet, and the culture that they forge as our area of operation, emerges literature, our field of study. In order to not reduce the category of “migrant literature” to a schema or a type, we position the concept in the place where it must be used, i.e. where the human beings described by that name make their lives. The comparative approach invites us to step out of a theoretical horizon and attempt to craft an experiential existential horizon for a work in language. This is a relational exercise, which will be reduced and limited by the imposition of abstract categories to contain and direct our understanding, as the works discussed here poignantly show.

In American academia, multiculturalism rather than plurality is the established way to understand the diversity and difference of the population. This is extended by World Literature in favor of a “universal” that is nevertheless tied to the economy of capital in its language of circuits, transactions and free markets – characteristics of the “world literature” identified by Marx two centuries ago. On behalf of Comparative Literature, Étienne prescribes an international translation bureau that would open the world to everyone, breaking the circuit of the markets. In such a context, the writers in this volume question multiculturalism as the response to a heterogeneous world as conceptualized by immigration studies: they are in favor of transnationalism, and of the spawning of what is known as “hybrid” cultures, a theoretical frame identified with the “post”colonial as a category. The “hybrid”, whether in “post”colonial theory or immigration studies, assumes some originary ideal purity, which goes against the very grain of a world that is plural. I argue instead for an eschewal of both essentialist purity and fashionably

fragmented hybridity. Rather, beginning with the discourse of metanoia that Figueira so perceptively and pithily uses to describe Comparative Literature, my commitment as a comparatist is to ethics in its originary sense – as proper to a place and time. The politics of Comparative Literature contextualizes metanoia, introducing the entities of the reader reaching out to the text, and that process, I suggest, should replace the labeling of the other by placing her/him in a hierarchy and then applying prefixed standards to her/him. In a nation with 23 recognized languages that have linked histories and “local” specificities, not to take a relational view of literature would be flying in the face of reality which has proved dangerous to the very difference that pluralism seeks to preserve. Lachchman Khubchandani describes the plural milieu as characterized by: (i) fuzziness of language boundaries; (ii) fluidity in language identity; (iii) identity claims versus language communications; and (iv) complementarity of intra-group and inter-group communications. This phenomenon is identified as a case of *organic* pluralism, in contrast with the *structural* pluralism that prevails in many multilingual countries across Europe (Khubchandani 1991, 265). Therefore, the contextualization of metanoia, that Comparative Literature strives towards, in such a case can only be within an organic pluralism and not a structural plurality of languages. Across the Asian subcontinent and throughout “South Asia”, the new fashionable category of literary study, such is the reality. I do not need to belabor the point to readers of “migrant fictions” but I would still state it for the record: South Asia as a linguistic entity cannot be reduced to a collection of languages that do not respect national boundaries: rather it requires what Guillén calls “a systematic study of supranational assemblages” (Guillén, 1993, 3).

Thus, both migration and multiculturalism as the mainstream academe conceptualizes them are unworkable as analytical categories for Indian literatures. However, the institutionalized intellectual trajectory for subcontinental and especially Indian academia is to follow in the footsteps of the West. As a result, we too happily eschew the more difficult and philosophical idea of pluralism in favor of the ready-made theory of mul-

ticulturalism. A critique, that disappeared under the weight of the theoretical turn in Western Comparative Literature and emulated in India, was made by Swapan Majumdar (2003-2004), who argued, back in the early 2000s, that multiculturalism in its present avatar is no more than a diversity management strategy that functions to serve the interests of global and multinational capital. It is then to our discredit as Indian comparatists that, even after this, we did not discard or even doubt the category of multiculturalism and obediently followed the twists and turns that filtered through to us from Western academia.

From such a vantage point, I would like in conclusion to return to relationality and the acceptance of plurality that shape the comparative approach. We emphasize the existential over the epistemological focus of our discipline, since literature and the textual practices involved in it comprise our field of study. This tendency leads me to question multiculturalism as an attempt to neatly categorize, officially and in a politically correct fashion, the plurality and heterogeneity – not to mention the intractable, irreducible “otherness” – that characterizes human existence and endeavor. As a procedure and praxis, multiculturalism is posited on a particular conception of the relation between location and difference. The comparative approach, I would claim, is dynamic, and not ossified by theory, because it takes on board openness to difference within a locational context, rather than as an exclusive binary between Self and Other, Subject and Object. The comparative approach to difference is a relation between self and another entity, from the subject position which struggles (and I use this word literally, not metaphorically, for comparison is a practice, not a given theory) to prevent objectification or exoticization of the “other”. A comparative reading begins from the premise that plurality is the condition of human society which makes acts of comparison possible. However, as policy and as ideology, multiculturalism is an analytical or an interpretative category that demands the essentialization of this uncharted, context-related dynamic interaction between humans. The practice of Comparative Literature arises from and addresses the fact that as inhabitants of a plural human society we must learn to partici-

pate in conversations across difference, rather than theoretically assimilate the other(s) into categorical knowledge. In other words, an encounter with alterity is an experience which we may approach ethically, not a *modus operandi* whose results are predetermined by formulae and achieved by following the steps of a theory.

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Conclusion

Ethics of the Other

Chapter 19

S Satish Kumar

Rethinking Collectivities and Intersubjectivities:
Inenarrability, Hospitality and Migrancy

In *Jews Without Money*, his fictionalized autobiography of immigrant life in the impoverished neighborhoods of the Lower East Side of Manhattan around the turn of the twentieth century, Mike Gold (born Itzok Isaac Granich) writes: “America is so rich and fat, because it has eaten the tragedy of millions of immigrants” (Gold 2004, 41). The novel opens with the now grown-up Michael reminiscing about his childhood. It also presents vivid accounts of the various immigrant groups who over the years had come to settle in the Lower East Side. While each immigrant group brought its own unique ethnic flavor to the novel’s *mise-en-scene*, the theme that implicitly dominates the narrative is their shared predicament of migrancy and impoverishment. There are many poignant moments in the novel involving the young protagonist’s mother and their Irish and Italian Catholic neighbors. As a Hungarian Jewish immigrant to America, Michael’s mother, Katie, is, as the young protagonist tells us, always opposed to “the Italians, Irish, Germans and every other variety of Christian with whom we were surrounded” (163). She has vivid memories from her childhood of being bullied for being Jewish, and of the violent persecution Jews faced at the hands of Christians in Hungary. She tells young Michael that Jews were “hunted like rabbits”, in the “old days” (164). She recounts stories of how they were rounded up and publicly humiliated in large market-squares, forcibly fed pork or even baptized. Despite the fear and distrust for Christians that she in-

ternalized at a tender age, his mother is incapable of any real hatred and, according to her son, actually has many friends among their Irish and Italian Catholic neighbors in the tenement. Katie also feels guilty about her friendships with her Christian neighbors and often says that they are unlike the Christians she had known as a child: “these are good people” (165).

As the adult narrator reflects on childhood memories of his mother’s kindness and generosity, he realizes that her animus against Christians was really just “the outcry of a motherly soul against the boundless cruelty in life” (166). Towards the end of the chapter that the narrator dedicates exclusively to the story of his mother’s experiences in America, we are presented with a beautiful and formative moment in young Michael’s life that is occasioned by his mother’s empathy for fellow immigrant mothers living in the tenement. Their upstairs neighbors, the O’Briens, are an Irish Catholic family who like everybody else living in the tenements struggle to make ends meet. Mr. O’Brien is a truck driver who works round the clock to provide for his family. The O’Briens are known for their loud squabbles late at night, when Mr. O’Brien returns home drunk after a long day of work. Michael’s mother is often mortified by these fights. No Jewish man she knows would ever strike a woman. She even tries to gather support for having the O’Briens evicted from their apartment. However, we later find out that Mr. O’Brien works so hard because the couple are hemorrhaging money over the care of their son who has been sickly since birth, and that the economic and emotional struggles of caring for a sick child are the source of all their domestic strife. Katie’s stance towards the O’Briens changes after she learns of their child Johnnie’s prolonged illness. She starts to develop a bond with the suffering Irish Catholic mother. Speaking to her husband Herman after supper one night, Katie says: “She is a good woman, even if she is a Christian. Her husband beats her, but she is sorry for him. He is not a bad man. He is only sad” (170). Michael’s father is still disgusted by the idea of a man striking his wife. Katie, however, is deeply sympathetic. She continues to talk about how the O’Briens come from a farming community back home, just like herself. They hate city life, just like she does, and Mrs. O’Brien

used to go mushroom picking as a young girl in the woods outside her village in Ireland, just as Katie had done when she was a young girl in Hungary.

