"HEART OF MY RACE:" QUESTIONS OF IDENTITY IN SICILIAN/AMERICAN WRITINGS

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ABSTRACT

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Throughout the 1900s, the sense of a distinct *sicilianità*—or Sicilian-ness—manifested itself in writings by Italian authors such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Leonardo Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, and Andrea Camilleri, among others. Interestingly, a parallel phenomenon has emerged in the United States in the broader field of Italian-American literature. While attempting to redefine the concept of Americanness and expand the canon of American literature so that it embraces articulations of ethnic identities, many Sicilian-American writers have turned their works into literary manifestations of their Sicilian Americanness, or, as I have called it, *sicilianamericanità*.

In this study, I try to answer questions such as: Why and how have some Sicilian-American authors fashioned their Italian-American identity in regional terms? How did a sense of *sicilianità* develop in the US and turn into *sicilianamericanità*? And how did the above-mentioned phenomenon materialize in Italian-American literature? My

examination focused on Jerre Mangione's memoirs, Rose Romano's poetry, and Ben Morreale's novels. While Mangione consistently capitalized on his regional ethnic identity mainly in order to correct some of the most unfavorable prejudices, and especially those originating from Mafia, Rose Romano writes poetry and prose dealing with issues of regional self-ascription which overlaps with contestations of traditional gender roles, heterosexual scripts, and racial categorizations. Ben Morreale's *sicilianamericanità* takes on intertextual aspects, creating a closely-knit net of relations with the Sicilian tradition in Italian literature.

Many Sicilian-American writers, just like their Sicilian counterparts, have come to see their regional ethnic identity as a source of inspiration for the growth of a distinctive literary tradition. This study has been conceived as an initial small step towards a process of inquiry and exploration of the common ground between Italian and Italian-American literatures. Such critical endeavors and international cooperation between both fields of literary studies could bring forth a better understanding of the cultures, and also strengthen in significant ways the status of both literatures within *and* outside their respective national critical communities.

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Chap. 1

Sicily, *Sicilianità*, and *Sicilianamericanità*

> Cinquant'anni di vita unitaria sono stati in gran parte dedicati dai nostri uomini politici a creare l'apparenza di una uniformità *italiana*: le regioni avrebbero dovuto sparire dalla nazione, i dialetti nella lingua letteraria. La Sicilia è la regione che ha più *attivamente* resistito a questa manomissione della storia e della libertà. La Sicilia ha dimostrato in numerose occasioni di vivere una vita a carattere nazionale proprio, più che regionale. ... La verità è che la Sicilia conserva una sua indipendenza spirituale... [1]
>
> Antonio Gramsci, "Letteratura e Vita Nazionale" (1916)

> Io non ho che te
> cuore della mia razza. [2]
>
> Salvatore Quasimodo, "Isola," Oboe Sommerso (1932)

In 1970, Sicilian intellectual/writer Leonardo Sciascia commented on Sicily being the chief object of Sicilian writers' literary endeavors:

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[1] "For the past fifty years, our politicians have tried to create the appearance of a uniform *Italian* nation: regions should have disappeared from the country, and their dialects from the literary language. Sicily is the region which has most *actively* resisted this tampering with history and freedom. Sicily has shown on numerous occasions to have a national, more than regional character of its own. ... The truth is that Sicily preserves its own spiritual independence ..." (my translation).

[2] "I only have you / heart of my race" (my translation).

> Certo è, comunque, che la cultura siciliana ha avuto sempre come materia e come oggetto la Sicilia: non senza particolarismo e grettezza, qualche volta; ma più spesso studiando e rappresentando la realtà siciliana e la 'sicilianità' (la 'sicilitudine' dice uno scrittore siciliano d'avanguardia) con una forza, un vigore, una compiutezza che arrivano all'intelligenza e al destino dell'umanità tutta. [3] (La Corda Pazza 17)

Especially throughout the 1900s, in fact, the sense of a distinct *sicilianità*—or Sicilian-ness—manifested itself in a corpus of texts, which, although subsumed under the broader context of Italian literature, have distinguished themselves as examples of an exquisitely regional literary experience. Writers such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Maria Messina, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Vitaliano Brancati, and more recently, the aforementioned Leonardo Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, and Andrea Camilleri, just to mention a few, have all contributed, in different ways and through different genres, to the formation of this literary phenomenon.[4] Despite its "local color"—which takes various forms, ranging from a constant preoccupation with all things Sicilian, to realistic depictions of regional characters and situations, through an always recognizable linguistic experimentalism—Sicilian literature has managed to cross the Strait of Messina as well as the Alps, and become part and parcel of the world's literary heritage.

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[3] "It is certain, however, that Sicilian culture has always had Sicily as its topic and the object of its attention: at times, with particularism and narrow-mindedness; more often, though, by studying and representing the reality of Sicily and 'Sicilian-ness' (or, as a Sicilian avant-garde poet calls it, 'sicilitudine') with such strength, vigor, and completeness that speak to the intelligence and destiny of the whole humanity" (my translation).

[4] As a reference, I will point to a few works that have dealt with Sicilian literature, starting with the section that critic Natalino Sapegno dedicated to it in the pioneering history of Italian literature subdivided by regions co-edited with Walter Binni in 1968: Storia Letteraria delle Regioni d'Italia. A good history of 20th-century Sicilian literature is Giorgio Santangelo's Letteratura in Sicilia da Federico II a Pirandello. Besides Sciascia and Guglielmino's Narratori di Sicilia, other valuable anthologies are Novecento Siciliano, edited by Gaetano Caponeto et al.; Cento Sicilie: Testimonianze per un Ritratto, edited by Gesualdo Bufalino and Nunzio Zago; and Narratori Siciliani del Secondo Dopoguerra, edited by Sarah Zappulla Muscarà.

Interestingly enough, a parallel phenomenon seems to have emerged in the United States in the broader field of Italian/American literature.[5] Writers such as Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, Ben Morreale, Tony Ardizzone, Nat Scammacca, Vincenzo Ancona, Gioia Timpanelli, and others, regardless of generational considerations, or inter-regional filiations, have, in their works, taken imaginative possession of the island and its *weltanschauung*, and have fashioned their Italian/American identity in regional terms. Some of these authors' works specifically focus on their experience as Sicilian Americans and lay out a recognizable set of Sicilian cultural markers; these authors have produced Sicilian/American literature. In 2004, this literary phenomenon materialized itself in the form of an anthology edited by Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis, entitled Sweet Lemons: Writing with a Sicilian Accent. De Santis and Fazio's collection features selected literary pieces by Sicilian, Sicilian/American and Sicilian/Canadian authors as well as, the editors warn, "a small number of non-Sicilian writers" (16). If anything, the editors' wide-ranging selection testifies to the unifying role that Sicilian-ness plays for Sicilians of the diaspora. The existence of a distinctive Sicilian/American literature has been also acknowledged by critic Fred Gardaphé in a recent essay, tellingly titled "Re-inventing Sicily in Italian American Writing and Film." In it, Gardaphé writes:

> Sicily, the setting for many famous myths such as those we know from Homer's The Odyssey, has proven to be equally fertile soil for the mythology of Italian Americans ... the offspring of Sicilian immigrants have created an eruption of writing that testifies to the power that the island has on the artists it creates. (55)

[5] I am borrowing the use of the slash instead of the hyphen from Anthony Tamburri's To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate. Recognizing that the hyphen is an "ideologically charged marker," the critic suggests to incline it by forty-five degrees, so that a phrase such as Italian-American would rather be written as Italian/American. Rather than simply reducing the physical distance between mainstream and minority cultures at the level of the sentence, Tamburri's slash signifies a strong awareness of the historical roots and sociological consequences of that distance, and a willingness to challenge it.

In the light of what has been said above, it would not be too farfetched to suggest that at the core of these two literary phenomena, which take place on two opposite ends of an ocean, there is a similar process of identity construction. In both the Italian and the US contexts, writers of Sicilian descent have clung to the island's shores, and have defined their identity in regional terms.

To be sure, Sicilian-ness as it surfaces in Italian literature has received plenty of critical attention as the subject of seemingly endless analyses and unresolved controversies in Italy. Therefore, my interest shifts to a terrain that as yet lacks a thorough investigation. My study aims to analyze the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity in some Italian/American texts. It is especially driven by questions such as: How has Sicily, either lived or imagined, shaped the identity of some Sicilian/American authors? How did a sense of *sicilianità*—or Sicilian-ness—develop in the US, and turn into *sicilianamericanità*—or Sicilian Americanness? How did second-, third-, and fourth-generation Sicilians articulate and/or re-invent a bond with the island? And, finally, how did the above-mentioned phenomena materialize in the literature written by American authors of Sicilian descent? My examination focuses on the different, and at times conflicting, acts of representation, self-representation, and writing strategies of some Sicilian/American authors—namely, Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, and Ben Morreale—that allow for a multi-faceted reading of the Sicilian/American Self(ves). In this sense, its point is not to affirm some sort of pre-packaged Sicilian/American literary consciousness to which one should refer in order to be considered "representative," let alone "authentic" Sicilian/American writer. Rather, I examine how each author has, in

his/her text(s), elaborated an all-too-personal notion of ethnic identity within the context of Italian/American literature at large.

Rather than a sterile and vainglorious celebration of local particularities, my study is meant as part of a larger project whose underlying assumption is that US ethnic literature would profit from a dialogue with the literatures of the countries of origins with which, as I will show later, it shares many characteristics. It is my conviction that, as far as Italian/American literature is concerned, an investigation of its connections with Italian literature promises to be as significant and legitimate a task as the study of ethnicity within the greater domain of American literature. Practitioners of Italian literary studies, on the other hand, would derive further inspiration from the realization that the same forces that lead to a more insightful reading of American literature could make a crucial contribution to our understanding of Italian literature as well. The polarization of US identities along ethnic lines, in fact, engenders a process of re-contextualization of the concept of Americanness, while at the same time questioning a myopic understanding of Italian-ness. In other words, Italian literature would certainly benefit from critical perspectives on ethnic identification found in diasporic writings. Seen from this perspective, Italian/American literature as a whole would be *twice* a literature of belonging: if on the one hand, in fact, it naturally belongs to the greater domain of US American Literature, on the other, it should rightfully aspire to be included in a systematic way in the curricula of North-American and/or Italian studies in Italy because in matters of themes, symbols, and problematics, Italian/American literature *is* germane to Italian literature. This study ultimately suggests that Italianists and Italian Americanists should engage in a critical dialogue between their respective fields of study

with the conviction that they would both profit from reciprocal and shared literary lessons.

1. Relations of Representation: the "Southern-Matrix" Politics

The valorization of regional diversity within the boundaries of Italian/American literature should also be read as an alignment to the improved commitment in ethnic critical discourses to endogenous decentering projects. In matters of political and literary strategies adopted by ethnic groups, in fact, especially the theoretical reduction of the inherently complex fabric of a people to a monolithic version of ethnic identity has recently come under scrutiny, and increased attention has been paid to intraethnic cultural discontinuities. In the mid-1990s, cultural critic Stuart Hall was in the position to diagnose a paradigm-shift in progress in black cultural politics from an initial "struggle over the relations of representation to a politics of representation itself" ("New Ethnicities" 165). According to Hall, this shift also finally marked "'the end of innocence,' or the end of the innocent notion of the essential black subject" (165-66). Far from being limited to the agenda of black studies in England, this new discursive circuit, Hall claimed, could also be identified in the wider field of ethnic studies, where the new representational strategy would take the form of "[a] new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities" (169). Hall's diagnosis was accurate: the notion of "ethnicity" conceived as an essentialistically constructed category has been increasingly contested from the *inside*; a shift in discursive configurations has occurred, and more and more attention has been paid by critics to the groups' internal differences that had been

previously glossed over. These developments suggest that the search for definitional strategies is far from over. At this point, it is critical for ethnic groups to find new speaking positions for their members, and to re-visit their agendas accordingly, as well as for their critical communities to bring new and diverse perspectives to bear on the field of multicultural literary studies.

In the field of Italian Americana, a critical ethnic discourse in literature came to being conspicuously later than most of the larger—number-wise—groups that constitute the cultural tapestry of the US. The earliest statement about the literary achievements of Italians in the United States appeared in 1949, with the posthumous publication of Olga Peragallo's notes for her dissertation Italian-American Authors and Their Contribution To American Literature. It took exactly twenty-five years before another attempt to promote the cause of Italian/American writers went to press; in 1974, Rose Basile Green published The Italian-American Novel: a Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures. Without underestimating the pioneering roles played by Peragallo and Basile Green, whose works, however potentially groundbreaking, were still at an embryonic stage,[6] we can point to another Italian/American woman's work, that is Helen Barolini's 1985 anthology The Dream Book, and to Fred Gardaphé's 1996 book-length study Italian Signs, American Streets as the beginnings of a consistent critical effort towards the detection of Italian signs in American literature written by authors of Italian descent. The 1990s, especially, were the decade that witnessed a booming critical production in the

[6] Peragallo's work was more bibliographical than critical. Rose Basile Green, on the other hand, sees the "evolution of Italian American fiction" through a sociological paradigm, mostly based on generational considerations. It, therefore, follows a rather schematic, and questionable, classification of Italian/American works according to the different degrees of assimilation to mainstream America they supposedly represent.

field of Italian/American Studies, thanks to the works of scholars such as the above-mentioned Barolini and Gardaphé, Robert Viscusi, Mary Jo Bona, Edvige Giunta, and Anthony Tamburri just to mention a few. [7] However, as far as debates over the last decades are concerned, "the question of *access* to the rights to representation" (Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities" 164) has generally been resolved by the Italian/American critical community by deploying what I call the "Southern-Matrix" politics, that is to say a strategy of representation which has tended to overlook Italian regional specificities as they surface in Italian/American literature.

In the field of literary criticism, in fact, Italian/American ethnic identity has generally been constructed discursively on the historical consideration that its culture was shaped by immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno*, an area that extends south and east of Rome, and which included the Abruzzi region, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, and the two islands of Sicily and Sardinia.[8] Therefore, from the incontrovertible datum of

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[7] For reasons of space, I will here briefly mention only the most significant endeavors of the past decade, starting with the birth of journals such as Voices in Italian Americana, The Italian American Review, and Italian Americana, all devoted to the diffusion of Italian/American creative and critical reflections; the publication of now-indispensable anthologies such as From The Margin: Writings in Italian Americana (1991) edited by Anthony Tamburri, Paolo Giordano, and Fred Gardaphé, and Beyond the Margin: Readings in Italian Americana (1998), edited by Tamburri and Giordano; la bella figura, 1988-1992: a choice, edited by Rose Romano (1992); The Voices We Carry: Recent Italian-American Women's Fiction, edited by Mary Jo Bona (1994); and Writing With An Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Anthology, edited by Edvige Giunta (1999); finally, the publication of heterogeneous critical studies such as Fred Gardaphé's 1996 Italian Signs, American Streets, his 2004 Leaving Little Italy, and the 2006 From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinities (2006); Anthony Tamburri's pamphlet To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate: The Italian/American Writer: an *Other* American (1991) and his more recent book A Semiotic of Ethnicity (1998), Helen Barolini's 1999 Chiaroscuro: Essays of Identity, Mary Jo Bona's 1999 Claiming a Tradition, the first book-length study of writings by Italian-American women, Edvige Giunta's Writing With An Accent: Contemporary Italian American Women Authors (2002), as well as several founding essays by Robert Viscusi, only recently collected in Buried Caesars, and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing (2006).

[8] According to Italian scholar Ercole Sori, the Italian *Mezzogiorno* sent a full 90% of its emigrants to the other side of the ocean, mainly to Brazil, Argentina, and the U.S. (L'Emigrazione Italiana dall'Unità alla II Guerra Mondiale 29). The debate around the numbers of immigration from different regions of Italy is still open. The figures are controversial, and vary according to different sources, which in their turn, take or fail

the Southern matrix of Italian America, most critical discourses have derived the legitimacy of focusing on the experience of the forsaken South as a whole, thus equating the socio-cultural background of an immigrant peasant of the area immediately south of Rome, with that of a fisherman of the south-west coast of Sicily. The common denominator for such different experiences is the status of second-class citizenship from which most of the immigrants from southern Italy tried to flee *en masse*. Also, by and large, the economic and political disenfranchisement of *meridionali*—or Southern Italians—continued in the United States, where the immigrant status *per se* has historically forbidden a fuller political and economic participation. This has led to the tendency in Italian/American studies to couch its literature in terms of the social and economic marginality that *meridionali* experienced both in the Old Country and in the New World, and to conceive of and represent them as a homogenous and coherent category of historically-muted subjects.

Admittedly, since Unification in 1861, the Italian southern masses as a whole have experienced various degrees of difficulty in accessing the decisional spheres of institutional power. The Kingdom of Italy was, in fact, constituted under the rule of the Piedmontese House of the Savoy at a time when the North of Italy was trying to keep pace with the European "first comers" of the industrialization process, i.e., England, France, and Germany. In this historical juncture, the *Mezzogiorno,* with a traditional economy based on the agrarian system, could hardly participate in the hegemonic project

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to take into consideration important factors such as the quality of immigration—i.e., temporary vs. permanent—and the role that illegal immigration plays in the figures, just to mention a few that could alter the numbers sensibly. As for the regions that contributed the greatest numbers to the Italian diaspora, suffice it to keep in mind historian Piero Bevilacqua's definition of the emigration from Campania, Sicily, and Calabria in terms of a "demographic earthquake" (Breve Storia dell'Italia Meridionale 37).

of new-born Italy. At the beginning of the 20th century, Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci provided a most lucid analysis of the problem of economic inequalities in relation to geographic distribution in Italy and of the subaltern condition of Italian Southern peasant masses. In his all-too-famous 1926 article "Alcuni Temi sulla Questione Meridionale,"[9] the economic developmental paradigm that Italy had chosen to adopt at the moment of Unification generated what he notoriously baptized as the "Southern Question." Six years earlier, in 1920, in a series of considerations on the effects of the First World War on the dramatically unequal economic growth of Italy, on behalf of the Turin Communists, Gramsci lamented on the pages of the Communist daily publication L'Ordine Nuovo:

> Si parla spesso di mancanza di iniziativa nei meridionali. È un'accusa ingiusta. Il fatto è che il capitale va a trovare sempre le forme più sicure e più redditizie di impiego .... Dove esiste già una fabbrica, questa continua a svilupparsi per il risparmio .... Così ... tutta la potenzialità produttiva nazionale rivolta all'industria della guerra, si circoscrive sempre più nel Piemonte, nella Lombardia, nell'Emilia, nella Liguria e fa illanguidire quel poco di vita che esisteva nelle regioni del Sud. (La Questione Meridionale 56-7)[10]

According to Gramsci, the *Mezzogiorno* had been reduced to a reserve of natural resources for the industrial North, to a supply of cheap labor, and, finally, to a market for the North's finished products in order to serve the needs of the capitalistic system. Early

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[9] "Alcuni Temi sulla Questione Meridionale" is an incomplete writing which would be better described as a series of scattered thoughts around the "Southern Question" that Gramsci articulated in 1926. The text was published for the first time in its incomplete form in 1930 in the communist journal "Stato Operaio," published in Paris under the supervision of Palmiro Togliatti.

[10] "People often talk about the lack of initiative in the southerners. It is an unjust accusation. The fact is that capital always seeks the most secure and fruitful forms of employment ... Where the factory already exists, it continues to develop through savings ... So ...all the national productive potentiality engaged in the war industry clusters more and more in Piedmont, Lombardy, Emilia and Liguria thus further weakening that little life that existed in the Southern regions" (tr. in Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Piccone's History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci 102-103).

enough in history, then, Southern Italy gave its share to what, after the famous 1980 Brandt-Report,[11] has become a commonplace expression that turns the South from a geographical location into a metaphor of a slow advancement, and economic backwardness: the "World's South."[12] With the programmatic recrimination "[l]a borghesia settentrionale ha soggiogato l'Italia meridionale e le isole e le ha ridotte a colonie di sfruttamento" (73),[13] Gramsci managed to bridge the chronological gap between the Italian post-Unification and the postcolonial struggles in other parts of the world.