Later on, in the same chapter, Mrs. O'Brien accosts Michael and some of his friends as they play in the street outside their tenement, offering a nickel to anyone who could come up and keep her sick son company. All the boys run away in terror. Michael tells his mother of this encounter, wondering whether it was a ruse invented by the "Christian washerlady" to get him into her house where she would burn a cross on his face with a hot poker (172). Katie explains to her young son that he should go and play with the Christian boy. She explains to him that it would be a *mitzvah* to keep the sick and lonely boy company and cheer him up. She takes Michael over to the O'Briens the very next morning to play with Johnnie. Michael spends time with Johnnie. Like his mother, he feels compassion for the sickly boy. But Michael also wonders if Johnnie, who often weeps out of sadness and frustration over being too feeble to even sit up and play, is "one of the dreaded Christians" (173) he had grown up hearing about.

It is significant that Michael's own realizations about the shared plight of immigrants in America, regardless of the differences in their ethnic origins and cultures, parallels a similar realization on his mother's part. For both Katie and her son Michael, the O'Briens represent a moment of recognition that is crucial in the building of transethnic and transcultural solidarities which evolve over the course of the narrative. In *Jews Without Money* such solidarities are foundational to immigrant life and community in the New York tenements around the late 1890s into the early 1920s. The overarching premise then, for Gold, is not to present the struggles of any one specific immigrant group in America. While a majority of the narrative focuses on his parents' lives as new immigrants to America, and on his own experiences of growing up Jewish American, he also presents vignettes from the lives and experiences of the ethnically and culturally diverse demographic groups that inhabited the Manhattan's Lower East Side. The sense that emerges is one of compassion, empathy, solidarity and intersubjective under-

standing through a shared experience of migrancy. What also becomes apparent is that Michael inhabits two distinct realities while growing up: that of belonging to the immigrant communities in the tenements and that of living in American society – the America that, Michael reminisces as an adult, had grown rich and fat by consuming the tragedy of millions of immigrants.

What particularly interests me is the way Gold phrases his statement – his use of the metaphor of consumption. The immigrant Other is somehow consumed by America. African American scholar and writer bell hooks uses a similar metaphor in explaining the cultural processes of assimilation and appropriation, that effectively result in the erasure of difference. Her analysis focuses primarily on the effacement of racial and ethnic difference in mainstream American culture through processes she describes as “Eating the Other”. She contends that a desire for the Other is counterbalanced by an equally strong, if not stronger, desire for the reinscription and sustenance of the *status quo* (hooks 2006, 367). Therefore, quite literally the desire for a “taste” of the “exotic” is offset by the fear of indigestion – a desire to experience an encounter with the Other without having to give up the comfort and safety of the familiar.

Such a desire for the *status quo*, hooks argues, historically defines any engagement with difference within the American socio-cultural and political context, and, while her analysis focuses primarily on intersectional experiences of race in America, it also allows for an extension to other experiences of identity defined as being outside the “mainstream”. As noted, the immigrant experience, like any experience of difference or otherness, is often defined by the inhabiting of divided realities. These divided realities, however, are not always entirely distinct from one another. As all the essays collected in this volume demonstrate, the precarity of immigrant experience in America stems from a somewhat Du Boisian “double-consciousness”¹: a desire

¹ In his most famous work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois describes the experience of being Black in America as inhabiting a double consciousness. One is constantly aware of the fact that one is being watched or observed, to the point that one begins to adjust the outward expression of one’s being so as to not

for one's own safety which can at times only be fulfilled through not posing a threat to the safety of the majoritarian mainstream. While such a predicament of inhabiting a divided selfhood has long found comprehensive representation in the diverse and vast body of "Ethnic American" literatures, bell hooks turns her attention to "popular culture" as the arena where such a consuming of the Other is perhaps most apparent (378). Acts of "eating the Other" are driven by a constant interplay between desire and power, and such an interplay is most palpable especially in forms of visual popular media such as cinema, television, photography, etc. Being immediately commodifiable, both in terms of form and content, popular culture is simultaneously sustained by and sustains a "consumer culture" that promises "authentic" encounters with the Other. Such a promise also implicitly reinstates power in the majoritarian "mainstream" by commodifying an encounter with Otherness. One experiences the thrill of vulnerability in encountering the Other on one's own terms and through one's own choosing. One can, for example, watch a film – documentary or fictionalized – about the Rwandan genocide and encounter the pain of massacred millions, in the comfort and safety of one's living room. It is such a promise for "controlled encounter" that makes popular culture the arena of choice for the playing out of such a conversation between desire and power when it comes to the question of the Other today (376). Quite a number of the concerns and problems regarding migrancy in America examined in this volume have been taken up by popular culture and media. Therefore, before moving into a more theoretical discussion of the immigrant as Other, I would like to take a brief detour through a discussion of representations of otherness in popular culture.

In a short statement published in 2017 on the *Vox* website, the Iranian American scholar of Religious Studies Reza Aslan commented that America needed a Muslim American sitcom. Citing the example of the change in American public opinion

draw negative attention to oneself. Eventually, such a divided self begins to believe the performance of its identity to be true, and lives in constant conflict with an inner life or being that must be constantly suppressed.

regarding LGBTQI rights and particularly marriage equality, which Aslan attributed to the mainstream representations of gay people in television shows such as *Will and Grace* or *Modern Family*, he argued that positive depictions of Muslim Americans in mainstream media and popular culture would work towards remedying Islamophobia in America. In concluding, Aslan also invoked the transformative power of narratives in bridging the gap between the experiences of Muslim Americans and the mainstream American perception of Islam.

Given the core problematic of this volume, its focus on the immigrant experiences of Jews and Italians in America, and the rich body of texts discussed here, one cannot entirely disagree with Aslan's claims regarding the immanent transformative power of narratives, as one of the most accessible means of encountering the Other. However, one cannot romanticize the process of narrativization as a spontaneous outpouring of experience. A narrative, both in terms of its production and reception, is determined by a politics of desire and consumption. The marginality of Italian and Jewish American authors within the academic study of literature, as echoed by all the writers contributing to this volume, indicates that the mere existence of migrant narratives does not necessarily imply a comprehensive or sensitive engagement with the immigrant experience, as Marta Skwara has argued regarding the reception of Holocaust narratives in America. Marjanne Goozé has shown how Kluger's memoir, *Still Alive*, which she rewrote in English with an American feminist readership in mind, deviated from her German version and was received in the United States with much critical acclaim, primarily because of its structuring from an American feminist point of view. As Tatiana Petrovich Njegosh observes about the translation of Salvatore Scibona's novel *The End* into Italian, the instances of Italian American racism directed towards African Americans in the original text are conspicuously erased in its Italian translation in order to rewrite what Italians might feel is a negative assessment of Italian American racial attitudes.

Now, such erasures, appropriations, or misreadings may be attributed to the discomfort around the issue of race in gen-

eral, but they are more significantly symptomatic of a larger discomfort around engagements with difference of any kind, that “mainstream” majoritarian discourse seeks to remedy by consuming the very object of difference – the Other. Therefore, narratives that emerge out of systemic and experiential differences from the mainstream are not vulnerable only because they are at risk of being consumed or appropriated into the logic of the mainstream, but equally because they are structured by the force that majoritarian desires exert on all experience, but most significantly on those experiences that are otherwise than the mainstream. Hence, when Aslan seeks acceptance for Muslim Americans through “positive” representations in mainstream media and popular culture, one could also argue that such representations make the Other acceptable by recasting difference in terms of a palatable similarity – which was after all, as Dorothy Figueira has argued in the introduction to this volume and elsewhere, the project of American Multiculturalism. This is even more so the case, should one closely consider the examples Aslan cites in relation to the “normalization” of homosexuality and same-sex marriages in sitcoms such as *Modern Family*. The message that is often sought in such “positive” representations is the resolution of difference in similarity. For example, in the specific case of *Modern Family*, the struggles of same-sex couples and adoptive parents, though experientially unique, are essentially no different from those faced by all American households or families. There is nothing catastrophically wrong with such a message, but one cannot deny the discomfort that is also felt in the recasting of difference in terms of a safe and comfortable familiarity – in the rendering of difference in terms that are reassuringly relatable. It is quite the same way in which the young protagonist and his mother in *Jews Without Money* come to terms with their Irish Catholic neighbor. When Michael sees the frail and sickly “Catholic boy”, he cannot help but wonder whether this was “one of the dreaded Christians”. In a certain sense, the otherness of the Other must be attenuated: their radical otherness must at least in part be mitigated, in order for us to claim relationality and collectivity with them.

Hence, as long as the Other does not disturb the *status quo*, all is fine with our worlds. It is perhaps this notion that the narrator of *Jews Without Money* means to convey when he talks of America growing fat by eating the tragedies of millions of immigrants. The pride with which multiculturalism claims the ethnic and cultural diversity of contemporary America often tends to erase the painful histories of how these millions of “ethnically and culturally diverse” peoples came to constitute a “Multicultural America”: quite like the song David Schiller evokes in his piece, “Let’s All be Americans Now”. As Figueira argues in *Otherwise Occupied: Pedagogies of Alterity and the Brahminization of Theory*, the foundational flaw within an American conception of multiculturalism is the assumption of an *a priori* Americanness (Figueira 2008, 19). It is only through first establishing such a common cultural core, much like Aslan’s desire for a television comedy presenting Muslim Americans in relatable frames of Americanness, that difference can be recognized and accepted. Two years before Aslan’s statement about the role a Muslim American sitcom would play in combating American Islamophobia, the African American television producer and screenwriter, Shonda Rhimes, while accepting an award at the 2015 Human Rights Campaign Gala in Los Angeles, claimed that she was “normalizing” television and not simply diversifying it by portraying people of color and LGBTQI characters in her shows (see Williams 2015). The commonality between the two statements extends beyond the fact that they both address popular entertainment media. They are both structured by the desires that systemically determine representations of the Other and otherness within the mainstream.

I am not seeking to criticize or question the intentions or motivations behind a desire for such forms of representation. True enough, people of color and LGBTQI people inhabit the world in every capacity imaginable, professional and otherwise, and should we think of culture as a reflection of reality, then it is inevitable that they would populate such representational narrativizations of our realities. There is also, no doubt, a powerful aspirational and inspirational component to such representations. In “Shondaland”, the name Rhimes gave to

her television production company, there is nothing seemingly extraordinary about a black woman being Chief of Surgery at a major metropolitan hospital while also being at the cutting-edge of major medical research and innovation, or being a law professor at a prestigious city university while also heading an immensely successful legal practice. Again, while such representations for the most part maintain a sense of “authenticity”, there is an acknowledgement of the exceptional struggles such characters often endure to achieve the success that they do in these fictional worlds. However, the over-emphasizing (or at times under-emphasizing) of the verisimilitude of their narrative arcs and emplotments causes such characterizations to inhabit an uncomfortable space between the “normalization” that is sought through their representation and the normativist demands of mainstream culture. Hence, it is not the representation or narrativization that one is questioning – rather, a normative assimilationist paradigm that systemically structures all experience, desire, and thereby also narrativization. More importantly, what do such desires for representation from the “margins” come to mean, when in dialogue with the “mainstream”’s consuming or even consumerist curiosity towards the Other? What does such a dialogue signify in terms of broader philosophical and ethical concerns regarding engagements with alterity? Here I draw from my own work on philosophies and theories of alterity and an ethics of engagement with otherness, which I primarily base on the works of Emmanuel Levinas. In bringing such works into dialogue with contemporary realities and particularly the immigrant experience as examined in this volume, I also seek to understand how issues of marginality, as they are discussed today, reflect a larger crisis in an ethics of engagement. Particularly, in light of the immigrant experience, I seek to explore both a practice and praxis of hospitality in light of such an ethics of engagement.

The absolutely other is the Other. He and I do not form a number. The collectivity in which I say “you” or “we” is not a plural of the “I”. I, you – these are not individuals of a concept. Neither possession nor the unity of number nor the unity of concepts link me to the Stranger [*l'Étranger*], the Stranger who disturbs the being at home with oneself [*le chez soi*]. But the

Stranger also means the free one. Over him I have no *power*. He escapes my grasp by an essential dimension, even if I have him at my disposal. He is not wholly in my site. But I, who have no common concept with the Stranger, am, like him, without genus. We are the same and the other. The conjunction *and* here designates neither addition nor power of one term over the other. We shall try to show that the *relation* between the same and the other – upon which we seem to impose such extraordinary conditions – is language. (Levinas 2015, 39)

It is the presence of the Other, in this particular case the Stranger, that necessitates the contemplation of engagement. I shall begin by focusing on Levinas's definition of the Stranger, as it resonates with both the experience and narrativization of migrant alterities. The Stranger, as Levinas explains, is one over whom I have no power and thus absolutely other, a free entity. The Other is not bound by the rules that govern my own world. Yet, despite having no seemingly shared experiential basis that would constitute some form of common knowledge, the Other and I are one and the same. The juxtaposition of "the same and the other" seems incongruous at first. The absence of what Levinas calls "genus", while making collectivity impossible, also offers the possibility of relationality.

One could interpret such a notion of genus as any ordering principle that underpins the formation of a collectivity – nation, religion, gender, class etc. The absence of genus implies the absence of category, and in an encounter with the Stranger (the "absolutely other"), it points to the absolute inefficacy of categories of selfhood in the *face* of the Other. What does one mean by such an inefficacy of the Self? As Levinas states, one has no power over the Stranger: such a loss of power stems from the fact that the Other is irreducible to the paradigms through which one defines one's being or selfhood. It is through such in-depth and critical reflections on the nature of the Self and selfhood that Levinas's ethics towards alterity emerges. His earliest reflections on the nature of selfhood and the Self's engagement with alterity were framed as a response to his former mentor and teacher, Martin Heidegger.

One might argue that such a question of being towards the Other forms the core of Levinas's engagement with Heidegger, especially in works such as *Time and the Other*. In these lectures

delivered in 1946-47, Levinas developed ideas that would become foundational to his future works, particularly *Totality and Infinity* and *Otherwise than Being*. Levinas engages with the phenomenological tradition as a whole, beginning with Hegel and Husserl, leading up to his reflections on Heidegger. As Richard A. Cohen suggests in his translator's introduction to *Time and the Other*, "Levinas' phenomenology is driven by a desire for an exteriority that remains irreducibly exterior, therefore it aims for a liberation from rather than a realization of totality, unity and the self-same" (Cohen 2013, 2). It is such a desire for exteriority that does not collapse back into a total truth that "knows itself and knows itself to know all" (3).