Gramsci's *ante-litteram* use of postcolonial arguments in the context of the Italian nation is not farfetched. In his 1997 Bound by Distance, Pasquale Verdicchio engages Gayatri Spivak's exclusionary practice in her all-too-famous essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which the Marxist/feminist/deconstructionist critic borrows Gramsci's

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[11] Known especially for his anti-Nazi zeal, and recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1971, Willy Brandt was for a long time the chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. In the late 1970s, he was appointed Chairman of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, also known as the "North-South Commission." In 1980, a report was issued on the relationships between industrialized and developing countries—the Brandt-Report--, which demanded from the "North" of the world to bring about changes so as to favor the economic development of the world's "South."

[12] Of special interest for the purpose of this study is The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno: Essays in Comparative History, a volume edited by Enrico Dal Lago, and Rick Halpern, which hosts the proceedings from the 1999 Commonwealth Fund Conference in American History on a comparison between the two Souths of the title. In it, Peter Kolchin's essay "The American South in Comparative Perspective" makes the point about the general commonalities between the two Souths as follows: "One of the most obvious bases on which to compare the two Souths is that of regional backwardness, together with a host of concomitant cultural characteristics. Both the American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno have been perceived—by contemporaries and subsequent scholars—as suffering from underdevelopment, poverty and an absence of 'modernization' in comparison with the two 'Norths'. Less urbanized, less industrialized, and less educated, they were supposedly marked by 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' values, seigneurialism, a hierarchical social structure, conservatism, a propensity for violence, an exaltation of honour; and also by poverty, poor health, intellectual isolation and massive emigration. Of course, such generalization require (and have received) qualifications in terms of specific time and place, but in both Italy and the USA, the two Souths appeared as laggards which even in the second half of the twentieth century were desperately trying to 'catch up' to national norms" (45).

[13] "The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies" (trans. by Pasquale Verdicchio, The Southern Question 16).

concept of subalternity, while purposely limiting it to so-called Third World countries. Verdicchio writes:

> Through her interpretation of Gramsci's concerns with the subaltern as 'an allegory of reading taken from or prefiguring an international division of labor' and by way of having stated elsewhere that 'it's hard for us to think of a genuine subaltern in the First World', Spivak imposes a cultural homogeneity on all First World nations and subtracts the possibility of subaltern expression within those boundaries. (63)

Verdicchio's polemics against Spivak is particularly apropos for a study that wants to disrupt any romance about a cohesive Italian nation. Publicized as a "national" venture, the Italian Unification was, in fact, supported by an imperial ideology that even resorted to the disturbingly familiar rhetoric of a civilizing enterprise—one which, incidentally, continues to inform current neo-imperialist projects. Cultural and social sophistication were especially deemed to be lacking in the rural South, while the Northern stock, eager to embrace the industrial model set up by the most powerful European countries, was assumed to prove a superior civilization. In Italy, the Manichean polarization that characterizes any imperialist project—based on dichotomies such as rationality vs. irrationality, modernity vs. backwardness, progress vs. obsolescence, and the like—followed territorial criteria, where the category "good Italians" was occupied by Northerners, while Southerners were "bad Italians." At the beginning of last century, Italian socialist Camillo Prampolini condensed the unhappy situation with a sentence that has become a common expression in Italy: "L'Italia si divide in nordici e sudici."[14]

[14] The punch-line of the sentence is the verbal pun that plays on the Italian adjective "Southerner." Loosely translated, Prampolini's expression would sound more or less like this: "Italy is divided between Northerners and Filthy-Ones."

The anthropological doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority that saw the light at the end of the 19th century also played a distinct role in the construction of the relations between the North and the South of Italy. Through the works of "social positivists" such as criminologist Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo, Giuseppe Sergi, and Enrico Ferri, the racial theory of the social and moral inferiority of the *meridionali* vis-à-vis Northerners became the dominant mode of understanding the problem of the "two Italies." [15] An example of this pernicious line of thought can be found in Niceforo's 1901 study Italiani del Nord, Italiani del Sud, in which the anthropologist/criminologist insisted on the difference between Northerners, belonging to the Germanic or Aryan race, and Southerners, representatives of the Mediterranean or African stock. According to Niceforo, racial differences accounted for the more advanced "psychology" of Northerners, which bred a superior civilization in terms of economy, industrialization, education, social structure, political behavior, and the like. The main characteristic of the "psychology" of "dark Mediterraneans," on the other hand, was the "enorme eccitabilità del proprio io" (116),[16] which was responsible for all kinds of genetic ills, such as a general impossibility for Southerners to concentrate on a task, a lack of volubility and practicality, an excess of banal emotions and of imagination, impulsivity, and so on and so forth (118-120).[17] It is almost unnecessary to point out how apt these theories were in absolving those who enjoyed the privilege of decisional power from any responsibility as to the unequal economic development of the country.

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[15] For a good selection of the most influent theses of the Italian Positivistic School on the inferiority of Southerners vis-à-vis Northerners, see Vito Teti's 1993 anthology La Razza Maledetta: Origini del Pregiudizio Antimeridionale.

[16] "Enormous excitability of their own Self" (my translation).

[17] It must be said, though, that unlike most of his colleagues, Niceforo was ready to grant Southerners an unexpected and rather flattering quality: "l'intelligenza pronta e rapida" (120) However, this concession was more self-apologetic than anything else, being that Niceforo was himself Sicilian.

In his "Alcuni Temi," Antonio Gramsci tackled not only with the economic aspects of the Unification, but also with the ideological propaganda that served as a justification for the exploitation of Southern masses. In a tone that calls to mind, once again, the later postcolonial contestations, Gramsci thus deplored the Northern hegemonic ideology:

> È noto quale ideologia sia stata diffusa in forma capillare dai propagandisti della borghesia nelle masse del Settentrione: il Mezzogiorno è la palla di piombo che impedisce più rapidi progressi allo sviluppo civile dell'Italia; i meridionali sono biologicamente degli esseri inferiori, dei semibarbari o dei barbari completi, per destino naturale; se il Mezzogiorno è arretrato, la colpa non è del sistema capitalistico o di qualsivoglia altra causa storica, ma della natura che ha fatto i meridionali poltroni, incapaci, criminali, barbari, temperando questa sorte matrigna con la esplosione puramente individuale di grandi geni, che sono come le solitarie palme in un arido e sterile deserto. [18] (La Questione Meridionale 135-36)

Despite the opposition of some of the most influential scholars of the time, [19] the pseudo-scientific discourses elaborated by "social Darwinists" managed to take roots in Italy, and are at the origins of a series of prejudices and divisions that continue to trouble the country today.[20]

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[18] "It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in innumerable ways by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie among the masses of the North: the South is the ball and chain that prevents a more rapid progress in the civil development of Italy; Southerners are biologically inferior beings, either semi-barbarians or out and out barbarians by natural destiny; if the South is underdeveloped it is not the fault of the capitalist system, or any other historical cause, but of the nature that has made Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric. This harsh fate has been only slightly tempered by the purely individual explosion of a few great geniuses, like isolated palms in an arid and sterile desert" (tr. by Pasquale Verdicchio, The Southern Question 20).

[19] Among those who most vehemently criticized the school of Social Positivism, a special mention deserves Napoleone Colajanni who, in his 1906 "Latini e Anglosassoni. Razze Inferiori e Razze Superiori," dubbed the racial assumptions as an "anthropological novel." Rather than improbable genetic reasons, Colajanni looked at political economy in order to explain the poverty of the South. See Teti's La Razza Maledetta.

[20] What must be emphasized is that, despite the provisional title given to his incomplete article, Gramsci never thought of the "Southern Question" as a problem circumscribed to a given geographical area for which that area only was responsible. Rather, he read it as the ineludible effect, on a national level, of the economic inequalities generated by the capitalistic system. Indeed, the solution proposed by Gramsci to the "Southern Question" was of national importance, accomplished through the constitution of a *Comintern*, or

In light of the considerations presented above, then, the "Southern-Matrix" politics adopted by the Italian/American critical community for interpreting its culture and literature as representative of a monolithic Southern bloc could be a rather plausible representational model. The "Southern-Matrix" politics has also proven to be a successful initial strategy for the construction of ethnic difference in the US multicultural context. What Hall in "New Ethnicities" calls the ethnic "struggle over the relations of representation," in fact, took place mostly through an early uncritical deployment of essentialistic strategies by critics of ethnic literature(s). In this context, Italian Americans too, to use Spivak's expression, made "a strategic use of positivist essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest" (The Spivak Reader 214). In other words, for scholars to promote the cause of Americans of Italian descent in literature, it was felt to be necessary to present a cohesive front in its most simplified version, that is to say different enough to be recognized as "Italian," but not too much differentiated so as not to confuse mainstream America. Critic Robert Viscusi notes that:

> America called on immigrants from Italy to think of themselves as Italians. Although these immigrants knew that their passports identified them this way, they often lacked a sense of themselves as actors in the national drama of the *patria* they had left behind. ... They were Abruzzesi, Napoletani, Siciliani. But Americans did not recognize these categories. Furthermore, the vastness of America's presence and of its own ideological claims simply flattened the pretenses of an Italian region. (Buried Caesars 19)

However, an ethnic discourse which is grounded in a homogenizing strategy that replicates the mainstream Anglo-American propaganda it claims to oppose is, instead,

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a "governo operaio e contadino" made up of Northern proletarian and Southern peasant masses in an anti-capitalistic perspective. But the "revolutionary bloc" theorized by Gramsci to counter the "historic bloc" made up by southern agrarian elites and northern industrialists never attained in Italy the much-hoped political weight. The proletarian revolution never took place, and the "Southern Question" is still awaiting an answer.

complicitous with it, for it overlooks the fundamental reality that, to paraphrase Gayatri Spivak's warning, the Italian/American "colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" ("Can the Subaltern" 79). The acknowledgment of the inherent variety that characterizes the Italian/American community could, to paraphrase Hall, mark "the end of the innocent notion of the essential Southern subject," and represent the first step towards a "new politics of representation" for Italian/American Studies.

Granted, many Italian/American scholars will acknowledge that the field needs to do away with any essentialistic definitional strategy that, at best, limits the possibilities born out of a sense of the concrete political, social, and cultural discontinuities of the country of departure. As Edvige Giunta points out in her recent study of Italian/American women's literature Writing with an Accent, "[w]hat must be emphasized is that Italian Americans do not constitute a homogenous group in any way—in terms of regional origin, social and economic status, or political perspective" (23). But as for the first variable of Giunta's insightful commentary, the "Southern-Matrix" politics has been deployed by glossing over the group's internal differences, and continues to be played on an evasive silence about the Italian regional predicament. Within the realm of discourses, if one wants to be exact about the social and cultural experiences of Italian Americans, and be therefore more attentive to their subjective position, one cannot fail to recognize the persistence of regional allegiances in the historical and cultural experience of Italians in Italy and in the States. In short, Italian/American studies would profit from what Stuart Hall, in "New Ethnicities," calls a "new politics of representation," that is "a new cultural politics which engages rather than suppresses [regional] difference and which depends, in part, on the cultural construction of new ethnic identities" (169).

In the field of sociological studies, Donna Gabaccia points out that a politics that constructs *meridionali* as a homogenous class of subaltern subjects is, at best, a scholarly construction. In her 1999 essay "Two Great Migrations: American and Italian Southerners in Comparative Perspective," Gabaccia writes:

> No matter how defined, the southern provinces of Italy shared no common language. They did not acknowledge the leadership of a single regional elite, and neither did traditional ties of marriage, common agricultural practices, arise or commercial exchange bind the southern provinces into a single region. Regional identities meant *siciliani* and *napolitani*, not *meridionali.* (221)

Gabaccia's sociological analysis disproves the assumption that Southern Italian culture is a monolithic culture, and thus proves a valid point of departure for a "new politics of representation" in the Italian/American literary field. In fact, if most of the immigrants who came to the States were not likely to root their consciousness in a *meridionale* framework, let alone to consider themselves as 'national' subjects, their children and grandchildren were likely to draw from them mostly regional features to work on in their writings. And the autobiographical humus from which much Italian/American literature draws inspiration, to some extent, guarantees for the regional character of the latter. Therefore, if on the one hand Italian/American literature at large purports to speak for the experience of all Italians in the United States, on the other many of its subtexts are exemplary sites of cultural particularities in a regional sense. Oftentimes, in fact, the literature's finest portraits of Italian/American life are highly localized, and depend on the author's knowledge and description of regional particularities on the historical, social, cultural, and linguistic planes. A focus on the regional facets of Italian/American literature at large would serve the purpose of an intraethnic decentering project. At its

basis, in fact, lies the problematization of the totalizing notion of *italianità*, or Italian-ness as it has been conceived and articulated so far in the field of Italian/American studies.[21]

With an eye to the future of Italian/American studies, a study that proposes an appreciation of the regional aspects of its literature could represent an alignment with the latest representational strategies in ethnic discourse. It could, in fact, mark a shift from a politics focused on relations of representation to a "new politics of representation" itself. At the same time, attention to regional signs would also provide new ways of reading Italian/American texts, and enable us to contextualize more accurately and responsibly the literature written by authors of Italian descent. And finally, as it is the case of this study, an awareness of the multi-faceted background of the culture of departure will also open a venue for an intriguing dialogue with the literature(s) of the country of origins.

[21] In the Introduction to From the Margin, the editors Tamburri, Giordano and Gardaphé include in the notion of *italianità* "all of these things that lead young Italian Americans back to their real and mythical images of the land, the way of life, the values, and the cultural trappings of their ancestors" (6). Some critics, however, most notably Pasquale Verdicchio in his 1997 Bound By Distance, and Justin Vitiello in his essay "What I Wanted to Ask and Say"--have been especially adamant in refusing to adopt the term because of its association with the Fascist rhetoric of an essential Italian nation "destined" to rule the world, or part of it.

2. *Sicilianità* e *Sicilianamericanità*

In the regional mosaics of Italians in the United States, it seems that the children and grandchildren of Sicilian immigrants in the United States have especially distinguished themselves in the sense of a regional self-ascription, by informing their works with a sense of *sicilianamericanità*, or Sicilian Americanness. *Sicilianamericanità* is a self-ascriptive enterprise born out of discursive practices of both the Old Country and the New World. In this sense, it is not the answer, but a response to, on the one hand, what in Gramscian terms has come to be known as the Italian "Southern Question," and, on the other, the American ethnic one. A theorization of *sicilianamericanità,* then, can only be carried out appropriately if one contextualizes both terms that make up the adjectival phrase Sicilian/American. The underlying assumption of this study is that at the core of *sicilianamericanità* as it surfaces in Italian/American literature, there is a process of identity construction similar to that of *sicilianità* –or Sicilian-ness—in Italian literature. Writers of Sicilian descent on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean have, in fact, defined their identity in regional terms. For the purpose of a sociological, as well as literary understanding of these phenomena, it is essential to investigate the historical causes that push Sicilians and Sicilian Americans to rewrite their position in both the Italian and the US contexts in "exceptionalistic" nuances. No discussion of *sicilianità* or *sicilianamericanità* is possible without an evaluation of the facts that led to what

continues to be to this day a massive diaspora from the Mediterranean island to "El Norte" of Italy, Europe, and the American continents. A review of "what happened" aims to provide an interpretive framework that is as historical as it is literary; for the authors I will examine in this study *deliberately* engage in regional literary production, thus negotiating their Sicilian/American subjectivity within and against the larger social narratives of both the Italian and the American national identities.

Without indulging too much in the history of the island, we could take as a point of departure of our analysis the opening sentence of Moses I. Finley's History of Ancient Sicily, in which the historian condensed its life as follows: "Sicily is an island. Few islands have played a greater, or even comparable, role in history over long spans of time, and no other which is so small" (1).[22] Lest there be any confusion about Finley's statement, it should be clarified that the "great" historical role that Finley ascribes to Sicily has always been that of an important overseas possession for many "great" colonizing countries and empires. Due to it being an island of modest size, and by consequence, easy prey to conquest, and because of its geographical location, embedded as it is between Europe and Africa,[23] and, on the east-west axis, between Western Europe and western Asia, Sicily has historically been the strategic epicenter of colonizing enterprises.[24] A "crossroad of civilizations" is the most common euphemistic definition

[22] Moses Finley and Denis Mack Smith's monumental A History of Sicily (1968) in three volumes is, to this day, the most extensive and accredited history of Sicily in circulation both in the academic and non-academic worlds.

[23] Less than two miles divide Sicily from mainland Italy, and therefore, from Europe, while the north-easternmost point of Africa is about one-hundred miles away from Sicily's south-west coast.

[24] Incidentally, Sicily continues to play this role in different forms. The website of the Sigonella NATO base, in the province of Catania, thus greets its visitors: "Welcome to U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella, the logistical 'Hub of the Med!' Due to its crucial and strategic location in the center of the Mediterranean, NASSIG plays a vital role in supporting joint and combined operations in the European theater, and

for the island's past, for there met the interests of the Greeks, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, and the Spaniards, to mention just the most influential civilizations in chronological order. There was no standard form of colonization to which Sicily was subjected; it was, for example, a settler colony under the Greek rule, the first province of the Roman Empire, and an administrative colony under the Bourbons. With the 1861 Unification of Italy, Sicily was finally "annexed" to the Kingdom of Italy, thus becoming the southernmost part of the new-born country. To some, time-wise, Italy is only the most recent off-shore colonizing power to conquer the island, so much so that in the aftermath of WWII, almost 100 years after the Unification, Sicilian nationalists coded their dissent to the Italian state in the language of a postcolonial struggle.[25] In short, armed conquest, expropriation of land, extortion of tributes, unsuccessful negotiations, military occupation, and, most recently, *miseria*—or starvation—, emigration, and high unemployment rates have played an almost uninterrupted role in the historical development of Sicily. If anything, then, the "great"

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provides the shortest logistics route from CONUS to Southwest Asia and the Indian Ocean. The importance of the base is reflected in our mission: to provide logistics and fleet support to U.S. military and NATO forces throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East..." (http://www.sicily.navy.mil/nassig/welcome.htm).

[25] From 1943 till 1946, the traditional autonomist aspirations in Sicily found a spokesperson in Andrea Finocchiaro Aprile, leader of the MIS (Movement for the Independence of Sicily), a movement which reclaimed the separation of the island from Italy, and the constitution of an autonomous republican government. Finocchiaro-Aprile thus spoke of the relation between Sicily and Italy: "Noi vogliamo che la nostra Isola faccia da sè, noi vogliamo che dal nuovo assetto internazionale la Sicilia esca come Stato sovrano e indipendente. L'unità italiana è stata deleteria per noi. Noi nulla avemmo dall' unità che non fossero l'abbandono, lo sfruttamento e il disprezzo. Quando si ripete che la Sicilia non fu considerata che come una colonia, si dice meno della verità. ... Vi fu un momento che Addis Abeba ebbe più cure e più interessamento da parte del governo italiano di quello che non avevano mai avuto nessuna delle nostre città e nessuno dei nostri territori: fummo insomma anche meno di una colonia" (qtd. in Claudia Petraccone, Federalismo e Autonomia 236-37). Finocchiaro-Aprile's "nationalist" project survives today in the anachronistic, and provincial claims of some scattered movements in Sicily of non-significant political weight.

role in history Sicily has constantly played has been that of an overseas territory ruled by more or less distant political centres.[26]

According to some, most notably Sicilian intellectual/writer Leonardo Sciascia, the Sicilian history of colonial suffering and exploitation, coupled with its geographical insularity—read, isolation—has engendered a particular process of identity construction, as well as recognizable cognitive and behavioral patterns in the population. In his 1970 La Corda Pazza: Scrittori e Cose della Sicilia, Sciascia speculated on the perpetual insecurity of the Sicilian people, which, according to him, was the primary legacy of a history of colonization:

> Si può dunque dire che l'insicurezza è la componente primaria della storia siciliana; e condiziona il comportamento, il modo di essere, la visione della vita--paura, apprensione, diffidenza, chiuse passioni, incapacità di stabilire rapporti al di fuori degli affetti, violenza, pessimismo, fatalismo—della collettività e dei singoli.[27] (13)

This "historical fear," Sciascia maintained, has readily turned into an "existential fear," which, sociologically, manifests itself in

> una tendenza all'isolamento, alla separazione, degli individui, dei gruppi, delle comunità—e dell'intera regione. E ad un certo punto l'insicurezza, la paura, si rovesciano nell'illusione che una siffatta insularità, con tutti i condizionamenti, le remore e le regole che ne discendono, costituisca privilegio e forza là dove negli effetti, nella esperienza, è condizione di vulnerabilità e debolezza: e ne sorge una specie di alienazione, di follia,

[26] To be sure, the history of Sicily is not one of consistently supine acceptance of foreign rule. More or less organized movements of resistance to domination—such as the Sicilian Vespri, the Sicilian Fasci, and, more recently, the separatist movement and *brigantaggi* --, however episodic, should be read as instances of assertion of an all-too-local identity, as well as strong statements for political self-determination enacted by the local population through spontaneous insurgence.

[27] "One can safely say that insecurity is the primary component of Sicilian history, and it affects the behavior, the way of being, the take on life--fear, apprehension, distrust, closed passions, inability to establish relationships outside of the private sphere, violence, pessimism, fatalism--, of both the collectivity and single individuals" (my translation).

> che sul piano della psicologia e del costume produce atteggiamenti di presunzione, di fierezza, di arroganza. [28] (14)

Borrowing the expression from Sicilian avant-garde poet and painter Crescenzio Cane, who, in turn, took inspiration from Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor's concept of *négritude*, Sciascia baptized the sum of these attitudes *sicilitudine*.[29]

Sciascia's *sicilitudine* is, to date, the most influential discourse on Sicilian-ness. No discussion about Sicily and Sicilians is possible today without questioning or concurring with Sciascia's speculations. Sicilian-ness became, in his articulation, a "way of being," the inescapable condition of a population marked by "a history of defeats."[30] With the concept of *sicilitudine*, Sciascia seemed to have pinned down the essence of Sicilians and unraveled their complex nature within the operative framework of cultural anthropology. *Sicilitudine*, in fact, proved a most valuable "grand narrative" for both Sicilians and non-Sicilians. The former, in fact, could finally resort to a well-articulated discourse to explain, in essentialistic terms, their "nature," while non-Sicilians might find in *sicilitudine* possible answers to all riddles and conundra that the island posed—and continues to pose—to mainland Italy.

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[28] "A tendency to isolation, separation of individuals, groups, and communities-- and, finally, of the entire region. At a certain point, insecurity and fear have reverted to the illusion that such insularity, with all the conditionings, qualms, and rules that originate from it, constitutes a privilege, as well as a source of strength, when, in truth, it engenders vulnerability and weakness. Hence a sort of alienation, of madness, which, on the plane of psychology and customs, ignite attitudes of presumptuousness, haughtiness, and arrogance" (my translation).

[29] On a linguistic note, the expression was a rather felicitous choice since in Italian it rhymes with "solitudine"--or solitude—which hints to the isolation of the island.

[30] Before the publication of La Corda Pazza, Sciascia had dealt with the concept of *sicilitudine* in the preface of an anthology of Sicilian writers edited in 1967with Salvatore Guglielmino: Narratori di Sicilia. He further developed the topic in the book/interview La Sicilia Come Metafora (1989), which contains the all-too-famous chapter "Come si può essere siciliani?," and in Pirandello e la Sicilia, in which he insists on the "historical insecurity" of Sicilians to justify the "Sicilian ways."

Much to Sciascia's own dismay, a most complex discourse like *sicilitudine* has been readily misinterpreted by many, and too often reduced to a learned source of trite stereotypes. *Sicilitudine* has, in fact, become such a commonplace discourse in Italy that in an article published in 2000 in the Italian national newspaper La Repubblica, journalist Matteo Di Gesù invoked a sabbatical year during which all discussions about the Sicilian identity would be suspended, because "alla difficoltà di esserlo, siciliano, si somma sovente una certa insofferenza a sentirselo ribadire così spesso" ("Cent'Anni di Sicilitudine" 23).[31] Di Gesù was thus expressing his resentment towards the inescapability of a situation in which the matter-of-fact avowal "I'm (a) Sicilian" is automatically turned into a programmatic statement by those who utter it, and/or into an interpretive tool in the hands of the non-Sicilian interlocutor.

Sicilitudine is certainly a controversial discourse. However debatable its content, a focus on the context out of which it came promises much more intriguing and constructive speculations. In his 1994 Culture and Imperialism, Edward Said suggested that

> in Post-colonial national states, the liabilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit, négritude, or Islam are clear: they have much to do not only with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, but also with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt to be necessary. (16)

Sicilitudine is certainly more than a form of self-exoticism with little conceptual merit. In the light of Sicily's colonial past, *sicilitudine* too, along with many other essentialistic projects, has much to do with "the embattled imperial contexts out of which [it] came and

[31] "To the difficulty of being Sicilian, one should also add a certain intolerance that grows from being reminded of that so often" (my translation).

in which [it was] felt to be necessary." In other words, *sicilitudine* would be more accurately interpreted as one articulation of the arsenal of complexes that Sicilians have been developing in a colonial environment. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon's 1952 analysis of the "black men of the Antilles" in Black Skin, White Masks, Sciascia too shifted his interest from the political and economic effects of colonialism in Sicily, to a psychoanalytic analysis of its consequences on the population. He was, then, performing the role of a postcolonial intellectual who diagnosed a colonial malaise in his people, and pointed to its most obvious symptoms. Critic Roberto Dainotto offers a similar perspective in his article "The Importance of Being Sicilian," in which he focuses on the role that Sciascia assigned to Sicily as a subaltern cultural model. According to Dainotto, in fact, "through sicilitudine, Sciascia had then set the background to begin his work as a critic of the hegemonic, colonial Culture to which Sicily had been subjected" (211). Otherwise said, by creating the notion of *sicilitudine*, Sciascia was bringing to the political fore again, after Gramsci, the "Southern question," only this time from a Sicilian *and* postcolonial angle in essentialistic terms.

Sicilitudine as a postcolonial discourse heavily informs the literature of some Sicilian authors. Since Unification in 1861, the works of Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Maria Messina, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Vitaliano Brancati, Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, Andrea Camilleri, and others, have all been dealing with questions of *sicilitudine* in different historical and social contexts. The contestatory potential of Sicilian literature lies in its refusal of the forced process of "Northernization"—read, homogenization according to Northern-Italian standards—on a cultural and literary level. The above mentioned authors have managed to enter the Italian literary panorama

without camouflaging, and, more often than not, by capitalizing on their distinctly Sicilian voice. In the Introduction to the anthology Narratori di Sicilia, Sciascia and Salvatore Guglielmino thus lay out the effects that *sicilitudine* has had on Sicilian-born writers:

> Da Palmieri a Quasimodo ogni siciliano che fugge dalla Sicilia sarà nella condizione dell'esule, di colui cioè che *non può tornare*. E in alcuni questa condizione si fa dolente memoria, nostalgia, mito; in altri la volontà di dimenticare, insofferenza, rancore. Tutti comunque hanno sentito drammaticamente e vissuto con dolorosa ansietà il fatto di essere siciliani, di far parte di una realtà, di un *modo di essere*, di una condizione umana diversa ed irreversibile; e più o meno consapevolmente, più o meno liberamente, non si sono sottratti alla 'condanna' di rappresentare quella realtà, quel *modo di essere*, quella condizione umana. [32] (10, emphasis in the text)

According to the two critics, Sicily is, by choice, and more often necessity, the favorite topic of the literary production of Sicilian writers, who have engaged in a particular and recognizable process of identity construction in literature.

Interestingly enough, the 1967 edition of the abovementioned anthology featured, among others, Sicilian/American writer Jerre Mangione. Born in Rochester, New York, Mangione is the only "narrator of Sicily" in the anthology who was not born on the island, and whose piece—part of his 1943 memoir Mount Allegro—is originally in a language other than Italian, and, therefore, appears in translation. The editors must have obviously believed that Sicilian-ness as a "way of being" had shaped the identity of some Sicilian Americans too, and that even a second-generation American writer of Sicilian

[32] "From Palmieri to Quasimodo, every Sicilian who flees from Sicily will be in the condition of the exile, of the man who cannot return. In some, this condition changes into painful memory, nostalgia, or some mixture of the two: in others, in the desire to forget, to intolerance, rancour. However, all have experienced dramatically, or with aching anxiety, the fact of being Sicilian, of belonging to a reality, to a manner of being, to a human condition which is distinct and unrepeatable" (Trans. by Joseph Farrell Leonardo Sciascia 36).

descent such as Mangione could not help but experience "with aching anxiety, the fact of being Sicilian [American], of belonging to a reality, to a manner of being, to a human condition which is distinct and unrepeatable."

Unfortunately, Mangione was removed from the second edition of the same anthology, published in 1991; this editorial choice was made by Salvatore Guglielmino, who decided to eliminate Mangione as well as some other narrators of Sicily featured in the first edition in order to make space for Sciascia (who was, by the time of the second publication of the anthology, dead), Elio Vittorini, Vitaliano Brancati, and others who had been left out in 1967. However, this later deletion does not alter Sciascia's initial choice; by including American-born writer of Sicilian descent Jerre Mangione in his Narratori di Sicilia, Sciascia was validating the existence of *sicilianamericanità* in Italian/American literature.

In the works of authors such as Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, Ben Morreale, Tony Ardizzone, Nat Scammacca, Vincenzo Ancona, Gioia Timpanelli, and others, Sicily plays a special role, as the land where some aspects of these authors' convictions, idiosyncrasies, personal bents, beliefs, and the like, find justifications. These writers' connection to the island is as much an emotional attachment as it is an aesthetic or inspirational source, with Sicily as the favorite topic of their literary endeavors. This is not just for those who, like poet Vincenzo Ancona, were born there, or like novelist Ben Morreale, spent a significant part of their life in Sicily, but also for those who visited it later in their life, like Jerre Mangione and Rose Romano; and even for those who have never been there, such as Tony Ardizzone. Some of these authors, notably Mangione and

Scammacca, even initiated a sort of "Back to Sicily" movement, often getting involved in the civil struggles of the island against the two related phenomena of political and economic stagnation, and the Mafia. For all these novelists, short-story writers, and poets, Sicily and the Sicilian landscape constitute not just the raw material for their works, but a sort of phantasmic presence with which they need to cope. However, if on the one hand, there is, on the part of all these authors, an emotional identification with the island of their origins, on the other there is a re-invention of it from the perspective of being an ethnic in the United States. These first-, second-, and third-generation Sicilian Americans have articulated their identity in regional terms, while simultaneously inscribing themselves in the US multicultural mosaic. These authors have managed to carve out a space in the Italian/American literary panorama by transferring onto paper their *sicilianamericanità*.

Sicilianamericanità in Italian/American literature takes very disparate forms. It can range from "naturalistic" depictions of local traditions, values, and folklore of Sicilians to more "lyrical" representations, which tend towards the (re)evocation, through memory or imagination, of the Sicilian socio-cultural dimension both in Sicily and in the Sicilian communities in the United States. The ethnic component of *sicilianamericanità* may allow some authors to achieve a critical distance from any essentialistic discourse on identity, while for others the American Self may be perceived as a threat to cultural disintegration, and therefore reinforce the already-pronounced tendency to insularity. While some Sicilian/American authors succeed in questioning or inverting the values generally ascribed to Sicilians, others uncritically deploy essentialistic strategies and resort to the most stereotypical modes of representation and self-representation. Finally,

sicilianamericanità is, to some authors, a sort of "political program," through which they position themselves as commentators and critics of both the Italian and the US American power structures. This one strategic aspect of *sicilianamericanità* is especially helpful, for it allows readers to re-consider Sicilian culture as a complex system within the Italian context, as well as Italian culture at large as a multiform ethnic alternative to Anglo-American mainstream culture.

Sicilianamericanità in literature also becomes a strategic position that allows for a contestation of any elitist view of Italian literature. Scholars of Italian literature, both in Italy and in the United States, have been especially adamant in their partial or total dismissal of Italian/American literature. By considering the Italian language as a condicio sine qua non of Italian literature, the field of Italian studies has opted for a formal requirement according to which any intriguing dialogue with the literature(s) of the diaspora is all-too-easily dismissed as inconsequential to the development of the field. In this context, then, *sicilianamericanità* could allow for a reading of Italian/American literature as a phenomenon that needs, as indeed it should, be studied not only in relationship to mainstream US American literature, but also in relationship to Italian literature, with which it shares themes, symbols, and problematics.

3. *Sicilianamericanità* and Sicilian/American Literature

The definition of a Sicilian/American narrative is not an easy task. The first questions to be addressed are: what is Sicilian/American about Sicilian/American narratives? Also, must the writer be entirely of Sicilian descent, or is it sufficient that the characters be Sicilian/American for a text to be defined as Sicilian/American? Must the writer and/or the characters perform their *sicilianamericanità* overtly and ostensibly? Within the context of this study, Sicilian/American literature is to be intended as the literature written by US authors of Sicilian descent which explicitly deals with the Sicilian/American experience. In other words, the three authors I deal with in this study—Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, and Ben Morreale—are thoroughly self-conscious of their *sicilianamericanità*. The works I will be discussing shed light on the interplay between their regional segment of the Italian/American community and mainstream America. These restrictive criteria find a raison d'être in the literary fortune that Sicily has enjoyed as a source of inspiration for Italian/American writers in general, as well as in the avowed intentions of this study. Were I, in fact, to include all Italian/American accounts of things Sicilian in the category of Sicilian/American literature, the Neapolitan/American Mario Puzo would have to be featured as one of the most prominent authors in terms of productivity. After the best-selling success of his 1969 novel The Godfather, in fact, Puzo devoted the rest of his literary career to the depiction of what he perceived as the "Sicilian way" through a rather unskilled use of

much-exploited topoi about Sicily and its inhabitants in The Sicilian (1984), The Last Don (1996), and the posthumous Omerta (2000). Whether Puzo helped or did a disservice to Sicilians, Sicilian Americans, and the Italian/American community at large with his highly controversial novels is a question that has incessantly been debated since the publication of The Godfather and Francis Ford Coppola's cinematographic trilogy. But this seemingly endless *querelle* transcends the scope of this study, for its avowed purpose is, instead, to analyze the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity in some Italian/American texts. Therefore, the project can only be carried out by focusing on the acts of representation and self-representation by Sicilian Americans.

As for the second criterion of inclusion, that which limits the content of my analysis to works that specifically deal with the Sicilian/American experience, as restrictive a condition as it appears, it is, once again, determined by the purpose of this study, which is more concerned with the deliberate articulation of *sicilianamericanità* in Sicilian/American texts, rather than with a reading devoted to the detection of Sicilian signs in Italian/American literature. As not all ethnic writers engage in ethnic literature, not all Italian/American writers of Sicilian origins—or other regional origins, for that matter—have made their texts ideal contexts for the reading I undertake in my study. For example, chronologically speaking, Sicilian-born Francesca Vinciguerra was the first Italian/American woman writer to reach notoriety at the beginning of last century. Included in Olga Peragallo's 1949 literary survey, Barolini tells us that Vinciguerra "went on to become a successful, prolific writer, not unaided by the anglicization of her name which, she has related, was a condition to the publication of her first book, The Ardent Flame (1927)." Not surprisingly, then, Francesca Vinciguerra/Frances Winwar

sacrificed any trace of her ethnic heritage on the altar of the Anglo-based literary hegemony of the beginning of last century. The same choice of contributing to US literature with non-ethnic works, characterizes the literary career of poet Diane Raptosh--presumably, in the wake of the "multicultural awakening," for reasons other than literary access--, while for others, like novelist Rita Ciresi and poet/novelist Rachel Guido De Vries, a sense of *sicilianamericanità* is not a clear distinctive trait. In Recollections of My Life as a Woman, Diane Di Prima occasionally hints at her *sicilianamericanità* in the form of an interest for her "Arabic" self,[33] and by recalling the identity conflicts she experienced as a child when pressured by her Neapolitan relatives to take distance from the Sicilian side of her family.[34] However, her literary career evolved following a passion for transgression and uncompromising freedom of individual expression that made her a representative of the Beat generation. Also, in the multidimensional aspects of her work, feminist critic and poet Sandra Mortola Gilbert too has left some of the most lyrically intense lines on Sicilian/American belonging, without engaging, though, in the regional identity politics that I have chosen to delineate in my work. While the general survey I

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[33] In her autobiography, the quest for her Arab roots takes the form of a dream that Di Prima claims to have experienced in 1987: "I am in an ancient church in Sicily. In the dream I think that it is 'like a mosque' – it is actually bare stone, hung with incredibly rich cloths: deep colors of red, gold, and green – satins and brocades...My uncle Joe has died...The funeral service is going on, and it is mainly music, incredibly beautiful vocal music, Arabic in its modulations, but polyphonic, with one voice joining another. In the dream, it is very important for me to understand how 'Arabic' my people are (the Sicilian side of my family). It will help me to understand my life" (15-16).

[34] Di Prima's father, Dick, was of Sicilian descent, while her mother, Emma Mallozzi, was Neapolitan. This is how the beatnik poet dramatizes the inter-regional conflicts between the two sides of her family: "The Mallozzis, I was given to understand, were everything desirable. (These matters were discussed only by my mother and her sisters, and usually in Neapolitan.) Mallozzis were smarter, thinner, more ambitious. 'Upwardly mobile' we might say but there wasn't that term then. All the Mallozzi women had gone to college. The one male Mallozzi sibling had rebelled and refused: but of course, that is different from not being able to, because of lack of money or of brains. Each of the kids in the family was often under discussion: was s/he a Mallozzi or a Di Prima? (...) I felt it as a moral imperative. Mallozzi or bust. They were more "northern", too, the Italian snobbery. (...) *Oh built-in Manicheanism, very stuff of the Tao! Of Yin and Yang, though I can't say which was which. All dichotomies in the world were laid out for me, and before my birth. Mallozzis and Di Primas. Cosmology.* ...Everyone knew Sicilians were outré" (46-47).

provided above in no way should be considered an exhaustive, let alone complete, inventory of Sicilian/American authors, I believe it nevertheless conveys a sense, by negation, of the criteria I have adopted in my project.[35]

My study focuses on the elaboration of a distinct Sicilian/American identity in the works of Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, and Ben Morreale. The articulation of a sense of *sicilianamericanità* proved to be the most distinctive trait and a crucial factor in Jerre Mangione's literary career. With the publication in 1943 of his memoir Mount Allegro, and his subsequent studies of what he defined as "the Sicilian Way"—i.e., Reunion in Sicily (1950), A Passion for Sicilians (1968) and An Ethnic at Large (1978)--, Mangione set the foundations of *sicilianamericanità* in literature both in chronological terms, and in terms of importance of a literary quest for his ethnic heritage, which earned him the honorary title of "dean of Sicilian American writers" (Gardaphé, "Re-inventing Sicily" 56). I will then search the roots of regional ethnic (af)filiation in Rose Romano's poetry. The poet's polemical stances on issues such as gender and homosexuality serve as a counterpoint to the hetero- and male-oriented perspectives of other Sicilian/American writers, while her discussion on racial categorizations allows for an exploration of power dynamics within the multicultural community. Ben Morreale adds an intertextual dimension to the phenomenon of Sicilian/American literature. Personal, sociological, and political analyses intertwine in novels such as The Seventh Saracen (1958), Few Virtuous Men (1973), and Monday, Tuesday...Never Come Sunday (1977) in a way that makes Morreale an ideal bridge between Sicilian and Sicilian/American consciousness, and their respective literary traditions. In what Gardaphé defines as an "eruption of writing that

[35] I have here limited my review to creative writers who have already received some critical attention.

testifies to the power that the island has on the artists it creates" ("Re-inventing Sicily" 55), I chose those writings that, most consistently, deal with questions of *sicilianamericanità,* and thus allow for an intriguing dialogue with the literature of the country of origins.