In his first lecture in *Time and Being*, Levinas begins by directly addressing the idea of Being, as it is expressed and defined in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The Being or *Dasein* in Levinas's reading of *Being and Time* is defined in terms of solitude (Levinas 2013, 40). Any relationship with exteriority in such a schematic, he argues, can only be "transitive":

I touch an object, I see the other. But I *am* not the other. I am all alone. It is thus being in me, the fact that I exist, my *existing*, that constitutes the absolutely intransitive element, something without intentionality or relationship. One can exchange everything between beings except existing. Inasmuch as I am, I am a monad. It is by existing that I am without windows and doors, and not by some content in me that would be incommunicable. If it is incommunicable, it is because it is rooted in my being, which is what is most private in me. In this way every enlargement of my knowledge or of my means of self-expression remains without effect on my relationship with existing, the interior relationship par excellence. (42)

Levinas's primary critique of Heidegger is that his depiction of the solitary nature of Being in its relationship between beings and temporality "resists every relationship and multiplicity" (43). Now, it is important to emphasize that Levinas's criticisms are not directed at Heidegger's philosophical methodologies per se. Rather, one arrives at a solitary understanding of existence through an engagement with ontic-ontological lines of interrogating the nature of Being. For Heidegger, "*fundamental ontology*, from which alone all other ontologies can originate, must be sought in the *existential analysis of Dasein*" (Heideg-

ger 2010, 12). If Being is so configured, in solitude, resisting all multiplicity and possible relationality, how can it be towards another? However, for Levinas, even solitude, a characteristic attribute of existence, is also made possible through existing multiplicities. The move towards the ontological leads to the event he calls “hypostasis”, “wherein the existent contracts existence” (Levinas 2013, 43).

For the purposes of his own reading and analysis, Levinas renders Heidegger’s terms “Being” and “being” as “existing” and “existent”. The differentiation, without clearly defined separation, between the two categories, he argues, is what is most powerful in Heidegger’s work. It permits the dispelling of certain “equivocations of philosophy in the course of its history, where one started with existing to arrive at the existent possessing existing fully, God” (44). However, that existing is always grasped in the existent, and this also means that existence is always made meaningful in existing and, for Levinas, irreducible exteriority can only be approached in existing without existents. The question then is, how can such an existence be imagined? Being is solitary, Levinas emphasizes repeatedly in *Time and the Other*. The “amphibolous character of the ‘I’”, he states, exists “preeminently” and without materiality. As a mode of itself existing, the “I” configured in a present temporality becomes foundational in constituting a solitary self – a hypostatized temporality that is the very formation of identity in an “I” (53-55). Should one assume fixity or permanence in the emergence of such an amphibolous “I”, this process – that makes the very work of identity possible – also culminates in the existent or in the existing closing in upon itself, and therefore making the moment of identification the moment of isolation. However, Levinas departs from the existentialist view of solitude being the source of tragedy within the larger human condition:

Solitude is the very unity of the existent, the fact that there is something in existing starting from which existence occurs. The subject is alone because it is one. A solitude is necessary in order for there to be a freedom of beginning, the existent’s mastery over existing – that is, in brief, in order for there to be an existent. Solitude is thus not only a despair and an abandonment, but also a virility, a pride and sovereignty. These are traits the existentialist analysis of solitude, pursued exclusively in terms of despair,

has succeeded in effacing, making one forget all the themes of the Romantic and Byronic literature and psychology of proud, aristocratic and genial solitude. (55)

Levinas returns to a similar understanding of solitude in *Totality and Infinity* and posits it as a basis for relationality with the Other. In *Time and the Other*, however, he focuses on how such a materiality of being is first configured. Matter is the “misfortune of hypostasis”, because the materiality of being, in an existentialist schematic, is conceived in contradistinction to nothingness. As Heidegger would posit, anxiety is “the experience of nothingness”, and therefore existence is configured in contradistinction to the absence of existing or death. Here Levinas briefly reflects on the tragedy of Hamlet, and the tragedy of tragedy in such a context, he argues, is the understanding that “not to be” is perhaps impossible, and it is such an irremissibility of being that fundamentally defines existence: the impossibility of mastering the absurd even by suicide (50).

In *Time and the Other*, Levinas lays a philosophical and ideational foundation for what in later works, especially *Otherwise than Being*, becomes the basis for his ethics of engagement with alterity. As evidenced by his views on the solitude of being, he does not disagree with Heidegger’s postulations on the relationality of Being to temporality. Heidegger’s inquiry into Being, beings and the experience of Time and temporality, as he explains, is founded on the fundamentality of presence: “*il y a*”. In *Being and Time*, for example, we observe repeated returns to the Cartesian construction of *Cogito ergo sum*. However, Heidegger is primarily concerned with the assertion of existence in Descartes’s statement. The idea that “Being is the self-evident concept” is the third of three philosophical predispositions, or “prejudices”, as Heidegger identifies them, attached to any inquiry into the nature of Being, the others being the assumptions of universality and indefinability (Heidegger 2010, 3). Therefore, he suggests, any investigation into the nature of something that begins on such unqualified premises rests on an inadequately formulated question. In such a relation between existence and temporality, Heidegger begins his inquiry into the nature of Being and beings. He defines its relational condition as “existen-

tiality” (11). In separating his inquiry from questions regarding the origins of Being, Heidegger finds the meaning of *Dasein* in temporality. “Being in time”, as he defines it, is tied to presence in time (17). Later on, Heidegger would argue that what he calls *Dasein*, the “*existential*”, takes precedence over the “*essential*”, and therefore, as “a being, *Dasein* always defines itself in terms of a possibility which it *is*, and that means in the same time that it somehow understands itself in its being” (43). The temporality of *Dasein*, Levinas argues, is always the present: the time of the Self. It is within such a temporality that Being is realized in beings: it is the moment of hypostasis. The time of the Self closes in upon itself. At the very most it allows for a contemplation of past temporalities through memory, but even in memory: “The present is welded to the past, is entirely the heritage of that past: it renews nothing. It is always the same present of the same past that endures” (Levinas 2013, 48). In order to contemplate any relationality beyond the Self, one would have to think outside the temporality of the Self.

It is in moving beyond its own temporality – being in time, a relationship of the Self to itself, which forms the crux of identity, the interiority and totality of Being – that a Self can begin to desire the company of another. Such a desire for the Other, unlike the consuming desire that bell hooks defines in “Eating the Other”, does not culminate in the creation of an assimilative collectivity: rather, it is a desire for the infinitude of exteriority. Particularly in *Totality and Infinity*, Levinas returns to a fuller exploration of alterity as an irreducible exteriority contrasted with a subject-centric totality. However, interestingly enough, it is “interiority” that resists “totalization” – interiority makes possible that which is “no longer historically possible” (Levinas 2015, 55). Extending his ideas on the solitariness of being from his previous work in *Time and the Other*, Levinas identifies interiority as being bound with the “first person of the I” (57). However, the separation of interiority, as discussed in *Time and the Other*, is now seen in a positive light, because it is not the separation of solitude, but rather a “radical separation” that accords each being “its own time” (57). It is such a separation of interiority, in individualistically resisting totalization, which

in Levinas's schema is the absorption of the entity's time into a "universal" time, that makes possible the idea of "Infinity" (60). We begin to see at this point how a radical separation from the Other and the absolute alterity of the Other starts to develop an ethical lexicon for an engagement and a possible relationship with otherness.