The purpose of this study is not that of affirming some sort of pre-packaged Sicilian/American literary consciousness to which one should refer in order to be considered an "authentic," or "representative" Sicilian/American writer. Nor does a search for common themes entail that the "American" component of the works under examination be disregarded in order to favor a reading that brings Italian/American literature closer to Italy. Rather, case by case, the presence, or absence thereof, of one or more topoi, themes, or strategies which identify these works as Sicilian/American texts will enable me to draw conclusions on the author's all-too-personal re-elaboration of *sicilianamericanità.*

This study will focus on the regional ethnic nature of some Italian/American texts particularly through a critical exploration of certain themes, concepts, symbols, and language which signal that a Sicilian/American consciousness is at work. I will especially analyze how questions of ethnicity and identity construction surface in the texts under examination in the form of syntheses between the Sicilian and the American epistemological systems and literary traditions. For instance, one of the characteristics of Sicilian literature is its oral substratum. Oral communication was for centuries the most immediate and valuable instrument of expression of the Sicilian population, and traces of orality surface in the works of Luigi Pirandello as they do, eighty years later, in the most

recent novels and short stories by Andrea Camilleri. Orality plays an important role in Sicilian/American literature too, as it reflects that cultural system out of which Sicilian/American authors operate. However, operating as s/he does within a system reliant on the written word, the Sicilian/American writer must ultimately find a way to bridge the cultural gap he inhabits by creating new hybrid positions for himself and his texts.

The linguistic aspects of the Sicilian/American texts considered in this study also reveal the construction of an Italian/American identity in regional terms. *Sicilianamericanità* draws its material from the daily life of Sicilians in the States, and, as such, it speaks Sicilian. In his precious 1963 study Storia Linguistica dell'Italia Unita, Tullio De Mauro calculated that at the moment of Unification in 1861, only the 2.5 % of the Italian population was italophone, in the sense of being able to read and write in what was considered "standard" Italian without a significant effort (37). As for the rest, the greatest majority of Italians resorted to their own local dialects for everyday transactions as well as any form of artistic creation. De Mauro also adds that "[i]n cifre assolute e percentuali l'emigrazione incise dunque soprattutto sulle regioni che erano più ricche di analfabeti e, quindi, di dialettofoni" (57).[36] The linguistic choices of an American writer of Italian descent, then, place him/her in an always specific position with regards to the sociological and regional varieties of the Italian language, and Sicilian/American texts abound with words and expressions that are style markers of the Sicilian dialect.

[36] "In absolute and relative numbers emigration especially weighed upon the regions with the highest rates of illiteracy, and, therefore, upon dialect-speaking areas" (my translation).

Of special interest for the purpose of this study is the case in which correspondences can be detected between Italian and Italian/American literatures. The Sicilian/American literary experience echoes the material, psychological, and ideological reality of the social group it claims to represent. Therefore, conscious and/or unconscious models and themes deemed to be relevant by that group might surface as *leitmotivs* in the literature that the social/ethnic group inspires, regardless of spatial considerations. In other words, if a common background informs both Sicilian and Sicilian/American literary traditions, it should not come as a surprise that both literatures, as we shall see, share common themes as well as literary strategies.

Finally, particularly significant is the case in which the Sicilian/American authors under examination deliberately establish a dialogue with Sicilian sources. Given, for example, the facts that Jerre Mangione was once able to interview Luigi Pirandello, while Ben Morreale was linked to Leonardo Sciascia by a personal friendship, one could easily advance the possibility--and, in certain cases, the certainty—that these writers read each other. Therefore, Sicilian "literary traces" might surface in Sicilian/American literature in the form of implicit or explicit meta-literary motifs. Through intertextual references, then, Sicilian/American texts not only betray their cultural filiations, but they also present themselves as parts of discourses developed through the centuries and across the ocean. Although my study is not a comparative study in the traditional sense, an attention to intertextuality as it surfaces in Sicilian/American literature might help those critics who believe in a mode of reading that, to cite just one, "should concomitantly and ultimately aim for the validation of the text(s) in question vis-à-vis those already validated by the dominant culture" (Tamburri, A Semiotic of Ethnicity 4). This method allows us to open

a channel of communication between Sicilian and Sicilian/American literatures, which will eventually and hopefully lead to a most fruitful cooperation between Italian and Italian/American literary studies.

In "New Ethnicities," Stuart Hall warned that: "[o]nce you enter the politics of the end of the essential black subject you are plunged headlong into the maelstrom of a continuously contingent, unguaranteed, political argument and debate: a critical politics, a politics of criticism" (166). On a final note, with this warning in mind, and at the risk of sounding defensive, I respond to those who might think that the valorization of regionalism in literature is comparable to a provincializing endeavor. To some, in fact, the "universal" dimension of a work would be overshadowed by a myopic focus on local specificities, and that the representational possibilities of a text would be severely reduced were it relegated to the stifling role of "regional" account. A series of brief considerations on the fate of regional literature both in Italy and in the United States will prove the untenability of such claims. In both countries, in fact, regionalism in literature has enjoyed a longstanding success. In Italy, any notion of "national" literary orthodoxy was shattered by the works of authors such as Giovanni Verga, Grazia Deledda, Federico De Roberto, Luigi Pirandello, Corrado Alvaro, and Ignazio Silone, just to mention a few. In different ways, these authors all capitalized on their regional origins and local experiences, without risking being cut off from the national literary landscape. The choice of Grazia Deledda and Luigi Pirandello to set their works almost exclusively, respectively, in Sardinia and Sicily, did not preclude for them the possibility of reaching a "universal" dimension. If anything, the Nobel Prizes for Literature that Deledda and Pirandello were awarded, respectively in 1926 and 1934, testify to the fact that local color

can reach emblematic proportions. An interest in the literary production from the geographical/cultural margins of the nation characterizes also US American literary history. The local specificity of the works of writers such as William Faulkner, Richard Wright, Mark Twain, Kate Chopin, and Tennessee Williams did not relegate them to the stifling role of local colorists. Nor was their literature considered un-American for its regional contents. Again, if the Nobel Prize for Literature somehow vouches for the "universality" of one's "regional" work, then even on the other side of the ocean it is safe to produce regional texts, for William Faulkner received it in 1949. These last remarks should be taken as an invitation to leave aside any pre-conceived and myopic notion of what makes a literature "universal." A study of the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity in some Italian/American texts is *not* an attempt to "provincialize" the field; rather, I believe an analysis of this sort allows for a more accurate characterization of Italian/American literature at large, while at the same time opening a space for new literary conversations on what it means to be Italian on both sides of the ocean.

Chap. 2

"Half-and-Half"

***Sicilianamericanità* in Jerre Mangione's Memoirs**

> The people from Toscana they're not good Like the people from Lombardia. But they're not bad like the people from Sicilia—I should say not!
>
> Marie Hall Ets, Rosa (1970)

In his 1996 study Italian Signs, American Streets, critic Fred Gardaphé makes the claim that, from his early activity as a journalist and reviewer, Jerre Mangione "went on to be a spokesman for Italian and Italian American culture through his many books" (7).[37] The general consensus in the field of Italian/American critical studies is that, thanks to his prolific writing career, in the late 30s Mangione succeeded in impacting the American

[37] Besides being a prolific writer, in Italian America Mangione also played a prominent role as a critic. He is, in fact, reputed to be the author of "[o]ne of the earliest acts of indigenous Italian American criticism," with the 1935 review of Garibaldi Lapolla's The Grand Gennaro published in The New Republic (Gardaphé Italian Signs 7). For the same magazine, Mangione also reviewed, a few years later, another work of art of Italian/American literature, Pietro di Donato's 1939 novel Christ in Concrete. Also, of all the children of Italian immigrants who, during the 30s and 40s, wrote about their experience as children of early-century Italian immigrant parents—such as John Fante, Pietro di Donato, Garibaldi Lapolla, Jo Pagano, Guido D'Agostino, Mari Tomasi, and Michael di Capite—, Mangione is the one who developed stronger literary ties with Italy, as testified by two translations of Mount Allegro—as Mont'Allegro, in 1955 by SIAE, and in 1983 by Franco Angeli Editore—, of Night Search—as Ricerca nella Notte in 1987 by Sellerio—of Reunion in Sicily—as Riunione in Sicilia in 1992 by Sellerio—, and more recently, in 1996, of La Storia, and also by the conferment of the honorific title of 'Commendatore dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà italiana' awarded to the author in 1971 for his literary merits.

literary establishment by opening a space for Italian/American writers to deal with their ethnic experience. Interestingly, a recurrent subtext of Mangione's opus is a process of ethnic identity formation that actually challenges any homogenizing definition of Italian Americanness. All through his literary production, in fact, the author consistently and persistently portrayed himself as an American-born of Sicilian extraction, therefore capitalizing on his regional identity. The opening sentence of the writer's article "Remembrances and Impressions of an Ethnic at Large" seems to leave no room for doubt with respect to the terms of his self-identification. In a humorous tone, in fact, Mangione directly addresses his readers as follows: "If for no other reason than to capture your attention, I am going to thumb my nose at the popular stereotype of the Sicilian, by informing you at the outset that, despite my American birth and my non-violent demeanor, I am a full-blooded Sicilian" (42). The question of identity in Mangione's writings involves the discursive creation of a distinct Sicilian/American consciousness, or *sicilianamericanità* from scratch. If, in fact, there exists a literature which is intimately tied to Sicilian/American identity, its history dates back to the '40s, and precisely to the publication of Mangione's Mount Allegro. Although, when it first appeared in 1943, it was labeled as fiction for marketing purposes, Mangione's debut book was meant as a non-fiction memoir, the autobiographical account of his youth in the multiethnic neighborhood of the same name in Rochester, New York.[38] Continuously in print since its launch and promoted by sociologist Herbert Gans in his Introduction to the 1989

[38]In An Ethnic at Large first, and later in a footnote of the Finale added to the 1981 edition of Mount Allegro, Mangione explained that the publishers decided at the last moment to present the book as fiction instead of memoir for reasons of marketing. As a consequence of this editorial maneuver, the Mangiones became the Amoroso family, while the writer simply kept his real name in Italian, i.e., Gerlando (An Ethnic 298-99). Finally, in the 1981 edition by Columbia University Press, the author could clarify the nature of his book by adding the subtitle "A Memoir of Italian American Life."

edition to the rank of "classic of American ethnic literature," Mount Allegro is only the first of a number of books in which Mangione undertook to explain to an American readership what it means to be a Sicilian ethnic in the United States. Thus, Mangione can be said to be the founding and leading figure of what may be called the Sicilian/American vein in Italian/American literature. What does it mean for Jerre Mangione, an American ethnic writer, to jokingly present himself as a "full-blooded Sicilian?" Where does he stand in relation to his regional heritage? How does he bridge the gap between "the Sicilian Way" and "the American Way of Life" (An Ethnic 176)? And, finally, how does he tackle issues of identity through literary expressions? In this chapter I will explore the process of construction of *sicilianamericanità* in Jerre Mangione as it surfaces in two of his memoirs: Mount Allegro and the 1978 An Ethnic at Large. Published exactly 35 years apart, the two books are complementary in that they examine two radically different but intimately related experiences in the author's life. While in Mount Allegro Mangione recounts his Sicilian education as a child, in An Ethnic he gives an account of his American education as a young man who is desperately trying to figure out who and "what" he is. I will concentrate on these two texts to illustrate the workings of, to use Werner Sollors's famous formulation, the forces of "consent" and "descent" that shape Mangione's Sicilian/American consciousness. I will analyze how in these two memoirs Mangione turned his self-knowledge into literature, thus revealing, more clearly than in any other work, the terms of his *sicilianamericanità*.

Few Italian/American writers lend themselves better than Mangione to a critical study that links the author's self-realization as an ethnic American with the world of his/her literary imagination. In most of his works, the autobiographical and ethnic

dimensions plays a preponderant role. A part from the 1972 book The Dream and The Deal: The Federal Writers' Project 1935-1943,[39] the 1965 pamphlet Life Sentences for Everybody,[40] and the 1975 educational booklet for children Mussolini's March on Rome, all of Mangione's other publications deal, in different ways, with issues of ethnic identity. In a "Statement of Literary Purposes" written in 1972 for an unspecified "British biographical directory," Mangione stated:

> As a writer I am motivated by the need to understand myself and the world around me. This need was first nourished by the circumstances of being born and raised among Sicilian-born relatives in an urban American environment. That experience, which is the substance of my first book, Mount Allegro, accentuated for me the sharp contrast between the philosophical values of the old world and those of the new. It also succeeded in casting me in the role of the outsider who, belonging to neither world, tries to create his own world by the writing of fiction. (qtd. in Burch 62)

To be born and raised till the age of eighteen in a household where both parents hailed from the province of Agrigento—in the south-west coast of the island--, surrounded almost exclusively by Sicilian relatives and friends, made and marked Mangione as an "outsider" to both the Old and the New Worlds. This condition he managed to overcome in literature by pinning down his Sicilian/American consciousness.

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[39] In this book Mangione recounted his experience as the national coordinating editor of what in the author's words was "an extraordinary governmental enterprise" (ix), that is the WPA Federal Writers' Project. The project produced a series of guidebooks to the states and employed writers such as Saul Bellow, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison, just to mention a few. In Daniel Aaron's words, "Mangione's fine book is the first full-length history of the rag-tag army of researchers and writers, artists and hacks, who made Americans a little more conscious of the land and traditions they possessed but still were unpossessed by" ("A Giant Mirror for America" 281).

[40] In the author's own description, Life Sentences for Everybody is made up of a series of "modern satiric fables, each one told in a single sentence," a style he claims to have learned while working as a copywriter for a long time for the advertising agency Ayer (Gardaphé, "An Interview with Jerre Mangione" 52). As an example, I will here report one of the fables, entitled "Abner Noodle:" "He became a writer/in the first place/because he had trouble/opening his mouth/in front of people;/but after one bestseller/requests for speaking engagements/began rolling in, and now/he speaks so often that/he no longer has/time nor energy/to write anything more/than telegraphic notes/accepting/new speaking engagements" (48).

Questions of ethnicity and identity construction are, in different ways, addressed by Mangione in all of his four memoirs, which he claimed to think of as "a four-volume set" (Esposito 17). Besides Mount Allegro and An Ethnic at Large, the other books in question are Reunion in Sicily (1950),[41] and A Passion for Sicilians (1968).[42] *Sicilianamericanità* also surface in significant ways in Mangione's two novels, The Ship and The Flame (1948),[43] and Night Search (1965),[44] which, the author himself conceded, "may be more truly autobiographical than the [four] books I have written in the first person" (qtd. in Burch 63). It can be said, then, that the bulk of Mangione's literary production revolves around the necessity of constructing a hybrid identity, contained by and different from any homogenizing notion of both Italian-ness and Americanness.

[41] Mangione's 1950 Reunion in Sicily is a memoir/travelogue. In it, the author recalls the several months he spent in Sicily in 1947 on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study the effects of Fascism on the life of Sicilians. Despite the negative impressions he had derived from his first trip to the island in 1936, the author went back giving in to some sort of biological call: "I can offer no satisfactory explanation for that act. There was this much logic to it, however: Sicily was in my blood" (2).

[42] After 18 years from his last visit, Mangione took a third trip to Sicily, officially for a scholarly endeavor. The author, in fact, went back to the island on a Fulbright to study the strategies of resistance enacted by Danilo Dolci. The activist Dolci—who was nominated twice for the Nobel Peace Prize—was nicknamed the "Ghandi of Sicily" because of his choice of nonviolent methods of resistance—mainly hunger fasts, "strikes in reverse," and sit-ins—to the control of Mafia on various aspects of the Sicilian life.

[43] The novel tells the vicissitudes of a number of European refugees who are trying to escape death in Fascist Europe on board of a Portuguese ship headed to Mexico. Among them, the Austrian radical Josef Renner, his Polish companion Tereza Lenska, and the Sicilian professor of history, and staunch supporter of the Movement for Sicilian Independence, Stiano Argento. When their transit visas turn out to be fraudulent, and the ship changes its heading to Casablanca, the passengers seem to be doomed to either an internment camp or death. The happy ending is partially Stiano's doing, for it is he who, acting as the chairman of an Action Committee, convinces the US Immigration Officers to let the passengers off the ship in Virginia. The novel celebrates the courage to take action against injustices and the crimes of Fascism, as embodied in the protagonist, who explains to the US Immigration Officials: "Until my escape from Sicily, I did not attach enough importance to political thinking and action. I did not like living under a dictatorship, but I thought it would destroy itself without any help from me. In the past few months I have come to realize that dictatorship thrives on such false hope" (302).

[44] The mystery surrounding the assassination of the anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca provides the plot for Mangione's Night Search. The title refers to the actual investigation undertaken by the protagonist, Michael Malory, on the assassination of his father, Paolo Polizzi—the fictional version of the real-life labor leader. Gripped by an obsession to find out whether the Fascists or the Stalinists were responsible for his father's unpunished murder, after a series of vicissitudes, Michael ends up meeting with the actual assassin, a once-friend of Polizzi's. In an unexpected, and rather improbable twist, we find out that the reasons behind the assassination were exquisitely personal, rather than political. Interestingly, whereas the real Carlo Tresca was an Abruzzese, in Mangione's hands he turns into a "gentleman from Monte Allegro," therefore from Sicily, who, parenthetically, bears the same last name of the author's mother, i.e., Polizzi.

Mount Allegro and An Ethnic are the two works most prominently concerned with questions of cultural entanglement that requires constant negotiations of dual oppositions.

The bulk of Mangione's 1943 memoir is the transcription onto paper of the author/narrator's childhood memories. These are enhanced by the stories of the lively members of the Mangione/Amoroso family, who bask in retelling folk tales and legends mainly belonging to a mythical past in Sicily. Through a skillful use of humor, Mangione succeeds in conveying a colorful and affectionate portrayal of his extended family performing, with ostensible nonchalance, their Sicilian ways in the New World. In this apparently successful ethnic translation, though, the American-born children—Gerlando, the author's youthful persona, and his siblings—experience a precarious balance between the culture of descent sponsored by their immigrant relatives and the mainstream one to which they are exposed at school, with its inevitable pressures for assimilation. The much-quoted incipit of Mount Allegro, which is worth reproducing here at length, is a most successful literary attempt to explain the uncertainties engendered by a bicultural identity:

> "When I grow up I want to be an American," Giustina said. We looked at our sister; it was something none of us had ever said.
> "Me too," Maria echoed.
> "Aw, you don't even know what an American is," Joe scoffed.
> "I do so," Giustina said.
> It was more than the rest of us knew.
> "We're Americans right now," I said. "Miss Zimmerman says if you're born here you're an American."
> "Aw, she's nuts," Joe said. He had no use for most teachers. "We're Italians. If y' don't believe me ask Pop."
> But my father wasn't very helpful. "Your children will be *Americani*. But you, my son, are half-and-half. Now stop asking me questions. You should know those things from going to school. What do you learn in school, anyway?" (1)

In this piece of a family dialogue, Mangione skillfully dramatizes the tug of war between Italian ethnic loyalty and American citizenship. Little Gerlando's ambivalent feelings toward his bicultural identity are at the core of Mount Allegro.

But any issue of identity in Mangione's memoir is further complicated by region-based hierarchies of inequality within the Italian immigrant community. The life of little Gerlando seems, in fact, to proceed relatively undisturbed in his multiethnic—mainly Jewish and Polish—neighborhood as an Italian/American kid, when the reality of hegemonic articulations of Italian-ness materializes in the words of a *paisan* schoolmate. When the boy shows his globe to Robert Di Nella, in fact, this latter points with his finger to Italy, the place he claims he is from. Then, the narrator recalls, "he pointed to a tiny orange splash at the end of the Italian boot and called me a lousy *siciliano*...From the way he hissed the word at me, I soon realized that while being a Sicilian was a special distinction, it probably was not one that called for cheers and congratulations" (3). Early on, then, Gerlando is led to reflect upon his ethnic regional identity as a consequence of an episode in which his Sicilian background exposes him to the scorn and contempt of other Italian/American kids. The incident with Di Nella, however, succeeds in sparkling in the young protagonist a sudden interest in his relatives' birthplace. The now-adult narrator recalls: "I felt an urgent need to know more about Sicily, if I was going to continue taking beatings for it. I wanted to know what the difference was between Sicily and Italy, and whether Sicily was a nation or a city" (17). However paradisiacal the description of the island conveyed by some of his relatives, in the end they cannot counterbalance the unflattering images of Sicilians in the United States. Little by little,

Gerlando grows to feel that "Siciliano" rankles pretty much as an insult, especially when accompanied by words such as "blackmailer" and "murderer" (4).

The suspicion of belonging to an ethnic sub-group, as it were, encompassed by, and yet distinct from Italians from the mainland, is also reinforced by the protagonist's family. While at school—the place where Americanness is predicated upon abstract principles of equality, trust in individual and social progress, justice, and freedom—the boy is infused with a sense of national identity and pride, at home his family provides him with a series of unequivocal messages on his ethnic identity. In one instance, Gerlando is even confronted with phenotypic evidence of his belonging to the Sicilian group when Ziu Luigi instructs him as follows: "One has only to look at your Roman nose, your Arab complexion, and your Saracen disposition to realize the truth of what I'm saying" (18) Wondering how the boy will eventually manage to resolve his identity conflict, the uncle further indulges in an amusing botanical metaphor: "You, Gerlando Amoroso, are merely a transplanted seed, and it is too soon yet to tell whether you will bloom into a flower or a cucumber" (18-19). [45]

The sense of distinct *sicilianità*—or Sicilian-ness—on which Mangione will elaborate his own personal version of *sicilianamericanità*—or Sicilian Americanness—in the memoir is mainly conveyed by the numerous stories told by the members of the Amoroso family, and set in a mythical or historical past in Sicily. Remembering in 1984 the important role that the constant exposure to storytelling had had on him and other second-generation Italian/American writers who entered the American literary scene in

[45] It is worth noting here that the Italian word for "cucumber," i.e., "cetriolo," is at the origin of the Italian epithet "citrullo," and Italian/American "jadrool," loosely translated as "fool."

the 1930s and 1940s, Mangione wrote: "The art of storytelling was virtually ingrained in [us]...I attribute my own love of narrative to those childhood evenings when I would listen to my relatives spinning their marvelous tales" ("Remembrances and Impressions" 52). These "marvelous tales," memories, and legends provide the American-born writer with a sense of Sicilian peoplehood, which transcends temporal as well as spatial connections. In terms of literary strategies, nothing epitomizes better *sicilianamericanità* in literature than the combination in Mount Allegro of folk stories drawn from the Old World embedded in a New World prose narrative.[46] By transferring into written form fragments of the Sicilian wisdom, Mangione is breaking with a tradition of oral performances. On the other hand, the presence of myths and legends originally meant for oral transmission in the economy of a memoir challenges the literary conventions of a culture for which education is wedded to the written word. In other words, by attempting to translate Sicilian oral storytelling to the American printed page, Mangione is giving form to his *sicilianamericanità* in the realm of literature.

Most of the folk tales in Mount Allegro amount to parables with didactic purposes, and dispense lessons based on peasant moral values. Among the most memorable characters are the Saccas, who, according to Uncle Luigi's story, would celebrate the Sicilian Feast of the Dead by laying out a sumptuous banquet for the close relatives who had died, leaving tons of food to rot for days. From Aunt Giovanna, we also get to learn about the miserable fate of Angelina Tosta, who, because of her stormy

[46] As Gardaphé notes, "Italian Americans are heirs to a rich oral culture...In America, Italian oral culture collided with the literary traditions of Anglo-Saxon culture ... Creating texts through narrative contributed to the re-creation of selves forged out of the elements of Italian and American cultures" (Italian Signs 24-25).

sentimental life, earned the title of *strafalaria*, an epithet "more powerful than 'hussy' or 'slut'," which was accorded by Gerlando's Sicilian relatives to "any woman who either flaunted her sex brazenly or was suspected of misbehavior with men," and almost all American women (152). *Compare* Calogero's story teaches about the dangers of giving in to the temptations of the flesh. Because of his weakness for women, in fact, the man comes close to losing the most important thing in the life of a "respectable" Sicilian, that is to say his family. Carmelo Primavera, on the other hand, exemplifies the Sicilian young "man of honor" who does not hesitate to kill a man who jokingly calls him his "brother-in-law," an expression that may cast doubt on Carmelo's sister's virginity. Translating these stories onto paper may prove a difficult task, especially since the written transcription of folk tales lacks the precious array of paralinguistic features which are essential to the storytelling tradition. Mangione himself seemed to be perfectly aware of this risk when, before reporting a story originally told by his Uncle Nino—which features an improbable, and yet successful, wedding between a rich and older Baron Albertini and the virtuous young daughter of a poor weaver—, he put in his narrator's mouth a disclaimer of sorts: "It would be futile to try to tell it as my Uncle Nino did but here, at least, is the gist of it—without the benefit of his tantalizing pauses, his eyebrows, and his magnificent leer" (Mount Allegro 141-42). By overcoming the problems posed by the translation of oral performance into written narrative, Mangione has succeeded to create a hybrid culture out of two. Mount Allegro is the product of inter-cultural synergies, which bring forth the need for a constant negotiation between two different, and at times conflicting, selves.

Critic Justin Vitiello has speculated on the possibilities and limits of the written sign to adequately reproduce the oral storytelling performance. In his 1993 article "Sicilian Folk Narrative Versus Sicilian-American Literature," Vitiello compares a corpus of oral histories collected in Trappeto, Sicily, in 1988, to Mount Allegro. The study is vitiated from the outset by the critic's prior assumptions on what he considers as "genuine" Sicilian storytelling—i.e., the Trappetese tradition—versus Mangione's "distorted" representation of his culture of origin. Ultimately, Vitiello dismisses as an aberration Mangione's—and, one might logically infer, many other Italian/American writers'—attempt to compromise between the Old World epistemology and the New World literary tradition. However, the choice of comparing the oral histories told to Vitiello by a number of elderly non-literate Sicilian informants to a memoir written by an educated American-born youngster of Sicilian descent poses some obvious methodological difficulties. First of all, as Vitiello argues, the Trappetese informants belong to a pre-industrial society characterized by a "mytho-poetic" vision of life and stories. The critic is ready to recognize a change in progress in the Trappetese culture, caused by a "radicalizing passage from traditional to modern, from agricultural to industrial and from mythopoetic to rational," which is the cause of a "transformation of their folk consciousness" (64). Unfortunately, though, he is not equally willing to accord the due weight to the reality that, being born and raised in the United States, Mangione is also, and preeminently so, a product of a 'modern,' 'industrial,' and 'rational' culture. Transcending the oral vs. written argument, Mount Allegro shows that the transgression of both Sicilian and American "rules" proves to be a necessary condition for the creation of a dialogue between these two different cultures. In this sense, Mangione's hybrid

literary discourse reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of a "Third Space of enunciation," which, the critic claims, "quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force." Bhabha warns:

> It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable. (The Location of Culture 37)

It is, then, in these interstices of knowledge that the critic must be willing to travel when evaluating the 'genuineness' of Mangione's memoir—and any other ethnic work, for that matter. Moreover, even though the Sicilian cosmology informs the stories featured in Mount Allegro at their inner core, the memoir is ultimately a memoir, and as such it cannot ignore a set of previous literary precedents and paradigms. William Boelhower's warning that "the student of American culture must not forget that immigrant autobiography is preeminently a model fighting for status in American literary history" seems rather apropos here (Immigrant Autobiography 31). Differently put, although drawing freely from the Sicilian storytelling tradition, as a memoir, Mount Allegro must accommodate itself to Western—read, 'modern,' 'industrial,' and 'rational'—aesthetic conventions. The interweaving of Sicilian storytelling and Western written literacy epitomizes the implications of a borderline identity, and ultimately brings into form a new concept of literary category that defies any pre-constituted genre. This is key to *sicilianamericanità* in literature.

Later in the same article, Vitiello also engages with the linguistic aspects of Mangione's first memoir. Although written in English, Mount Allegro is spiced with a modicum of Sicilian and Italian, a fact that reflects the trilingual nature of the author's

life.[47] Interestingly enough, in this discussion the critic turns from a paladin of the *popolo*, whose oral traditions he defends against "Western worshippers of written idols" (62), to a most anti-democratic linguistic purist. While continuing to attack Mangione for what he calls a "semi-conscious betrayal of genuine roots" (69), Vitiello adds: "[n]owhere is Mangione's own confusion as to his roots and their eradication more evident than in his shaky hold on the languages—Italian and Sicilian—that are, indeed, very foreign to him."[48] The critic then proceeds to list a series of examples from the memoir to show the "multifarious inadequacies" of Mangione's *sicilianità* and *italianità*. Among them, Vitiello finds particularly important that in Mount Allegro: "Sicilian and Italian words are constantly misspelled: *figliu* (vs. *figghiu*), *astrattu* (vs. *estrattu*, i.e., Sicilian tomato paste), *ma como fini* (vs. *finì*), *ce permisso* (vs. *c'è*)," and so on and so forth (72). The question of language is, indeed, one of the most important issues at the core of the not-so-cordial relationship between the fields of Italian and Italian/American literary studies. The fact that "Italian words are constantly misspelled" has especially driven Italianists to patronize, and at worst, dismiss Italian/American literature as an aberration. For the same reasons, Italian/American writers have sometimes felt obliged to

[47] In a 1996 interview, Mangione candidly described his relationship to both Italian and Sicilian as follows: "The best way perhaps of characterizing my relationship to the Italian language is to say that I speak bad Italian fluently. Mine is a mishmash of the Sicilian dialect, which my parents insisted upon at home, and of one year of college-taught Italian. Sicilian was my first language by edict" (Gardaphé, "An Interview with Jerre Mangione" 46).

[48] In his article "Circles of the Cyclops," which focuses on the linguistic aspects of some Italian American texts, Robert Viscusi points to Mount Allegro as an example of "Cyclopean isolation" due to the language barriers experienced by the Italian immigrant characters with limited, if any at all, proficiency in English. The memoir, Viscusi argues, features many instances of what the critic terms 'heteroglossolalia,' or "an interruption in systems of communication that occurs as a result of large-scale migration into a nation with foreign language, customs, and political institutions" (Buried Caesars 113). In an attempt to overcome this linguistic isolation, the narrator, endowed with a double competence, functions as a purveyor of semiotic transactions between Sicilians and Americans. However, the narrator, Viscusi concludes on a pessimistic note, "mediates between these two discrete circles with the Homeric wit belonging to a veteran traveler who can accommodated comfortably conflicts that might inspire sadness in a more innocent mind or exhaustion in a less flexible spirit. His tone can accommodate, but not resolve, these conflicts" (122).

take on an apologetic stance with respects to their "shaky hold on the languages." A letter that John Fante sent to Italian literary critic Giuseppe Prezzolini in 1940 will help us get a sense of what the terms of this discussion are.[49] In response to an invitation to present his work at the Casa Italiana in New York, Fante hurriedly thanks Prezzolini and immediately seizes the opportunity to painfully 'explain' the poor Italian in his 1938 novel:

> Thank you very much for the interest you express in my writings. Doubtless you shuddered at the spelling of those Italian words in my Wait Until Spring, Bandini. If you have had any experience with printers, you know how I must have felt. That was over two years ago, but I still clinch my fists and spit on the floor when I think about it. The truth is, I can't write Italian, except phonetically, but I had my proofsheets carefully checked and double-checked by an expert. It made no difference to that damn printer. When I found out about it, the book was already for sale. I offer this explanation because Prof. Altrocci at California U. commented about it, and I assume you too were surprised. (qtd. in Marazzi, Misteri di Little Italy 58)

As far as Sicilian is concerned, Vitiello's idea of this dialect is based on a sort of koinè, a standardized version of it, codified in the literary production of great Sicilian poets like Giovanni Meli and Ignazio Buttitta, and institutionalized in dictionaries, anthologies, and so forth. However successful in the field of vernacular literature, this "correct" Sicilian is a written artifice, an elitist version of the everyday language of the Sicilian people to which Vitiello claims his allegiance. The critic's *faux pas* serves as a reminder that one

[49] Giuseppe Prezzolini, Professor of Italian and Director of the Casa Italiana at Columbia University, was especially convinced of the superiority of Italians vis-à-vis Italian Americans, and, as a corollary, of the unworthiness of Italian/American literature. In his 1963 book I Trapiantati—The Transplanted--, Prezzolini defined Italian immigrants and their progeny as a "fracture" between Italy and the US, for they have for a long time forbidden Americans to know the "real" Italians. Italian Americans to Prezzolini, "Non sono la somma di due interi, ma il *residuo di due sottrazioni*" (9, emphasis in the text). In a review of Mangione's 1948 novel The Ship and the Flame, Prezzolini especially elaborated on what he perceived as a total lack of artistic value in Italian/American literature. Bluntly put, the contribution of Italian/American literature to American literature was, according to him "una cellula, o una cista entro il corpo della letteratura Americana, non una goccia di sangue" ("Nè Puri Profughi, Nè Profughi Puri" 23).

should be careful when establishing degrees of "genuineness" in a relatively new literary tradition like the Italian/American one. Also, comparisons between Italian and Italian/American traditions could be most fruitful, provided that no a priori hierarchy of "authenticity" is established.

A more insightful reading of Mangione's treatment of the storytelling tradition comes from William Boelhower, who dedicated a whole chapter in his 1982 book Immigrant Autobiography to Mount Allegro. According to the critic, by turning himself, for a good portion of the book, into a mere transcriber of his family's stories, Mangione is subverting any traditional notion of authorship as the celebration of exquisitely individual creativity. Also, the inclusion of folk tales, which, by definition, are communal, transforms the personal memoir into something that encompasses the ancestral as well as the mythical dimensions of the life of the Sicilian people. The personal life of the ethnic writer is enriched by cultural narratives of Sicilian identity and self-awareness, which help the creation of what Boelhower calls a "transindividual self" (192). Finally, Mount Allegro manages to transcend the individual boundaries of a bildungsroman and becomes a kind of "group-biography" that can be read as "radical substitute for the traditional type of solitary self common to the American autobiographical tradition" (185). For all the above reasons, the critic concludes, Mangione's 1943 book is "by far the most critical as well as the most positive [immigrant autobiography] in that it completely substitutes the American Self, its habitat, values, and behavioral codes with a new concept of the self and a new sustaining world view" (181).

Boelhower further notes that the fourteen chapters that make up Mount Allegro are arranged in a logical structural pattern that supports the theme of the memoir. The critic identifies three movements in the book. The first two chapters are devoted to the identity crisis experienced by little Gerlando, while from the second chapter onward, the focus shifts to the communal life of the Sicilians living in Mount Allegro, Rochester. Finally, in the last three or four chapters, Boelhower concludes, there is a return to a now-adult Gerlando Amoroso, who has completed his training as a "transindividual self." Following a progression from the individual, through the family, to the community, each chapter in the memoir also presents an instance in the narrator's education in the Sicilian cultural codes, as well as in his process towards an accomplished sense of Sicilian Americanness. The young hyphenated Jerre Mangione/Gerlando Amoroso can count on a rather large number of relatives, friends, neighbors and *compari* who gather on a regular basis to help him build his "half-and-half" identity. "My relatives were constantly seeking each other out to celebrate the existence of one another," the narrator recalls (24). Especially on Sundays, the Amorosos get together for a family party. The banquet is usually the highlight event, to which the narrator accords the respect granted to holy scenes:

> Great-Uncle Minicuzzu and my Uncles Luigi and Nino were avid guests at nearly every banquet my father gave. They flanked him on both sides at the table, like the disciples of Christ at the Last Supper, and they partook of his wine and cooking as though each meal were their last one. There was a banquet for as many occasions as my father could imagine, and his imagination was fertile. (127)

The menu is usually abundant, made up of traditional recipes of the Sicilian cuisine, such as "*pasta con suco*," "*brusciuluna*," Saint Joseph bread, and especially *cannoli*, of which

the narrator's father is a specialist, and we get to read a tentative recipe (128). These meals are an essential medium for community building. It is at these gatherings that Gerlando learns the ropes of the Sicilian "cultural grammar."[50]

The young boy's instructional journey through *sicilianità* takes place in various stages meant to illustrate the collective consciousness of Sicilians, as it surfaces in their rituals, beliefs, cultural norms and the like. The education of the American reader to the Sicilian cultural codes takes place in Mount Allegro following Gerlando's vicissitudes. A quick look at the titles of the chapters—among which, "Family Party," "God and the Sicilian," "Evil Eye," "Sicilian Virgin"—reveals the desire to probe into and expose non-Italian/American readers to an array of Sicilian values, norms, habits, and behavioral patterns. Being persuaded that "[b]eing a Sicilian in the United States has never been a picnic" ("On Being a Sicilian American" 40), Mangione took upon himself to relate and comment upon the experience of Sicilian immigrants in Rochester in the 1920s. In this sense, works of ethnic literature like Mount Allegro can be read not only as "handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness" as Werner Sollors recommends doing (Beyond Ethnicity 7), but also as manuals of (correct) procedures to interpret an ethnic culture.