Infinity is not the "object" of a cognition, which would be to reduce it to the measure of the gaze that contemplates. It is the desirable, that which arouses Desire, and that which is approachable by a thought. The infinite is not therefore an immense object, exceeding the horizons of apprehension and perception. It is Desire that measures the infinity of the infinite, for it is a measure through the very impossibility of measure. The inordinateness (*démesure*) measured by Desire is the *face*. Thus, we are yet again confronted by a distinction between Desire and need: desire is an aspiration that the desirable animates, and it originates from its "object": it is revelation – whereas need is a void of the Soul and proceeds from the subject. Desire, Levinas argues, can only come to a self that lacks in nothing, a self that does not need to assert its selfhood or its subjectivity upon an object in order to accord value to its existence. Only a self that is completely secure in its interiority can desire exteriority. Thus, while ethics can be seen as an exteriorly-oriented practice towards alterity, such a praxis actually begins in the Self. Selfhood does not derive from an ontic or even ontological totality, but rather through a recognition of infinity, and it is only by beginning in such a recognition that the intellect can aspire for transcendence. What, however, does the intellect seek to transcend? Its own subject or subjectivity? What does such a transcendence mean? Or conversely, is one seeking to transcend the separation between oneself and the object of one's desire?

One could posit, for example, a desire for knowledge of the Other. By gaining knowledge of the Other, one can thereby seek to reduce the alienating distance of the Other's exteriority. However, is this also not a form of mastery, an attempt to extend the horizon of one's subjectivity or subjecthood, that is ontically and ontologically defined, albeit even in good faith, to "include" the Other and thereby place a demand of com-

prehensibility upon the Other? As discussed earlier, bell hooks, speaking about race relations in America, would describe such a process of “knowing” or understanding alterity as “eating the Other”. It is an act of consuming, because in the process of being known or understood the marginal is consumed within the subjectivity of the mainstream and majoritarian. More importantly, such a bringing of the “marginal” to the “center”, even if it stems from a desire for the Other, implies either a partial or complete erasure of the very processes and conditions that define the Other as marginal in relation to a center. There is, no doubt, a desire for relationality operational within such endeavors towards understanding or knowing the Other. However, such a relationality should be achieved through a mitigation of the Other’s attributive alterity which, according to Levinas, accords the Other its “own time”. The Other is consumed within the subjectivities of the Self and thereby its temporality is erased through its very “consumption”. For Levinas, therefore, while desires for exteriority and aspirations towards transcendence may begin in a desire for knowledge of the Other, any endeavor towards knowing the Other also entails the very undoing of knowledge, in as much as the very act of knowing is tied to the subjectivity of the knowing subject – it is, in effect, a subjective epistemology in the most literal sense of the term.

As noted earlier, there is much in Levinas’s philosophical premises that guide us toward an ethics of engaging the Other. Levinas’s work resonates with not only the ways in which this present volume of essays explores issues of marginality, but more importantly with larger concerns regarding the systemic forces that shape the apprehension, experience and narrativization of the realities we inhabit today. Levinas’s concept of an ethics of being towards another, which emerges through his engagements with Heidegger’s ideas of Being and being in the world, is not unique to his work. We find similar ideas echoed, for example, in the works of Martin Buber, Paul Ricoeur, Jacques Derrida, Giorgio Agamben and, most recently, Judith Butler. As a contemporary voice in debates surrounding the purpose of humanistic education and scholarship, and the nature of intersubjectivity in a context of moral philosophy and moral

psychology, Butler especially draws on a philosophical tradition that finds representation in the works of Levinas and Buber. The radical practice of self-reflexivity in Levinas's later works, such as *Humanism of the Other*, further develops his notions of being towards the Other as being a form of responsibility inherent to inhabiting or being in the world. However, unlike these philosophers' theories of transcendence, quite a number of contemporary theorizations of otherness tend to treat alterity or marginality solely in identitarian terms that are structurally very similar to Levinas's critique of ontology.

All of us, and I include in such a collectivity all the authors who have contributed to this volume, who have in some form, either in an act of faith or out of professional exigencies, engaged with postcolonial criticism recognize the impact that works such as *Orientalism* by Edward Said or *Imagined Communities* by Benedict Anderson or "Can the Subaltern Speak?" by Gayatri Chakravory Spivak have had on global, transnational and intercultural discourses within the Humanities. Especially, in the case of *Orientalism*, regardless of whether or not we agree with Said's conclusions and historical analyses, we encounter a critique of discursive forms of "soft power", borrowing from Joseph Nye's coinage of the term in the early 1980s, that met with unparalleled acclaim (see Nye 2009). I do not discount or undermine the importance of such critiques of power in academic, political and socio-cultural contexts. I also increasingly have come to believe that the primary failure within such critiques of power is that, while they offer generative subjective epistemologies that do indeed underscore the inherent plurality of both knowledge and knowledge systems, they emphasize individual subjective experientiality, and thus run the risk of vindicating a subjecthood that, although "other" than the "mainstream", tends to close back upon itself into interiority.

The experiential breadth represented in the various and varied narrativizations of migrancy that the contributors to this volume address is, perhaps, indicative of the kind of movement towards exteriority that, I argue through my reading of Levinas, are most valuable in understanding our present realities. A movement towards exteriority is a movement towards the

infinite of the Other – it is existing without existents. It is from such a philosophical standpoint that I ascribe a partial failure to all identitarian frames of reference and analyses. I do not wish to belabor a critique of American Multiculturalism. Once again, in this volume of essays itself we have contrasting and contradicting views of the philosophy and institution of multiculturalism in the United States, both within the academy and beyond. On one hand we have more optimistic estimations of the core principles of multiculturalism that in theory embrace plurality and foster the possibilities for intersubjective understanding. Such a celebratory multiculturalism, for example, is echoed in Fred Gardaphé's essay that envisions the harmonious and mutually enriching coexistence of "high and low" culture – the Rembrandt in the museum and the wall mural in the street. This vision is placed in dialogue with a more realistic estimation of the reinscription of *status quo* through multiculturalism as a diversity management strategy in Dorothy Figueira's introduction to the volume, and in Ipshita Chanda's critique of multiculturalism as a reductionist hermeneutic frame for the study of literary texts and the experiential worlds they represent.

Particularly, an understanding of migrancy in literary expression and within the larger realities of the human condition today necessitates a transcending of self and selfhood. As I reflect on the various arguments and postulations regarding migrancy and the immigrant experience anthologized here, I cannot help but feel that the presence of the Stranger, as explained in the passage quoted from *Totality and Infinity*, has always posed the exact same question across history. Such a presence is anxiogenic precisely because the Self who defines selfhood in terms of being at home will always struggle to understand beings other than itself, who are not at home. As Chanda emphasizes through her analysis of contemporary realities in India, especially in a context of the present global COVID-19 pandemic, migrancy is seldom a matter of choice or whim. Differentiating between the predicament of migrancy and the privilege of mobility is a discernment often inaccessible to such a Self whose selfhood is defined by a sense

of being at home with/in itself. While such a discernment had always been crucially relevant in the structuring of immigrant experiences, contemporary resuscitations of nationalist ideologies make the cultivation of capacities for such considerations all the more pressing today. Contrary to imaginations of community, as defined in Anderson's critique of nationalisms, what our imaginations contend with in encountering the human predicament of migrancy, but more importantly deracination on a global scale today, is the absolute absence and impossibility of community. We are not speaking here of a migrancy defined by a cosmopolitanism that puts the onus of being at home on the migrant entity. Rather, we are negotiating the failures of every possible way in which we as a larger human collectivity have sought to understand what Spivak famously defined as the "forces of people moving about the world" (Spivak 2003, 3).