Suffice it to read a few instances in Mangione's memoir where the author focuses on Sicilian unorthodox religious attitudes to understand the "educational" potential of ethnic literature. A great deal of attention in Mount Allegro is paid to the Sicilians' religious views for they set them aside not only from non-Catholics, but also from the

[50] I am here borrowing the expression "cultural grammar" from William Boelhower, by which he means "a metacritical organization of a culture into its constitutive structural norms and codes" (Immigrant footnote 11, p. 29).

more orthodox Catholic Irish in the US. In his 1974 social commentary Blood of my Blood, Richard Gambino comments profusely on the uniqueness of the religious attitudes of Italian Americans, which are "rooted in a fantastic amalgam of pagan customs, magical beliefs, Mohammedan practices, Christian doctrines, and, most of all, *contadino* pragmatism" (194). Among the magical beliefs, one of the many interesting items the Southern Italian cultural encyclopedia offers are the *malocchio*—or Evil Eye--, and the *fattura*. The bearers of *malocchio* are *jettatori,* people believed to have supernatural evil powers thanks to which they cast malefic spells on unsuspecting victims through a simple gaze. One of the most famous literary treatments of this belief is Luigi Pirandello's 1915 short story "La Patente,"—variously translated in the US as "The License," or "The Jinx." The protagonist, Rosario Chiàrchiaro, accused of being a *jettatore*, loses his job, and finds himself penniless and with a family to support when the idea comes to him that he could turn this unfortunate situation to his best advantage. Not only does he accept his role as *jettatore* in town, but he wants it sanctioned by a "license" released by the authorities, through which he could officially turn his stigma into a profitable business. In Rochester's Mount Allegro, Mangione's narrator tells us, *jettatori* are easy to spot. Because they are creatures of the Evil, these ominous figures have distinct features that give them a demonic look: "Persons who had the *mal'occhio*...usually had a cadaverous and olive-skinned face, and their eyebrows came together in an unbroken line" (102). The fear of catching the Evil Eye, gives way to a whole range of preemptive strategies, and apotropaic rituals of which the narrator provides a sample:

> The best way of protecting yourself from the Devil was to carry a pointed amulet, preferably a horn, so that you could grasp it when someone with the evil eye looked at you. If you did not have the amulet, then the next

> best thing you could do was to form your hand in the shape of two horns. Making the sign of the cross would give you the same protection, but the trouble with that was that it was too obvious. It might offend the person with the *mal'occhio.* (101-2)

Malocchio, however, is nothing compared to the more catastrophic *fattura*. This latter, in fact, "presupposed the services of a witch with a professional knowledge of black magic" (104). When Gerlando's cousin Rosina shows signs of insanity, her relatives, being unfamiliar with the etiology of the psychosis, resolutely claim she must be the victim of *fattura*. A middle-aged spinster is believed to be the one who commissioned the spell to a licensed witch, because "this jaded virgin had become ... envious of Rosina's beauty and her three young sons" (105). Traditional medicine appears to be an insufficient, and, ultimately, ineffective method to cure the sick woman. Being a curse inflicted by a professional, Gerlando's relatives believe the *fattura* must be healed by a professional as well. Unfortunately, though, the self-styled Devil-fighter Cristo—who, the narrator points out, unlike Christ, demands a fee for his services—turns out to be a charlatan, and Rosina eventually gets confined to a psychiatric ward. This story is much more than an episode in the narrator's life. By letting the reader in on the subjective religious experience of Sicilians in the US, Mangione is, in fact, attempting to disarm his skepticism towards non-traditional spirituality, as well as his fears, and eventually charm him with the creativity, humor and wit of his ethnic community.

Magical reasoning is not the only remnant of pagan culture which has managed to blend harmoniously with the most orthodox aspects of Catholicism. In Blood of My Blood, Gambino also notes that:

> with the coming of Christianity, many of the pagan customs were joined to those of the new religion. [...] The old pagan polytheism became Christianized as a whole panoply of saints was pressed into service to fulfill the functions of the gods they supplanted. As was true of the ancient gods, each saint was seen as having domain over a specific area of life and often to be in competition or rivalry not only with other saints but with Satan and other demons, with witches, and even on occasion with God himself. Thus the worship and appeasement of saints became a complicated affair. (196)

Saint Joseph is one of the most revered saints who inhabit the Sicilian Olympus. One of the inveterate traditions that honor him is the Saint Joseph's Table. According to the legend, the origins of the *festa* can be traced back to the Middle Ages, when a severe drought hit the West of the island, threatening the life of the inhabitants of the area. When the hopeless farmers turned to Saint Joseph for help, their prayers were heard, and miraculously it started raining. Acres of crops and thousands of lives were saved, and as a form of thanksgiving, people decided to honor Saint Joseph on March 19th with huge banquets to which everyone was invited. With time, however, this tradition took a more individualistic course, and the table became a way to thank Saint Joseph for fulfilling personal requests. In Mount Allegro, in fact, Gerlando's aunt Sarina asks Saint Joseph's intervention to cure her sick husband. The Saint does not let her down, and the man miraculously recovers from his illness. In order to keep her part of the covenant, a couple of days before the Saint's day, her head covered by a black shawl, Sarina walks around the neighborhood begging for alms to fund her table. The fundraising campaign proves successful, and, as the narrator recalls, aunt Sarina's Saint Joseph's table "stretched from one end of her living-room to the kitchen, and was piled high with a dazzling variety of meats, fruits, and pastries" (Mount Allegro 90). Through these colorful stories, Mangione instructs the non-Italian/American reader on the roots and dimensions of Sicilian

traditions that are most at odds with the dominant culture. The "outsider" may be thus better positioned to gain an appreciation of the diversity brought on to the United States by this foreign group.

Another aspect of the Sicilian weltanschauung that has received plenty of critical attention is the notion of *destinu*, or destiny. Interestingly, this aspect of Mangione's memoir brings it closer to Italian literature. Among the classic topoi and themes of Sicilian writings, in fact, Leonardo Sciascia identified a fatalistic resignation to one's lot. This fatalism—which entails a total distrust of human ability to improve one's condition, and therefore leads to cultural stasis—is best exemplified by Giovanni Verga's 1874 novella "Nedda," which was the blueprint for this author's more accomplished elaborations on *sicilianità* in later all-too-famous novels such as I Malavoglia (1881), and Mastro Don Gesualdo (1888).[51] However, while Verga in his writings seemed to sympathize, or, at least, empathize with the stoic acceptance of human unhappiness shown by his protagonists, Mangione takes a different stance on the issue. As an American-born child of Sicilian descent, the author had first-hand experience of his relatives' supine acceptance of their individual and collective fate: "'*E u Destino*.' That single phrase explained everything. 'The good Lord has decided in advance what is going to happen to all of us. You can't fight destiny,' my mother would often say to me" (80). The writer further elaborates on the historical abuses suffered by Sicilians, which have turned a feeling of hopelessness into a real philosophy:

[51] Orphan of father at an early age, Nedda is a poor olive picker who suffers humiliation and hunger, while taking care of her ill mother. At her mother's death, Nedda meets a poor young boy, with whom eventually she has a daughter. The baby will die soon, together with her father, who breaks his back falling from a tree. Nedda accepts her inenarrable pain and hunger with stoic resignation.

> [My father's] belief in Destiny could not be shed in his lifetime. For centuries his ancestors had been relying on the alibi of Destiny, for how else could they have become resigned to the obstacles that stood between them and a decent living? Their priests had talked about Destiny; so had their employers. They came to believe its power and to respect it. They heard nothing else. (80)

But at school, the hyphenated kids are imbibed with a different philosophy, for they are made to believe that no force beyond human control can ever predetermine one's fate. In the classroom, the notion of Americanness is predicated on the meritocratic belief in upward mobility, because "Abe Lincoln got to be President of the United States and so can you and you" (80). It is here that the author's Sicilian heritage conflicts with his American Faith. In instances like this one, when the gulf between the two halves of his Self reveals its depth, *sicilianamericanità* asserts itself most dramatically.

On the question of the education of the non-Italian/American reader to the Sicilian cultural codes, Robert Viscusi argues that "Explanation is the major mode in Mount Allegro. Mangione explains the *paesani* to the American reader, just as he shows himself explaining, or trying to explain, America to the *paesani*" (Buried Caesars 124).[52] By portraying himself as a spokesperson of sorts for his group, the writer ends up performing the role of a "diplomat,"[53] who conducts negotiations between his ethnic milieu and mainstream American culture in order to reduce pre-existing hostilities. In this sense,

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[52] I fail to see in what ways in Mount Allegro Mangione would try to explain America to his *paesani*, or fellow Italian Americans. Rather, I tend to agree with William Boelhower, who, in a discussion of the intraethnic nature of the memoir, writes: "In Mount Allegro there are two radically separate worlds, two different behavioral codes, two different conceptions of the self, two languages and two types of food. *Simply put, Mangione presents only one of these two series; the official world is, with few exceptions, ignored*" (Immigrant Autobiography 183, emphasis added).

[53] In Italian Signs, American Streets, Fred Gardaphé places Mangione—together with John Fante and Pietro di Donato—in the "Early Mythic Stage" of the narrative development of Italian/American literature. According to the literary mode peculiar to this stage, Mangione eventually "debunks the melting pot myth and replaces it with the myth that the two cultures can be synthesized into a new culture, Italian America … He serves as a *diplomat* of the new world of Italian America that he fashions in his writing" (Italian Signs 75, emphasis added).

Mangione works in the tradition of what critic Daniel Aaron has called the "local colorist." In Aaron's 1964 article "The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters," the "local colorist" occupies the first stage of the "process by which the 'minority' writer has passed from ... 'hyphenation' to 'de-hyphenation'" (214). According to the critic, in writing about the members of his hyphenated group, the purpose of this self-appointed spokesperson is that of correcting distorted images in order to overcome damaging stereotypes of the group which may persist in mainstream America. He adds:

> It was as if he were saying to his suspicious and opinionated audience: "Look, we have customs and manners that may seem bizarre and uncouth, but we are respectable people nevertheless and our presence adds flavor and variety to American life. Let me convince you that our oddities—no matter how quaint and amusing you find them—do not disqualify us from membership in the national family." (214)[54]

Differently put, Mangione resorts to explanation as a most effective literary mode of operation in order to convince mainstream America of the worthiness of inclusion of his ethnic group in a more comprehensive version of American nationhood.

Yet, there might be another reason why explanation would be Mangione's preferred rhetorical strategy. This has something to do specifically with his regional identity. In an article suggestively entitled "A Double Life: the Fate of the Urban Ethnic," Mangione describes his first steps in the growth of a Sicilian/American consciousness as

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[54] Italian critic Giuseppe Prezzolini made the same point in 1948 when by the way of Mount Allegro he wrote: "Per il Mangione la sua origine siciliana resta sempre un 'problema,' qualche cosa da spiegare agli americani, per cui, inevitabilmente, lo scrittore italo-americano prende la posa di colui che insegna ai forestieri, fa da guida o da intermediario fra i selvaggi e l'uomo civile, ma con la benevolenza di chi ammette che anche fra i selvaggi c'è qualche cosa di buono" ("Nè Puri Profughi, Nè Profughi Puri"). "For Mangione, his Sicilian origins always constitute a 'problem,' something to explain to Americans, therefore, inevitably, the Italian-American writer takes the pose of someone who teaches foreigners, of the guide or the intermediary between the savage and the civil ones, but with the benevolence of those how admit that there is some good even in the savages" (my translation).

follows: "On the street we were Americans, though not sure what that meant; inside the home, we were Sicilians, and there was never any mistaking of what that meant" (173). This sense of acute self-awareness is something that can be said to mark Sicilians both in Italy and in the US. A good part of it, I would suggest, might be explained as a response to the phenomenon of Mafia. Even when not dealing explicitly with Mafia themes, Mangione's—and many other Sicilian and Sicilian/American writers'—need to explain Sicilian culture to "Outsiders" could be ignited by the mere existence of Mafia. Forced on the defensive by a series of prevailing cultural prejudices against their group, this sense of guilt puts Sicilians and Sicilian Americans in a state of constant psychological siege. In other words, Mafia weighs on the psychology of Sicilians and Sicilian Americans as an almost inescapable collective sense of guilt. Mangione was first confronted with this psychological burden when his father forbade him and his brother to join the Boy-scouts, an episode that the narrator recalls as follows:

> Even before [Robert Di Nella] came along, my father had indicated that there might be some doubt about the good standing of Sicilians, by being on the defensive about them and by forbidding Joe and me to carry knives because of the unpleasant association they had in the public mind with Sicilians. (7)

The writer was obviously conscious of Sicily's place both in Italy and in the US as the region where Mafia first originated. In the end, as a Sicilian American—arguably, more than any other Italian American—Mangione felt the need to explain his group's lifestyle.

An array of ambiguities and conflicted feelings towards ethnic allegiance are constitutive of *sicilianamericanità*. If on the one hand, Sicilian/American writers are drawn to the past of Sicily, to its variegated history, charming stories, and legends, on the

other they are haunted by the ghost of Mafia. Rather than exploring the moral intensity of this psychological burden, Mangione decided to downplay it in his first memoir. The humorous tone of the beginning of the chapter entitled "Uncle Nino and the Underworld" functions as an evidence that the stigma of Mafia drove the author to counterbalance the negative image of Sicilians in the States:

> In the sphere of crime, my relatives were a distinct disappointment. From the newspapers one gathered that Sicilians in general had a passion for murder and blackmail, but my relatives did little to uphold that reputation. Considering their large numbers—there were several hundred in Rochester alone—the crimes they committed were few and hardly the kind to enhance my prestige with my playmates. Except for mundane misdemeanors like playing the numbers and occasionally bootlegging, they led such respectable lives that they might as well have been Polish, Irish, German, or even Northern Italian, for all the glory I got out of them. (181)

Assuming the role of the "diplomat," Mangione felt upon himself the pressure of a certain social ideology, and the responsibility to protect his group from the infamy of Mafia. After all, the author confessed that, in writing Mount Allegro, he hoped that "[a]t last, the Sicilian immigrants, the most maligned of the Italian Americans, would be presented as [he] knew them to be, not as the criminals projected by the American press" (An Ethnic 243). It does not come as a surprise, then, if Mangione had no flattering words for Puzo's 1969 The Godfather, a novel which he thought devoid of

> any moral value whatsoever. Everybody in it, with the exception of the WASP wife of young Corleone, has no sense of ethics. They're all willing criminals or at least susceptible to criminality, even the police. Both the book and specially the movie have done tremendous damage to the image of Italians in this country. (Esposito 13)

In a 1992 interview published in the Philadelphia Inquirer, Mangione even alluded to Puzo's discriminatory attitudes towards Sicilians when he said: "The thing is, Puzo isn't

Sicilian. His family comes from the hills around Naples" ("Chronicling Italian Life"). In many respects, Sicilian/American writers like Jerre Mangione are victims of the collective sense of guilt they inherit as a regional legacy. Their rage to explain stems as much from their ethnic status, as from a regional inferiority complex. It is a rage to inform, charm, and eventually de-opinionate the non-Sicilian public.[55]

Humor is another major literary mode in Mangione's Mount Allegro. In his article "Humor and Identity in Ethnic Autobiography," John Lowe focuses on Zora Neal Hurston's Dust Tracks and Mangione's Mount Allegro to show how these two ethnic writers used humor as a *captatio benevolentiae* in order to reverse the negative stereotypes that mainstream America holds of their respective groups. Humor, Lowe notes, is one of the discursive engines that can facilitate the performance of ethnic autobiographies. The life stories of ethnic authors, the critic continues,

> become mechanisms for bringing opposites together, fixing in words a mirror whereby opposites look at one another, understand each other, and thereby come to a firmer understanding of their own self. The vehicle for much of this process, the circumambient ether of the experiments, is laughter, chief agent of the carnivalizing mode. (97)

[55] In his review of the book, Paul McBride rightfully notes: "Not everyone swam in the melting pot; many drowned. Jerre Mangione's masterful Mount Allegro exalts those who swam rather than mourning those who drowned." McBride is especially unconvinced by the uni-dimensional aspect of Mangione's characters. This book "creates postcard photographs rather than Picasso paintings," he objects (112). In an attempt to convey a positive image of Sicilian immigrants in the States, in fact, Mangione chose not to explore the darkest sides of Sicilian culture, nor did he hint at the most horrific encounters between ethnic and mainstream culture. In an effort to counter the traditional depictions of ethnic ghettoes as receptacles of crime, misery, and immorality, in Mount Allegro he conveyed an image of his multi-ethnic neighborhood as a sort of cocoon of comfort. The author himself had reservations about his autobiographical omissions, and voiced them in a Finale added to the 1981 edition of the memoir. Suffice it to read the following passage that he added in the Finale about his father Gaspare Mangione/Peppino Amoroso to grasp a sense of the mechanisms of self-censorship: "The father presented in Mount Allegro is not nearly as complex as he actually was. For all of his vitality, he suffered from periods of black despair that tortured our childhood with the fear of losing him ... we could not help but recall the fate of his own father who, on a Christmas Eve, had drowned himself in the Mediterranean, leaving behind a family of several young children of which he was the youngest" (297).

By capitalizing on humor, Mangione manages to construct his own difficult position as a Sicilian American, while at the same time he corrects stereotypical cultural representations.

Lowe further notes that "[b]oth [Hurston's and Mangione's] books are conservative in a way. [...] Both writers demonstrate in some detail their wide experiences outside the group and display their hard-won credentials in various mainstream hierarchies" (96). As a matter of fact, Mangione never made a secret of the fact that, as a young man, he resented his Sicilian upbringing, and thought it necessary to break free from his family, neighborhood, and city in order to become American.[56] As a second-generation ethnic, what he feared the most was the strong influence of immigrant parents, from whom, he argued, the American-born child inherits "a ghetto psychology which, incorporating the darkest fears and suspicions of his immigrant forebears, made him resistant to social change" ("On Being a Sicilian American" 49). The "ghetto psychology" discussed and feared by Mangione reflects the findings of sociologist Herbert Gans's 1962 The Urban Villagers, a study conducted between 1957-58 in a predominantly second-generation Italian/American low-rent neighborhood in Boston. In Gans's examination, the values, processes of socialization, and structure of the peer-group of the Italian Americans under observation reflected the patterns inherited by their immigrant parents. This legacy affected the relationship of these American-born adults with the outside world, by turning them into the "urban villagers" of the book's title. Gans, however, is more prone to argue that what Mangione defines as a "ghetto

[56] "As I grew up," the author recalls, "I developed a strong feeling that I had to leave home. As much as I loved my family and shared all their anxieties, I felt that unless I left I would never have much sense of what I was all about and what this country was all about" (Esposito, "Jerre Mangione," 8).

psychology" is less a cause of the ethnic heritage of the Italian Americans, than a working-class style. Whatever its nature, early on Mangione felt the need to avoid this legacy by escaping from Mount Allegro. In retrospect, the author also realized that he needed to bracket his experience as a Sicilian son before being able to report it in such a complacent way in his first memoir. In a 1983 interview, he put it bluntly as follows: "If I had never left Rochester, I would never have been able to write about them as I have" (Mulas, 75). Mount Allegro was written half during a residence fellowship at the Victorian manor house of Yaddo, and partly in a barn on Kenneth Burke's farm in New Jersey. By then, Mangione had already made the leap from "urban villager" to "urban ethnic."

Although it was the last of the four memoiristic books to appear in 1978, it is to An Ethnic at Large that one must refer in order to trace the leap from "urban villager" to "urban ethnic," as well as to get a deeper understanding of the elaboration of a Sicilian/American consciousness in Jerre Mangione. The author considered An Ethnic as a "companion volume" to Mount Allegro, and thought they should be read together (Mount Allegro 300). An Ethnic is, in fact, a sequel of sorts of the first memoir, picking up chronologically where the former had left off. In one of the last chapters of Mount Allegro, the narrator recalls:

> At eighteen, I left my Sicilian relatives. Living among them, I had the sense that though I was born in America, I was not really an American. I decided to become a part of the outer world; perhaps in that way I could rid myself of the feeling that I was more Sicilian than American. (225)

In An Ethnic, Mangione tells the second part of his education as a Sicilian American, which is the one that took place in mainstream American culture. A quick look at the

titles of the chapters that make up this memoir will immediately reveal the difference with Mount Allegro. "Manhattan Miasma," "Into the New Deal," "Washington at War," "The Philadelphia Front," and "White House Weekend" are only some of the chapters that represent many stages of the author's process of education into the codes of Americanness. The only chapter that looks back to Mangione's past in Rochester is the opening one, tellingly entitled "Growing up Sicilian." While this cue ties the writer's 1978 memoir to his debut book, most importantly it signifies a transition from an exquisitely ethnic, to an almost exclusively American life. The growth of a sense of Americanness here appears to be inversely proportional to the author's independence from the Sicilian community-oriented model. On the literary plane, this autonomy translates into a memoir which is, this time, compliant with Western literary traditions. The "transindividual subject" Boelhower thought had characterized Mount Allegro is only a vague memory. An Ethnic focuses on the "I" as an individual, a change in style which reflects the author's transition from an ethnic, peasant, small-town scene, to the intellectual milieu of New York. If from his birth to age eighteen Mangione had especially developed his Sicilian Self, it took him exactly the same amount of time to balance it with an equal amount of Americanness. Between his 1943 and 1978 memoirs, we can re-construct the years that coalesced into the gradual unfurling of Mangione's *sicilianamericanità*.