In his famous treatise on peace and hospitality, Immanuel Kant defined hospitality as the stranger's inviolable right to not be treated adversarially upon arrival in a foreign land (Kant 1917, 137). While I completely agree with such a sentiment, I cannot help but wonder if such hospitality is even possible in the worlds we inhabit today? If we conceive of collectivity as an extension of a selfhood that is defined in its security of being at home, both literally and metaphorically speaking, can such a collectivity accommodate the Stranger? Once hypostatized, can such a selfhood (individual or collective) think of its ontology as imaginary? Philosophically, but also practically speaking, these are the questions raised by the presence of the Stranger. These questions become even more urgent today because we are constantly reminded of such an ever-looming presence. The predicament of migrancy today, unlike the immigrant experiences encountered in the essays collected in this volume, is one that often does not offer itself up to our perception and cognition through accessible or consumable narrativization. Two years ago I remember reading a number, projected by the United Nations Human Rights Commission, of globally deracinated peoples. The UNHRC estimated that 70.8 million people in

the world live stateless and in deracination². This seems like a small number in the larger scheme of things, where the world's population is now estimated at over seven billion; it represents a mere one percent. However, the report also emphasized that the number is ever-growing, and at the end of 2019, was alarmingly high. As Nick Cumming-Bruce of the *New York Times* reported in June 2019, the number of people fleeing conflict in that year alone far exceeded the projection and was the highest recorded since the Second World War. Cumming-Bruce also reported that nearly eighty percent of these displaced people had been living in statelessness for over five years, and that nearly over half that number is comprised of children.

What is to become of these children? As Julia Kristeva reflects in the *Powers of Horror*, upon looking at glass cases at the museum in Auschwitz and in the midst of greying and browning old shoes that belonged to the victims of the death camps, spotting what seems like a small dull flash of color: shoes or a doll that might have belonged to a child are a sight that fills one with an inexplicable sense of “abjection” (Kristeva 1982, 4). Kristeva claims that such a sense of abjection reached its apex in “Nazi crime”, when “death” interrupted what in one’s “living universe” should supposedly save one from an acknowledgement of death that eventually kills. Kristeva notes that childhood and science, among other things, offer a sense of security in the face of death, because nothing apparently terrifies Being as much as the termination of its temporality. I reiterate my previous question: is it possible for, as Levinas states in *Totality and Infinity*, “the being at home with oneself”, to contemplate the horrors of such extreme deracination? The terror of Non-Being?

Therefore, while I do believe in the power of narratives, I also contemplate the inenarrable. To contemplate the impossibility or interruption of narrativization, one must first contend with what Judith Butler (2004) has rightly described as the shared precarity of all humankind. It is precisely within such a realm of the inenarrable that we find the predicament of migrancy located today. In order to engage with inenarrability one has to forsake

² <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html>.

the ontological security one finds in one's own narratives of individual and collective selfhood. A "humanism of the Other" demands such a recognition of shared homelessness. As Kant had also famously observed in *Perpetual Peace*, no one group has any more or any less claim over the earth than another, the only claim staked is due to prolonged habitation and not ownership (Kant 1917, 109). Practically speaking, this may not seem reasonable within contemporary national discourses that obsess over the securing of physical and metaphorical borders. However, if we truly desire to engage the alterity of migrancy, we might do well to acknowledge, as Levinas states in *Humanism of the Other*, that men "seek one another in their incondition of strangers. No one is at home. The memory of that servitude assembles humanity. The difference that gapes between ego and self, the non-coincidence of the identical, is a thorough non-indifference with regard to men" (Levinas 2003, 66).

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Chapter 20

Jenny Webb

Theoretical Fluencies

The essays in this volume reflect the high degree of nuance and complexity available within the study of Italian and Jewish American immigrant literature today. As such, these discussions are taking place within the larger questions of cultural fluencies, dialogues, and exchange: in other words, within a multicultural literary economy. And yet, simply framing this volume as a specific instantiation of multiculturalism at work in literary studies via a revitalization of Italian and Jewish American immigrant literature within the academy misses the point that such labels, broadly applied, will have (un)intended consequences. If there is anything we can take from the popularity of recent works in fields such as the social sciences, economics, and technology, it is that innovative action, however well-intentioned, occurs within a complex context of origination, and as such carries reverberations and consequences into corners and crevices that appear, for all intents and purposes, unrelated¹. The work here

¹ Numerous works in these fields have achieved significant popular success, helping non-specialists understand the issues at stake and their potential social, political, and even historical implications. See, for example, the look into the seemingly hidden structures underlying instinctual decision making in Gladwell 2005; the dissection of the economic forces at work in seemingly mundane life in Levitt – Dubner 2005; and the dive into the culture of techno-rationality via the application of the algorithm to modern life in Dormehl 2014. Each of these (representative) books is deliberately aimed at demystifying or unveiling the truth of some process, person, or thing for a popular audience, and as such represents the ways in which the contemporary reader is increasingly well equipped to deal with the complex network of social, economic, and political forces that inform the larger historical and literary questions surrounding immigrant literatures today.

produces the kind of focusing and careful reading that brings to light such consequences.

At this point, however, rather than conclude this volume by continuing to focus in an increasingly granular measure on Jewish and Italian immigrant fictions, I want instead to take a step back and reflect on the broader field of multiculturalism itself. In doing so, I am in no way diminishing the textual analyses in this volume, but rather utilizing their insights and perspectives in order to reapproach multiculturalism in a more enriched position.

As Dorothy Figueira illustrates at the beginning of this study, the real work of a multicultural approach lies in an ability to see beyond identities that have been commodified and politicized for economic profit and cultural power. The politicization of identities within the academy has its own unintended consequences: identities deemed more politically viable and culturally potent are given institutional space and resources in the name of promoting multiculturalism, but at the cost of overlooking or even purposefully excluding additional multicultural works. To be clear, as Figueira argues, this is not an argument for the continued dominance of a white cultural narrative within America, and it is not an argument that the various immigrant and multicultural identities currently engaged within the academy should be dismissed. Rather, the work of multiculturalism within the academy is invitational and inclusive – this is about making *more* room at the table, not about limiting the number of seats. Ipshita Chanda makes this point very clear in her analysis of Comparative Literature from her vantage point in South Asia.

To such an end, the invitation extended throughout the scholarship collected here in this volume is an invitation to reconsider, review, and remember the breadth of the immigrant experience within the ongoing American experiment of defining a nationhood. While distinct waves of immigrant nationalities have historically made their way to the United States, it is important to remember that these waves overlap – previous immigrant experiences are not cancelled out by the arrival of a new immigrant body. Immigrant bodies from multiple cultures weave their lives together within the American landscape, and

these multiple immigrant experiences extend generationally in an ongoing process of adaptation, mitigation, and preservation. Multiculturalism can thus be understood as an ongoing practice of recognition, and a commitment to continue to look for and see the various ethnic and cultural identities at work within a “national” body of literature. The kind of focused work gathered in this volume, then, can be understood in terms of the broader project of multicultural enrichment.

Multicultural enrichment as the commitment to recognize and listen to an overlooked identity, such as the Italian American immigrant and the Jewish American immigrant, deepens literary landscapes and cultural heritage. But multiculturalism itself is not nationally bound to any one political or cultural identity. And multicultural enrichment is likewise a project that exceeds any one individual literature. Another kind of enrichment can be productively brought into the conversation: theoretical enrichment. Just as it is important to pay attention to specific literatures and cultures within multiculturalism, it is also important to pay attention to specific contemporary theoretical developments in order to avoid additional blind spots and in order to develop the kind of theoretical fluency that supports and enhances the linguistic fluency essential to the work of Comparative Literature.

The history surrounding the relationship between critical theory and multiculturalism is complex². The history of the evolution of multiculturalism within the academy is a problematic combination of the rise of identity politics and a move toward expiatory social justice. Multiculturalism as an institutional and methodological practice rose as structural power inequalities came to light and the liberal conscience sought to address a lack of voice and representation through the institution of various

² See, for example, Gordon – Newfield 1996, Taylor 1992, and Figueira 2008, especially chapters 1-2. Note that my use of the term “critical theory” in conjunction with multiculturalism here is meant to reference a specific critical space within the field of literary studies (found primarily in the relationship between philosophy and literature, though encompassing critical theoretical work in linguistics, psychology, sociology, etc.). It is not a reference to the work of critical multiculturalism within education and pedagogy, interesting and important as it is. For more on critical multiculturalism, see May – Sleeter 2010.

individuated programs seeking to study and thus, ostensibly, help to make visible the marginalized experience. Within the academy, the 1970s saw the rise of Black Studies and Women's Studies programs; eventually they were joined by a variety of other minority studies programs that tended to focus around ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. The problem, however, endemic in such an approach, was that these programs were more often than not staffed by the very minorities studied by the programs themselves. In essence, multiculturalism served as both the political excuse and the theoretical space through which to bind or limit minority academics to *self-study*: on paper, the institution could then make claims towards diversity and inclusion, but in practice it was far too easy to then make the assumption that the implicitly proper sphere for minorities within the academy was, in fact, a space functionally set apart and delimited for an institutionalized and isolated Other (Figueira 2008, 27).

In other words, African Americans were often guided towards African American studies; Hispanics were assumed to be Hispanists; and women, of course, would be interested Women's studies. Having African Americans, Hispanics, and women in corresponding programs is in and of itself not necessarily problematic, but it is *symptomatic* of an underlying institutional racism and sexism if these programs only have their corresponding constituent parts participating, and even more problematic if, say, an African American woman interested in medieval peninsular Hispanic literature is actively encouraged to refocus her efforts in a "more appropriate" direction (107-119).

Multiculturalism's claims to engage the Other can thus be seen in terms that replicate the colonizing power structure and hegemonic authority of white culture. The academy's appropriation of multiculturalism's ethical efficacy allowed institutions to showcase ethnicity in a way that was politically expedient and that ultimately restricted and bound alterity in problematic ways. A large part of the problem in the history of multiculturalism's space within the academy centers around the demands placed upon the concept's digestibility: the academy lauded multicultural practices of diversity and inclusion, but only as

they fit within the pre-existent palate (see Figueira 2008, 19-20, 23). The interplay of identity politics and the business of academia resulted in a multiculturalism in which linguistic facility and cultural understanding were problematically exclusionary and isolating: to participate in multiculturalism's conversations, the scholar must, above all, work in English and perform a critique applicable to the Euro-American worldview. As multiculturalism made room for additional discursive programs focused around the Other, such as Postcolonial Studies and World Literature, these linguistic and cultural expectations remained in place. In this formulation, the scholar shifts from one seeking understanding to one seeking to be understood; the scholar becomes the critic speaking from the apparently ethical space of advocacy for the Other, but occupies that space without the contextualizing capacitation of linguistic and cultural fluency.

As multiculturalism pivots around the centering of the Other, the notion of alterity itself has been formulated, appropriated, and politically configured to various degrees by different political, cultural, and institutional bodies, including the academy. Within the academy, the Other (both the Other as a body, and the Other as a body of work) can be seen or promoted as a sign of inclusion, but such action and labeling is problematic as it structurally duplicates the inside/outside (colonial) relationship and inherently creates blind spots within the population and the curriculum. These blind spots emerge when the institution is satisfied with a gesture of inclusion and excuses itself from continued engagement with (unending) Others.

In order to avoid the institutional replication of a politics of exclusion, the field of multiculturalism requires an outward orientation (one that actively seeks multiplicity) rather than an inward one, that inscribes multiplicity within individual identity politics. Multiculturalism's claims to engage the Other can be seen, as earlier stated, in terms that replicate an imperialist design, and the academy's appropriation of multiculturalism's ethical efficacy allows the institution to showcase ethnicity in ways that are politically expedient, though problematic: a gesture of inclusion simultaneously confines the object of inclusion,

denying it access to the center by underscoring its own peripheral status as that which requires an invitation to participate. What is needed is a form of multicultural engagement that avoids replicating the very power structure it seeks to disrupt. Thus, I argue that multiculturalism structurally requires some sort of theoretical engagement or depth for, without it, it is reduced to mere descriptive textual anthropology. And yet, it is essential to avoid the lionization of one particular theoretical approach as some sort of messianic intervention that will rewrite the past and save the future, as such an approach reinstates the problematically dichotomous colonial power structure. Part of the work here involves the recognition that theoretical fluency is not a finite project: additional voices will always remain and engagement with these voices must be ongoing in order to be engagement rather than appropriation. Likewise, theoretical fluency therefore cannot be a solitary endeavor: one scholar striving towards theoretical fluency will inevitably fall short, hindered by her own human limitations, blind spots, and the constraints of reality. However, a community committed to the work of theoretical fluency despite any one individual's inability to realize this goal has the potential – through the combined effort of listening, understanding, and generosity – to produce the necessary ongoing influx of theoretical fluencies. To *work* within multiculturalism requires a non-exclusive theoretical openness and curiosity: it requires multiplicity. To avoid reinscription within the dichotomous English/Or hegemony, structurally foundational to the contemporary World Literature approach, the multicultural critic must consciously cultivate a concrete, pragmatic praxis: multiple linguistic and theoretical fluencies. One way to cultivate such theoretical fluency consists in rethinking the relationship between critical theory and multiculturalism.

Multiple linguistic fluency is a fairly transparent concept, but how do we cultivate multiple theoretical fluencies? First, I would argue, we actively seek out and engage theoretical work in adjacent disciplines. There are, of course, numerous recent theorists whose work in the past ten to twenty years could be profitably applied to the question of immigrant literatures, mul-

ticulturalism, and the role of the immigrant experience (or the lack thereof) as it has been translated (or transformed) through the emergence of World Literature³.

Alain Badiou's work on the problems of an ethics of cultural relativism (his response/reading of Levinas in *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, 2001) and his formulation of an ethics of truth processes (discrete, contextualized truths emerge via the fidelity of multiple subjects to an event) in *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (2003), for example, are relatively recent. While Giorgio Agamben's work on sovereignty and biopolitics in the *Homo Sacer* project (2017) are broadly applicable to the power networks underlying multicultural literature, more specifically the concept of (im)potentiality developed in his secularizing study of the problem of messianism in *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans* (2005) could work especially well with the questions of assimilation and individualization at work in immigrant literatures⁴. The recent developments in speculative realism, particularly in the field of object-oriented ontology, also could provide a distinctive theoretical lens, one that would encourage an ontological flattening and focus on materiality that would certainly bring different questions and considerations to the fore. For example, Levi Bryant's onticology in *The Democracy of Objects* (2011), with its insistence on the relationship between difference and being, could prove productive (see also Bryant 2014), as could Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology; or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (2012), which investigates object relationships via production and translation. Other contemporary philosophical works such as Catherine Malabou's rigorous engagement with the field of neuroscience, in works such as *What Should We*

³ A word of caution: the following examples are presented in the spirit of engagement and exploration, and are not in any way meant to represent the complexity and nuance of the philosophical and theoretical work under discussion. I am not suggesting that a body of work can be boiled down to a banal talking point and arbitrarily packaged and "applied" as one would a bandage. The following survey is instead offered in the hope of sparking curiosity regarding lines of contemporary theoretical work and encouraging cross-disciplinary dialogue and engagement.

⁴ For a work that engages multiple concepts of identity (via literary texts), see Agamben 2011.