Differently from Mount Allegro, where no exact time frame is provided to the reader,[57] An Ethnic is set in a precise temporal dimension. It, in fact, encloses the

[57] Only from various cues scattered throughout the text do we gather that the facts recounted in Mount Allegro took place in the twenties.

author's life from when, at the age of 18, he "arrived in the winter of 1928 [at] Syracuse University" (35), till his thirty-fifth birthday, which "came about a month before Franklin D. Roosevelt suddenly died of a cerebral hemorrhage, and six months before World War II ended with Hiroshima." This event, the writer adds, "marked the end of my apprenticeship as an American" (367). In this memoir, the personal and the historical planes interweave to portray the emergence of Mangione's Sicilian/American Self in the context of the "miasmal Depression that was devastating the country" (57). The bulk of An Ethnic is the story of the author's life as a student at Syracuse first, and as a job seeker during the Depression Era later. We get to know of his many sentimental and, occasionally, sexual exploits, his more or less famous friendships, but especially the progressive successes in his professional life. In his initial efforts to eke out a living anywhere for the sake of not going back to Rochester, we follow the author's peregrinations to Manhattan, Washington, and Philadelphia. Starting out as a member of the editorial staff of Time, Mangione also worked as an assistant bookkeeper in a garage, assistant librarian, book editor for the McBride publishing firm, and as the National Coordinating Editor of the WPA Federal Writers' Project.[58] Ironically enough for an Italian American, at the end of the memoir—which coincides with the eve of Pearl Harbor—, Mangione was working as director of the Public Relations Program of the INS. For this program, he was put in charge of publicizing the Alien Registration Act, which required for German, Italian, and Japanese nationals to register as "enemy aliens."[59]

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[58] From this experience, Mangione will draw inspiration to write The Dream and the Deal. See footnote n. 39.

[59] Chap. 13 of An Ethnic, entitled "Concentration Camps—American Style" is based on Mangione's first-hand experience, and personal visits to major internment camps. This chapter is also included in a recent study of the effects of internment on Italian Americans during WWII edited by Lawrence DiStasi, Una

From this memoir we gather that, paradoxically, the years spent away from Rochester and his relatives were probably those in which Mangione learned more about his Sicilian Self. The contact with the non-Italian/American majority with whom he purposely surrounded himself provided him with a looking glass through which he could calculate the entity of the influence his Sicilian upbringing had on him. At times, this confrontation engendered in him a sense of inadequacy. In one instance, he elaborates on the envy he felt towards the guests at a house party thrown by the artist Peggy Cowley. Unencumbered by an immigrant family, these people, Mangione felt, moved around with a higher degree of self-assurance:

> They were also fortunate to have had parents whose roots were deeply imbedded in American soil and who spoke the native language. They had no identity problems, none of the conflicts that gnawed at the psyche of every son and daughter of immigrant parents to whom English was a foreign tongue. (133)

However, the fact that, in some ways, his ethnic identity might constitute a handicap of sorts did not immediately translate into a rejection of his heritage *in toto*. Rather, Mangione's "apprenticeship as an American" turned out in the end to be a period of learning more about his Sicilian roots. At Syracuse University, as Feature Editor of the college's newspaper, The Daily Orange, Mangione took to interviewing prominent writers who came to lecture at school. On one of these missions, the author met British novelist John Cowper Powys, who, he recalls, "on learning I was full-blooded Sicilian with parents from the ancient province of Agrigento, he chided me for not using my baptismal name of Gerlando, then discoursed eloquently about the glories of Sicilian

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Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment During World War II (2001).

civilization which, I learned for the first time, antedated that of Rome by two thousand years" (43). Having experienced first-hand the folk aspects and traditional values of the Sicilian culture, the author was then informed of a different aspect of his Sicilian/American identity, one that engendered in him a sense of pride rather than inadequacy.

By the way of the cultural dilemma experienced by Italian/American writers, in his 2006 study Buried Caesars, Robert Viscusi claims that "Italian American writing arises in the oscillating space that subsists between two formidable national/imperial programs:" on the one hand, the more recent economic power of the United States, and on the other Italy, with "its antique prerogatives." "Those Italian Americans who choose to thematize Italy in their thinking and writing," Viscusi continues, "soon enough begin to compile claims of precedence that have roots deep in the Italian national imaginary" (31). Mangione seems to confirm Viscusi's theory when he writes:

> I began to understand the falseness of the melting pot concept that had been drummed into every school child of my generation. Especially hard to swallow was the arrogant assumption of politicians, as well as of some scholars, that American civilization, though still in its infancy, should take precedence over the older civilizations of its latter day immigrants. ("Remembrances" 54)

Upon learning from the British writer of the "glories of Sicilian civilization," the writer grew an interest in the island explained as follows: "Yet for all my faith in the American Way of Life and the Lucky Break, the Sicilian Way began to obsess me as it never had before. Sicily became an irresistible magnet which I needed to explore and fathom" (176). The exploration was first a scholarly endeavor, carried on through travel and history books. In 1936, in an attempt to get closer to his relatives' reality, ascertain his

own identity, and ultimately make cognitive sense of his status as a US ethnic with strong regional allegiances, Mangione took his first trip to Sicily. Reported both in two final chapters of Mount Allegro—entitled "Welcome to Girgenti" and "Blighted Land"—and in An Ethnic, the author's first encounter with the island and its inhabitants was a crucial moment in the construction of his Sicilian/American identity.

In many ways, Mangione's first trip to Sicily was undertaken not only for personal, but also for political reasons. Although he never was a member of the Communist party, Mangione was a fierce anti-fascist.[60] In New York he had attended several meetings of the leftist group John Reed Club, and wrote under pseudonyms for several left-winged newspapers, among which the organ of the group, The Partisan Review, and the New Masses.[61] In the city, Mangione had also befriended Carlo Tresca, labor agitator, editor and publisher of Il Martello. All throughout the thirties, the anarchist had conducted a systematic campaign against Mussolini, a courageous mission which eventually resulted in his assassination. Tresca, in fact, got gunned down in the streets of New York the day before he was supposed to attend a party to celebrate the publication of Mount Allegro. The narrator painfully recalls: "On the morning of the party when I

[60] Mangione explained his skepticism towards Communism with his Sicilians heritage: "I could not bring myself to join the Communist Party. Some inner warning system, created perhaps by the weariness that Sicilians have developed through centuries of foreign invasions, made me chary of affiliating myself with a political organization that, like the Catholic Church I had rejected, handed down dogmas and orders which its membership was blindly expected to accept" (An Ethnic 121).

[61] For the New Masses, Mangione also wrote a review of Ignazio Silone's Fontamara, an anti-fascist political novel, and published an interview with Luigi Pirandello that took place in New York, during the author's first visit to the States. Mangione managed to have an hour of the Nobel-prize winner's time by playing on the common heritage, being that both Pirandello and Mangione's parents hailed from Agrigento. From the interview, however, all that Mangione could get was the acknowledgement that the café where his father had worked as an apprentice pastry maker made the best cannoli in Sicily. As for Pirandello's stance towards Fascism and Mussolini, which was Mangione's main reason for that interview, he could not get any satisfactory answer. See An Ethnic, 126-29.

dashed to a newsstand to read what the critics had to say about my book, I was confronted by the front-page headlines of his murder" (An Ethnic 306). [62]

The friendship with such a notoriously staunch enemy of Mussolini was one of the factors that compromised the happy outcome of Mangione's first trip to fascist Italy in 1936. In constant fear of being conscripted as an American of Italian descent, and also of being recognized as the author of venomous articles against the dictatorship, let alone as a friend of Tresca's, Mangione developed "a sense of caution that sometimes veered on paranoia" (194). The writer officially undertook the trip as a correspondent for Travel magazine, with an ingratiating letter addressed to the Minister of Propaganda, signed with "fascist greetings." Nevertheless, all during his stay in Italy, his mail from the US was constantly checked, his movements followed by the fascists, and he was even interrogated a couple of times at police headquarters. Much to his own dismay, Mangione realized that most of the people around him, his relatives included, to different degrees, supported the regime. When they did not adamantly refuse to talk politics, as a potentially dangerous pastime, they just uncritically repeated, and, sometimes, enthusiastically embraced the propaganda messages with which the masses were bombarded. Significantly enough, the only person in fascist Agrigento who had managed to escape the brainwashing was an "ex-American." According to this man, his experience in the US—from where he had been deported to Italy for some mysterious crime—had endowed him with a critical perspective on Fascism, which was lacking in those who had never crossed the ocean. "'This town stinks, the whole country stinks. If you ask me,

[62] Mangione speculated on the mystery surrounding the assassination of the anarcho-syndicalist Carlo Tresca in his 1965 novel Night Search. See footnote n. 44 in this chapter.

their system of government stinks. But none of these guys know it. They been here all their lives; that's all they know, they don't know no better'," the "ex-American" says to the author (184). While confessing he has been cooking up a scheme to illegally re-enter the United States, the man adds "I'd rather be dying in Brooklyn than living in this friggin' country" (184). In this atmosphere, Mangione's resentment towards the regime grew to the point that, in a moment of exasperation, on top of Giotto's tower in Florence, he could not resist the temptation of adding to the work of some graffito writers, by writing "the words 'Abbasso Mussolini' (Down with Mussolini) across the torso of a female saint with a broken nose" (200).[63]

Despite all the problems caused by Mussolini's regime, Mangione's trip to Sicily helped him elaborate on the feeling he had already started developing in New York, that is "a root feeling, a connection with a substantial past that made the uncertain present more bearable" (175). The author's connection with Sicily starts delineating itself in terms of a symbiotic, and yet conflictual relationship as the boat approaches the shores of the island. Overhearing some of the crew members talking to each other in the Sicilian dialect, the author feels "overwhelmed with the emotion of being *a full-blooded Sicilian in direct touch with his life source*" (180, emphasis added). As soon as he steps off the boat in Palermo, though, his enthusiasm wanes. For the first time in his life, in fact, Mangione has the chance to evaluate the impact of nostalgia on his relatives' memories of Sicily. Poverty and the stark barrenness of the landscape strike him as incongruous with the picture provided to him in Rochester, to the point that he is prone to conclude

[63]A much more politically mature and responsible anti-Fascist statement is Mangione's first novel, The Ship and the Flame (1948). See footnote n. 43 in this chapter.

that "The mythologists who placed the gates of Hades in Sicily were certainly more reliable than the memories of [his] Rochester relatives" (181).[64]

The first trip to Sicily also enabled Mangione to evaluate the impact of American-ness on his immigrant relatives. As for gregariousness, warmth, and conviviality, the author noted that his Sicilian relatives were certainly comparable to those living in Rochester, as a number of more or less close relatives vied to offer hospitality to the newly arrived guest. Most of the differences between the indigenous Sicilians and the immigrant ones were, according to him, accounted for by political and economic considerations, which made the "Rochester relatives ... a more contented lot than their Sicilian counterparts" (188). However, deep down, the author concludes, there is not much difference between Sicilians and first-generation Sicilian Americans, and adds: "The champions of the American melting-pot theory were wrong. Despite three decades of American residence, my Rochester relatives remained Sicilian to the core" (187).

As an American-born citizen, Mangione experienced in Sicily the same conflicted feelings towards his relatives' *weltanschauung* that were at the core of Mount Allegro. The arena of cultural conflicts between Sicilian and American ways is, in this memoir, represented by the different views Sicilians and Americans hold on marriage. While Mangione's Sicilian relatives believe in the sanctity of traditional arranged marriages, the American culture that accounts for one half of his "half-and-half" identity supports love marriages, based on choice. In peasant societies like that of Sicily at the time of

[64] On his second trip to Sicily, in 1947, Mangione had the possibility to reverse his opinion. He wrote: "On my first trip, both the scenery and the people had oppressed me with their sullen reticence. ... Now, thanks to the spring of the season and of the new regime, everything seemed different. This was more like the Sicily, the God-graced garden, my Rochester relatives were so nostalgic about when I was a child" (Reunion 78).

Mangione's first visit, the true good of the individual coincides with the true good of the clan. Marriages are, therefore, arranged according to various social and economic considerations. In the end, these unions are supposed to reinforce the position, and enhance the reputation and fortune of both families involved. In an industrial and modern country like the United States, on the other hand, familial control over the adult individual's life is more tenuous. Therefore, love is considered as the institutional basis for marriage, and love match marriages are the rule.

At the news that his Uncle Giuseppe had just arranged a marriage for his eldest son to the daughter of the local bandmaster, Mangione cannot but express "astonishment on learning that Gerlando, who was stationed in Rome as a Department of Justice agent, had yet to set eyes on his future bride. All he had was her photograph and his father's assurance that the marriage would be a good one" (185). However, later in his trip, the author meets with his cousin in Rome, and, to his own surprise, this latter turns out to be "by no means confident of his father's taste in such matters, although as a dutiful Sicilian son he was prepared to spend the rest of his life with the girl" (190). He, in fact, bombards Mangione with questions about his fiancé, which range from her anatomy—legs, breast, feet—, to her disposition. The same Uncle Giuseppe who had successfully fixed his son up, advises Jerre: "'Your best bet would be to marry a Sicilian girl who lives in Sicily and hasn't been spoiled by crazy American ideas.'" When the author reminds him that he would be leaving Sicily in a few days, the uncle does not flinch:

"'That doesn't matter,' he replied. 'I can always mail you photographs,'" and then devises a schoolteacher who would make a perfect wife for him (An Ethnic 185-86). [65]

In his much-acclaimed book Beyond Ethnicity, Werner Sollors engages in a discussion about the conflicts between parentally arranged marriage and "romantic marriages." The critic underlines the coincidence between American identity and the American marriage patterns as follows:

> American allegiance, the very concept of citizenship developed in the revolutionary period, was—like love—based on consent, not on descent, which further blended the rhetoric of America with the language of love and the concept of romantic love with American identity. (112)

Following New World patterns of mate self-selection, on the ship back to America, Mangione falls in love with a thin blond American with an all-American name, Ellen Ingram. However, *sicilianamericanità* is a most complicated process of identity construction, and what appeared at first as a self-selection of mate according to American patterns was actually dictated by his Sicilian heritage. Despite the appearances, in fact, what attracts him to Ellen is the fact that she is a staunch Methodist, with "old-fashioned

[65] The question of arranged marriage is also an important part of Mangione's 1950 Reunion in Sicily. In his Introduction to the Italian 1992 edition of the book, Prezzolini wrote: "Ma c'è qualche cosa in questo libro di cui forse l'autore non si è reso conto, cioè che la sua Riunione somiglia ad un abbraccio disperato a qualche cosa di perduto, che né l'autore né la sua progenitura ritroveranno più. ... L'emigrazione è stata una tragedia. Non è più possibile riunirsi dopo la separazione. I pezzi rotti di un vaso si rimettono insieme, ma sono sempre cocci. Il motivo permanente di questo libro è lo sforzo della famiglia siciliana, anche di quella rimasta in America, di far sposare una ragazza della famiglia, o almeno del paese, o almeno siciliana, all'autore. ... ma il fatto rimane che l'autore non si è sposato in Sicilia. E questo dev'essere stato un gran dolore per quella famiglia" (Riunione in Sicilia 302). "But there is something in this book of which perhaps the author is not aware, that is his Reunion looks like a desperate hug to something which one has lost, and which neither the author nor his children will ever find again. Emigration was a tragedy. It is not possible to reunite again after separation. The pieces of a broken vase can be put together again, but they're always shards. The permanent theme of this book is the effort of the Sicilian family, even of that which is in America, to make the author marry a girl of the same family, or at least town, or at least a Sicilian. ... but the author did not marry in Sicily. And that must have caused a great sorrow to his family" (my translation).

virtues, which included the vow to preserve her virginity for the man she married." The narrator recalls:

> Only months later, when I had regained some of my wits, did it dawn on me that many of her values were the same ones I had derided in my Sicilian relatives, and what was even more absurd, were still a part of me. Apparently, the miracle of discovering Sicilian values lodged in an unmistakably American girl, the blond personification of my bicultural yearnings, was more than my American-Sicilian psyche could resist. (208)

The possibility of an exogamous marriage with someone belonging to the so-called dominant culture appeals to the author for it could represent his passport to mainstream America. His selection, however, is conditioned by the value system of the girl, who, because of her strict religious beliefs, seems to match his fantasy of a subservient Sicilian woman, therefore becoming "the blonde personification of [his] bicultural yearnings."

Back in the States, Mangione continues his education in mainstream America. The end of the writer's "apprenticeship as an American" is recounted in one of the last chapters, entitled "White House Weekend." In it, the author recalls a 1944 three-day weekend spent at the Roosevelts' residence. The personal encounter with the presidential couple may very well represent the acme of the author's all-too-personal process of interethnic contact with American society. After eighteen years spent in a Sicilian milieu, and just as many struggling to become part of the American mainstream, Mangione had somehow managed to figure out who and "what" he was. In "A Not-so-Final Note," Mangione recapped his process of construction of a "half-and-half" identity as follows: "I resolved [my impressions of identity] by becoming an ethnic at large, with one foot in my Sicilian heritage, the other in the American mainstream. By this cultural gymnastic stance I could derive strength from my past and a feeling of hope for my present" (369).

In conclusion, Mangione is arguably the most prominent of the authors on this side of the Atlantic whose works, although subsumed under the broader context of Italian/American literature, have distinguished themselves as examples of a regional ethnic experience. Betraying the principle of what has come to be known as "Hansen's Law," according to which the son wishes to forget the legacy of his immigrant parents, Mangione delved deeply into his heritage, both in his life and his work. From an interplay of first- and second-hand experiences with *sicilianità*, the author derived the sense and meaning of a regional self-ascription and of *sicilianamericanità*. For Mangione, to present himself in various occasions as a "full-blooded Sicilian" meant to acknowledge the import that the culture of descent had on him, and which he specifically identified as Sicilian. His self-identification is a reflection of both his group's efforts towards cultural preservation and of dominant Italian and American prejudices. In order to correct some of the most unfavorable prejudices, and especially the ones which originate from Mafia, Mangione undertook to explain, mostly through humor, many aspects of the Sicilian culture to non-Sicilians, among which the folk tradition of Saint Joseph's Table, the belief in *malocchio* e *fattura*, the notion of *destinu*, and so forth. However, as we have seen, the question of identity in his writings is a complex process of representation and self-representation, for, as an outsider to both mainstream American and mainstream Italian cultures, Mangione elaborated on the complexities of his "half-and-half" identity. The necessity to overcome the dual oppositions inherent in his bicultural identity led sometimes to negotiations which, in the realm of literature, took different forms, among which the translation of Sicilian oral storytelling tradition into written paper, the abundant use of Sicilian dialect, and so on. All in all, the need to understand himself led

Mangione to an autobiographical exploration which was as literary as it was ethnographic. During his third visit to Sicily, in 1965, Mangione found himself prophesizing that "Sicilian culture [...] is vanishing in the United States. In a couple of generations there won't be any trace of it, except for a few Sicilian names that Americans have trouble spelling" (A Passion 102). Significantly, when his non-Sicilian interlocutor asks him whether he thinks that it is a desirable thing for Sicilians "to become like everyone else, like the Italians who live in an industrialized society," the two get interrupted, and the discussion is never again resumed (102). Whether the prophecy will be fulfilled or not is perhaps too early to say. What Mangione has left us with is a space in the American literary panorama for Sicilian/American authors to capitalize not only on their ethnic but also on their distinctly regional Sicilian voice.