Do with Our Brain? (2008) and *The Ontology of the Accident: An Essay on Destructive Plasticity* (2012), gives philosophical traction to the concept of plasticity, and her more recent work with Judith Butler on Hegel (Malabou – Butler 2011) produces a provocative reading of dispossession crossing both body and property – both flexible theoretical constructs applicable to the immigrant economy of gain and loss⁵. Adjacent disciplines producing thoughtful, theoretically-engaged work need not be confined strictly to philosophy: Adam S. Miller's efforts in theology and the philosophy of religion provide, in my opinion, a more useful treatment of Bruno Latour's work on immanent, material relations via Miller's *Speculative Grace: Bruno Latour and Object Oriented Theology* (2013) and one that lends itself to a reading of the material networks and relational forces that emerge within immigrant literatures. Likewise, John Durham Peters's seminal work in media studies, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (2015), engages the material and immaterial landscapes of a broadly-conceived, mediatically-meshed world in order to take up questions of self-knowledge and human identity from a perspective informed by contemporary technologies, providing a philosophical bridge into questions of immigrant digital literatures and revealing the mediatic effects on immigrant writing.

While there are, of course, numerous other contemporary philosophers and theorists whose work is worth bringing into consideration, the point I am trying to make with the above survey is not comprehensiveness, but rather to argue for the continued need within literary studies generally, and work on immigrant and multicultural texts particularly, to continue to engage with the ongoing contemporary theoretical discourses. These works have all appeared (either originally, or in translation) within the last twenty years, and make up a significant space within the contemporary critical and philosophical thought that informs the political, economic, cultural, and institutional no-

⁵ Malabou's work developed initially out of her critique of the Derridean grammatological project (Derrida supervised her doctorate); given the continued influence Derrida's work exerts within the humanities broadly, engagement with Malabou provides a productive way to continue thinking such questions.

tions of power, relations, and identity. At this particular point, I want to take a somewhat closer look at the work of one specific thinker in order to provide a more engaged example. The theoretical work that I will address is that of Manuel DeLanda, a scholar known for his work on assemblage theory, which he explicitly develops as a clarifying reading of Deleuze⁶.

DeLanda's basic argument is that bodies – material bodies as well as social bodies (institutions, organizations, communities, etc.) – can be effectively investigated by understanding their composition as assemblages. For DeLanda, the whole is always real, but it is always also added to its constituent parts (as an additional part) rather than existing as a separate type of entity that completely encompasses (and consumes) its parts. Consider, for example, water. While water can be conceptualized as a particular, individual whole (I can have a discrete cup of water, for example), water is simultaneously the emergence of a particular relationship between hydrogen and oxygen. The gasses, as agents, interact, and, in their relationship, form a new whole whose own properties – in this case, being a liquid – emerge from the assemblage of hydrogen and oxygen. If we let the water evaporate, the water as water itself ceases to exist: its constituent parts return to their own individual, gaseous properties. Thus, the assemblage of liquid water arising from the interaction of its constituent parts – here hydrogen and oxygen – is both *irreducible* to those parts as well as *immanent* to those same parts in that the existence of water cannot emerge outside this particular relationship between hydrogen and oxygen.

Seeing a body as an assemblage, then, helps us to focus on the ways the various components relate to each other in the assemblage while still maintaining space for additional relations/functions that are exterior to the assemblage. Applied, assemblage theory thus helps to avoid the dangers of both micro-reductionism and macro-reductionism – the whole is not the com-

⁶ Several recent volumes by DeLanda are of potential interest here (they are all relatively slim, and quite clearly written – DeLanda wants to consciously avoid the potential pitfalls of stylistic obscurantism): *Assemblage Theory* (2016), *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (2005) and *A New Philosophy of Society: Assemblage Theory and Social Complexity* (2006) all come to mind.

plete sum of its parts, but rather the dynamic relations of the parts produce a contextualized/situated assemblage (what we tend to think of as the whole). An assemblage is both irreducible to its parts and immanent to its parts – both belong to the same ontological plane. Working within this theoretical framework provides the ability to scale (to zoom both in and out) material and social bodies by treating them as historically individuated entities that, as agents, intersect and influence other likewise constructed agents⁷.

This overview is, of course, grossly incomplete – DeLanda constructs his argument quite carefully, addressing the various potential problems and pitfalls as well as providing a host of practical, real-world examples that effectively concretize complex concepts. Studying DeLanda's work on assemblage theory provides a contemporary theoretical voice whose work is grounded in more familiar discussions (Deleuze, speculative realism, etc.) and, it is my belief, produces productive perspectives on the various complex social and material forces that create and inform immigrant communities and their literatures. In my view, it is essential that any literary theory, in order to continue to participate in the broader contemporary theoretical discourse, finds a way to clearly see and work with the underlying materialities that inform its existence. There is a difficult balance here: if we read immigrant literature materially, we must do so in ways that account for cultural relationships and their interplay as actual ontological features of the literature, but we need to do this without relying on some sort of overarching transcendental version of an idealized "immigrant literature". The immigrant experience, as well as the multicultural experience, is materially specific – an actual body interacting with other actualized bodies – and as such, theoretical gestures that seek to homogenize (or commodify) the immigrant/multicultural experience ultimately erase the underlying material reality of said experience in ways that permit its continued political appropriation. DeLanda's assemblage theory, with its ability to

⁷ I thank Adam S. Miller for our conversations on the topic of DeLanda in 2016, which introduced me to DeLanda's work.

continually strip down the coded networks of abstract politics in order to expose relational potential, could permit a relatively neutral method through which to examine the individual materialities at work in these texts.

The complex relations of immigrant literature and, particularly, its influence on the conceptualization of post-World War II Comparative Literature require theoretical frameworks that are able to simultaneously hold multiple components apart as discrete individuals while allowing for said components to forge overlapping relationships, all while scaling up to the community and down to the individual author. Assemblage theory provides a useful tool in such discussions. But it is by no means the only theoretical tool through which to engage multiculturalism. In order for multiculturalism to be relevant rather than harmful, it requires, in addition to the linguistic facility and cultural familiarity advocated by many in this volume, theoretical flexibility. It is not enough to simply acknowledge difference. To frame multicultural experiences as interchangeable parts within the greater whole of “Multicultural Experience” avoids engagement with the particular and instead simply replicates culture, language, and even theory through colonizing acts of substitution.

We need critical practices and theoretical models that allow for both the particularized individuality of the Other as well as the political and cultural denuding of the critic herself. When criticism becomes about the individual critic, the power structures of identity politics are put back in play. How do we do this? I do not have a clear answer, but I do want to suggest that one way forward is, ironically enough, through that of individual ethics. If I am interested in the voice of the Other, am I committed enough to do the hard work of listening? Does that commitment extend to learning another language? Three? Four? To accepting the fact that no matter how many languages I learn, there will inevitably be another? Does my ethical commitment here extend to spending time with a culture that is not my own? To try to appreciate that culture on its own terms? To learn a history in which I am the oppressor? Am I willing to work through theoretical approaches that lie outside my area of expertise? To read people who make me uncomfortable? Whose

words I do not understand? Whose work may make me feel inadequate? If the ethical demands of the Other are not excessive, are not beyond my every capacity, then it may be that they are not, in actuality, ethical.

Theoretical fluency illuminates the blind spots in our own readings and the assumptions we unthinkingly hold when we engage a text. It provides multiple modes of thought with which to approach a text, and thus can bring to the fore readings and interpretations we otherwise would not have seen. The tension of working in the field of literature today is one of insufficiency: we cannot read everything, and yet that foundational insufficiency does not negate our responsibility to our texts to keep bringing them into dialogue with contemporary thought. Literature and theory are mutually beneficial, drawing from each other in order to think the realities and speculative fantasies of the human condition. Various immigrant voices have been effectively drawn out and engaged throughout this volume, and in doing so blind spots within our understanding of American immigrant fiction have been illuminated and reshaped within that light. Likewise, my thoughts here are meant to give a similarly productive invitation to work against the replication of colonial power structures within our work on multicultural literatures through the cultivation of theoretical fluencies. An admittedly insufficient effort, but one I hope provides a way to continue cultivating this important and necessary conversation.

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