Chap. 3

"The Scum of the Scum of the Scum"

Sicilianamericanità in Rose Romano's Poetry

> The Negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the coloured farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the condition and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily.
>
> Booker T. Washington, The Man Farthest Down (1910)

As discussed in the previous chapters, whereas ethnic identification problematizes any hegemonic notion of Americanness measured against Anglo-Saxon standards, the avowed allegiance to any one of the regions which contributed to the Italian diaspora to the US challenges any monolithic configuration of *italianità*, or Italian-ness. Any exploration of Italian Americanness defined in regional terms becomes an even more difficult task for the critic when issues of regional self-ascription overlap with contestations of traditional gender roles, heterosexual scripts, as well as racial categorizations. Moving within the realm of post-Civil Rights and post-feminist discourses, in the early 1990s, Rose Romano used her Sicilian/American identity in order to question the patriarchal and sexist paradigm of the Italian/American community, the

homophobic grain of American culture at large, and even the discriminatory practices of the lesbian publishing community towards her "race." In the process, Romano crafted a poetic persona so idiosyncratic that she gained a reputation as the enfant terrible of Italian/American literature.[66] "Like a stand-up comedian," Helen Barolini writes, "Romano stresses a blue-collar past and present, writes fast and smart, and presents herself defiantly vaunting all her differences" (The Dream Book 48). These differences, as we shall explore, allegedly stem from a combination of her ethnic status, Sicilian heritage, and sexual preference. "I'm a Sicilian-Italian-American Lesbian, / the scum of the scum of the scum, / forgotten by those who scream / in protest because they are / forgotten, / and I am neither seen nor heard," she declares, thus portraying herself as an "outsider" to the Italian/American community, mainstream America, and the heterosexual world ("The Fly," Vendetta 40). In this chapter, I will look at Rose Romano's two volumes of poetry, namely, Vendetta (1990) and The Wop Factor (1994) in order to show how she uses her *sicilianamericanità* to set up a powerful critique of multiple systems of domination in tones so controversial that she ultimately turns a poetic possibility into a polemic reality. By bringing to the fore a sexualized and racialized subjecthood, Romano takes on the subversive role of the defiant troublemaker who constructs an openly oppositional stance towards any form of authority and pre-constituted roles.

According to Romano, the widespread use of the umbrella terms Italian and Italian American is a rather insidious way to erase all traces of the different, and equally

[66] In her 2002 study of Italian/American women writers, critic Edvige Giunta defines Romano as "[o]ne of the most polemical figures on the Italian American literary scene in the early 1990s" (Writing with an Accent 23).

glorious, pre-Unification pasts experienced by the South, and especially Sicily. Non-Italians in the US, the poet laments,

> Don't know
> What I'm talking about.
> They think I'm weird.
> They think the only
> difference, if
> there is any, between
> Italians and Sicilians,
> is that, unlike Italians
> (who aren't too bright,
> either), Sicilians make pizza
> the way morons make
> wheels. ("Mutt Bitch," Vendetta 38)

In her poetry, Romano undertakes to preserve the regional spirit that pervades much of the writings by Sicilian/American authors. However, unlike Jerre Mangione, whose Sicilian/American consciousness manifested itself mainly in the form of realistic depictions of regional characters and situations as well as a recognizable linguistic experimentalism, *sicilianamericanità* as it surfaces in Romano's poetry is not characterized by a recognizable set of Sicilian cultural markers. Rather, in the poet's hands, the self-ascription to the Sicilian regional subgroup serves the purpose of creating a discourse of subalternity in the United States. By portraying herself as a Sicilian American, in fact, Romano can claim a subaltern status both vis-à-vis mainstream American culture as an ethnic, and in relation to the Italian community as the Southerner par excellence. *Sicilianamericanità*, then, is to Romano a poetic/political tool that helps her to articulate her position as an ethnic woman and a lesbian poet in the United States.

The contestatory potential of *sicilianamericanità* as a discourse in Romano's hands is easy to discern when one introduces the element of choice in the poet's process

of self-ascription. Differently from the other two authors considered in this study—namely, Jerre Mangione, and Ben Morreale—whose respective parents all hailed from Sicily, third-generation Romano is the daughter of an "inter-regional" couple. According to the family history, her grandparents on her father's side "were Neapolitan / nobility, owned property on the bay, named [her] / father Victor, after the king—they knew him / personally" ("Just Two More," Vendetta 10). Ironizing on the self-aggrandizing family mythology, the poet wonders why no adequate explanation has ever been provided to her as to the reasons that pushed this allegedly rich couple to leave its fortunes and titles—count and countess—behind in Naples to become in the United States just "two more / wops" (10). Her mother's 'coat of arms,' on the other hand, featured a pick and a shovel, so to speak, for she was born into a family of Sicilian peasants. When the woman died prematurely, the eight-year-old Romano was left in the care of her paternal grandmother, a fact that caused a weakening of the ties with the Sicilian side of her family. In a poetic recollection of her childhood, the poet brings out memories of how region-based hierarchies of inequality within the Italian immigrant community affected her upbringing:

> I grew up
> in a Neapolitan family,
> always silently
> defending Sicilians…
> If I misbehaved
> or did something
> stupid, it was because
> I'm Sicilian.
> I don't remember
> ever doing anything
> that got me called
> Italian. I grew up
> thinking Naples
> is in Northern Italy. ("Mutt Bitch," Vendetta 37)

The poem suggests that a pecking order is in place within the Italian community, which relegates Sicilians to the lowest echelon of the Italian social ladder.

Romano's poetic speculations echo the observations of Luciano Iorizzo and Salvatore Mondello in an early study of Italian immigration in the US. In their 1971 The Italian-Americans, calling attention to the question of inter-regional relations, the two scholars noted:

> Italians have had a class system which placed the northerner over the southerner and gave preeminence to the Tuscan while relegating the Sicilian to the lowest ranks. Neapolitans who scorned the condescending attitudes and actions directed against them by their northern brethren were just as quick in denigrating their countrymen farther south. Even in America, the Sicilians were ostracized by other Italians, who believed them to be of non-Italian and even savage origins. (4)

Following the 1861 Unification of Italy, in fact, hierarchical distinctions were established so that *meridionali*, or 'southerners,' were relegated to second-class citizenship. The industrial North had control not only over the means of production, but also of the political apparatus, while the *Mezzogiorno*, with a conservative agricultural economy, hardly participated in the hegemonic projects of new-born Italy. Southern Italian masses experienced various degrees of difficulty in participating in the nation's economic and political life. As an island at the southernmost extreme of Italy, Sicily and its people occupied a peripheral position in the new-born country, and were looked down by those both socially and geographically further up. These ranking dynamics contributed to Romano's choice to capitalize on her Sicilian heritage in order to portray herself as the ultimate Italian/American subaltern. In her poetry, then, *sicilianamericanità* as an identity statement reflects not only an actual ethnic filiation, but, most importantly, it signifies a conscious act of self-politicization.

As Romano's poetry intentionally bespeaks a position of subalternity, it becomes excessive, and sensational in language as well as images. The use of self-disparaging definitions and ethnic slurs—among which "the scum of the scum of the scum," "mutt bitch," "wop," "dyke," and the like—is one of the strategies adopted by Romano to speak truth to power. In other words, through the use of self-derogatory language in her poetic expression, Romano intends to reclaim historically harmful hate speech, deprive it of its disparaging potential, and eventually appropriate it as an expression of pride. Furthermore, Romano challenges not only what is considered "proper" poetic language, but also "politically correct" ethnic representations, when she re-appropriates stereotypical images of Italian women of Southern stock circulating in the US. In her insightful "Introduction" to The Dream Book, the first anthology of writings by Italian/American women, Helen Barolini elaborates on the gap of values between traditional Southern Italian culture and modern America that contributed to the creation of stereotypical representations. According to the critic, the clash between these two seemingly irreconcilable cultural frameworks caused a loosening of family ties, which, in turn, caused the immigrant woman to lose her power within the confines of her family. "In America," Barolini writes,

> she was quickly dethroned from venerable matriarch into the image of the old woman in the kitchen stirring the sauce, heart-warming maybe, but actually a figure of ridicule, a caricature...Not able to Americanize on the spot, the Italian immigrant woman suffered instant obsolescence, (an American invention), and became an anachronism, a displaced person, a relic of a remote rural village culture. (18)

Oftentimes in her poetry Romano uses the stereotypical image of the Italian immigrant from Southern Italy to articulate her own social and cultural identity. Exemplary in this

sense is the poem "To Show Respect," where the poet produces a detailed identikit picture of a woman of the Old Country, to which she imagines she will look like in a not-so-distant future:

> I'm already short; someday
> I'll be round, like a meatball, like my
> grandmother. Someday I'll wear black
> dresses, black stockings, square black
> shoes. Someday I'll wear an apron, with
> a bodice, safety pins and sewing needles
> stuck to the bodice, change and keys
> in the pockets, keys to every room in the
> house, more keys than there are rooms
> in the house. I'll tie my long hair at
> the back of my neck, long faded white
> hair, wear wire rim glasses, never
> wear make-up or perfume. ("To Show Respect," Vendetta 23)

Short and stocky, dressed in black to signal the mourning of some old losses, showing no sign of vanity in her appearance or clothes, Romano's Southern Italian woman might strike—especially the American reader—as a powerless figure. Only, she still holds the keys to every lock in the house, a detail which reveals the degree of power the woman enjoys within the domestic sphere. Romano thus attempts to rescue the Italian immigrant woman from, to use Barolini's terms, "instant obsolescence" by using the same images American culture has used to condemn her to be an "anachronism." By usurping the so-called dominant culture of its discursive power, Romano attempts to resist its cultural control. Ultimately, the strategy of re-appropriating derogatory language and stereotypical images allows the poet to force a rethinking of these discourses and the damaging effects that they can engender.

As a poet, Romano carries on a project of poetic/political contestation which aims at a conceptual reorientation of some of the most pressing issues of being a woman and a

lesbian of Sicilian descent in the US. The first obstacle to the full realization of women writers is the silencing power of the patriarchal man over the woman of Southern Italian culture. A testimony of the heteropatriarchal system of the Italian/American community comes from journalist/writer Michelangelo Signorile. In his 1993 Queer in America—an autobiographical exploration of the devastating effects of the closet on the lives of gays and lesbians—Signorile tells stories of his youth in Brooklyn. Remembering how the struggle for civil rights echoed in his Italian/American family, he notes that the conflicts that surfaced at his house were generational and cultural as much as they were gendered. The hostilities often culminated in shouting matches, which almost always ended with the victory of the patriarchal-conservative men over the liberal-democratic women:

> The country was in the midst of dramatic change. The black civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, the war in Vietnam, and the feminist movement were coming into the forefront. Some of my cousins, teenagers at the time, espoused the emerging ideologies, and their political stance resulted in heated arguments. One or two of my female cousins got into shouting matches regularly with the older men about the women's movement and about racial issues. Almost always, the men would become enraged, yelling at the top of their lungs and silencing the discussion. The men always won, of course. They had to: That was the rule of *la famiglia.* (21)

Guarantors of the status quo, the men try to maintain their power and authority in the household by muting the voices of women.

Acknowledging the fact that "[i]t's not easy being an angry poet / when you come from a culture / whose most profound statement of anger / is silence" ("Mutt Bitch," Vendetta 37), Romano understood that only by speaking up and writing down can Italian/American women become effective agents of resistance and change. If praxis had to be developed, the voices of Italian/American women needed to be structured around a

new philosophy of *sorellanza*—or 'sisterhood'—through the creation of common forums of discussion. In order to turn the collective literary efforts of Italian/American women into a legitimate site of struggle, in 1988 Romano founded the literary journal la bella figura, devoted to writings by Italian/American women writers, and malafemmina press, which produced a series of chapbooks of Italian/American women's poetry, including her own two volumes, namely Vendetta, and The Wop Factor. As for the meaning of this latter title, it is explained in a poem of the same name. In it, Romano ponders on how to improve her self-publishing operations and eventually resolves that what is needed is an increased literary density, which would make her journal heavy enough to produce a metaphorical "WOP" sound when tossed on the table. "So I've been thinking about that / a lot," she writes,

> and I think maybe
> *la bella figura*
> should be enhanced
> by the wop factor—
> we want that extra weight—
> prose of substance,
> good and heavy poetry
> and when you slap us down
> we make noise. ("The Wop Factor" 24)

Through la bella figura and malafemmina press, Romano helped to build a sense of community, artistic support, as well as identity among Italian/American women writers.

Thanks to her poetic and publishing endeavors, Romano soon became a central figure in the newly developing field of Italian/American feminist and lesbian writing, so much so that in 1988 Gardaphé praised her as "the avant-garde of an Italian/American cultural consciousness that is ready to explode" (Dagoes Read 196). Refusing to be overwritten by heterosexist narratives, she courageously turned her queerness into one of

the overt subjects of her poetry, thus enriching the Italian/American literary tradition in the same way Audre Lorde, Gloria Anzaldúa, Cherríe Moraga, Paula Gunn Allen, and others have enriched that of their respective ethnic groups. For a feminist lesbian poet like Rose Romano, the historical backdrop of the women's and gay liberation movements played an important part in the development of her poetic voice. It is especially from the gay and lesbian literary forerunners who achieved prominence in the early 1970s that Romano inherits the idea of experimenting with old literary forms to convey new meanings, translating lesbianism into poetic expression.

Be she a lesbian from Bensonhurst, shouting profanities to a bunch of men commenting on her beauty; or a femme from the Lower East Side, strolling along Second Avenue, feeling the vegetables and fruits of a stand before buying them with a sensual touch; or a butch from the Village, who thinks about the traditional Italian Sunday dinner she is about to have, where she will carry "to the head of the table / not only the endurance of the Grandmother / but also the will of the Grandfather;" Romano proudly announces that "there is nothing in this world as wonderful / as an Italian-American Lesbian" in a poem of the same title (The Wop Factor 55). Her poetry celebrates pride in her lesbian identity, but often she uses the poetic medium to explore the difficulties engendered by her sexuality. In "Coming Out Unnoticed," for example, Romano recalls a meeting she once had with a best friend from her teenage years. Acknowledging that, as a girl, she had felt an early attraction to her friend, she painfully remembers how difficult it was to claim a lesbian identity even back at the time when "The only thing better than / a large number of lovers was / a great variety of lovers" (Vendetta 18). When she finally concedes to her friend that she has had it with men, the poet still prefers to "come out

unnoticed," by letting her friend take the statement "as one of those jokes / that introduces the long / tender moaning of straight women / complaining about their own / true loves" (15).

Interestingly, Romano's Sapphic poems are rarely explicitly sexual. Hardly ever does she explore the various aspects of lesbian physical love, a fact that might suggest that, despite her outspokenness and the provocative imagery and language of her poetry, sexual taboos might still be an issue Romano has not yet managed to resolve in the literary realm. In "Over the Edge," a poem included in Vendetta, the poet shyly crafts her lesbian poetics by focusing on the emotional and sexual turmoil she experiences when her lover's breasts accidentally emerge from her blouse during a serious conversation. The most explicit stanza on the theme of lesbian eroticism in Romano's poetic production is one that graphically celebrates the abundance of flesh, and culinary appetite together with lesbian eroticism as follows: "Sweet creases where her bellies meet, / run my tongue along them. / Caressing, moist, her bellies suck my/ tongue and I am dizzy" (Vendetta, "And She Laughs" 20). As the poem proceeds, though, the focus shifts away from the initial emphasis on Sapphic erotica to concentrate on the lover's relationship with food. This reticence seems to suggest that while issues of ethnic identity and gender are relatively easier to deal with in poetry, the dominant heteropatriarchal order is much more problematic, and difficult to face in verse.

The poet, however, is particularly aware of the culturally disruptive potential of her openly lesbian poetry, insofar as it threatens the all-too-important social institution of

the family. In his 1912 study Il Popolo Siciliano: La Famiglia e la Casa,[67] scholar of folklore Giuseppe Pitrè described the role of *la famiglia* in Sicilian culture, and the place that women occupy within it as follows:

> Forte è nei siciliani il sentimento della famiglia. Il padre tiene il governo assoluto e indiscusso di essa; la madre governa la casa, ne prende il maggiore interesse e comanda sui figli, quasi per facoltà del marito, cui essa ubbidisce ed ama anche quando egli non lo meriti. (29)[68]

The woman, Pitrè continues, "fa [al marito] sacrificio pieno di sé, della sua vita, dei suoi servigi, nei quali nessuno può eguagliarla, come non c'è cosa che possa eguagliare l'amore pei figli: *Amuri di matri, e sirvimentu di mugghieri*" (29).[69] A woman's self-actualization was thus supposed to be attained within the boundaries of the family, exhausted in the two roles of wife and mother. Romano draws from her personal experience as a "Sicilian-Italian-American Lesbian" to denounce the stifling expectations of the Italian/American family, which forces homosexuals to disguise their sexual identity in order to fulfill traditional gender roles. In her 1990 polemical essay "Where is Nella Sorellanza When You Need Her?" the poet confesses she came out as a lesbian at the age of thirty (148). Before that time, though, she too had been a victim of—to use Adrienne Rich's famous formulation—the "compulsory heterosexuality" of the Italian/American community, as proved by her marriage. Romano's first collection of poems Vendetta is also dedicated to her daughter, with a bitter-sweet explanation that

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[67] This is the last volume of the monumental Biblioteca Delle Tradizioni Popolari Siciliane (1871-1913), which Pitrè undertook to record all the aspects pertaining to the life of the Sicilian people.

[68] "Sicilians have a very strong sense of the family. Within it, the father exercises the absolute government, and his power is undiscussed; the mother governs the house, by serving its interests and commanding the children through the authority bestowed on her by her husband, whom she loves and respects even when he does not deserve it" (my translation).

[69] "Sacrifices herself fully [to her husband], both her life and her services, which no one can match, as much as nothing can compare to her love for her children: *a mother's love, and a wife's service*" (my translation).

leaves no room for doubt as to the poet's degree of awareness of the familial expectations of the heterosexually oriented Italian/American culture: "to Megan, my daughter, / for proving I can do what's necessary."

In her introduction to the 1996 collection of essays by Italian/American lesbians and gays Fuori, critic Mary Jo Bona notes how, for many,

> coming out as gay or lesbian is a process of discovery and recovery, not only of their sexual selves, but of their relationship to more than one family: to the Italian/American family reconstituted; and to a community of gays and lesbians, to which there are varying degrees of loyalty and connection. ("Gorgeous Identities" 4-5)

Rose Romano's relationship with the multicultural lesbian community was fraught with the same difficulties and conflicting feelings that characterize her relationship to her ethnic group. Disagreements especially surfaced around the concept of "race," and, consequently, of racial hierarchies. To Romano, Italian as a label is a misnomer when referring to Southerners in general, and particularly Sicilians, not only in the discussion of what is commonly referred to as ethnicity—loosely defined as the sum of shared values, beliefs, customs, food, and, generally, of cultural matters that account for human variation. According to the poet, in fact, Sicilians are a "racially" defined group as they do not belong to the Aryan stock of Northern Italians. Claiming to fit uncomfortably into the generally accepted White vs. "of Color" racial bipolarization in the US, Romano attempts to add one more nuance to the palette, namely Olive. Always in her poetry as well as in her polemical essays, Romano speaks of/from her Olive lesbian identity, so much so that, borrowing the definition from Noel Ignatiev and John Garvey, Gardaphé defines Romano—along with several other Italian/American writers—as a "race traitor," for being "militant in her attempt to avoid being white" (Leaving Little Italy 133). What

this Olive-ness means exactly, the poet tried to explain in "Permission – Two Friends" in the collection Vendetta. The poem is an attempt to resignify dominant modes of understanding racial categories in the form of a dialogue between the poet, who defends her racialized identity, and a friend who challenges it:

> you can't say
> Italians are people
> of color. I never
> said that. I said
> Southern Italians
> and Sicilians
> are Olive,
> neither white
> nor of color. But,
> she explained,
> you can't say
> Italy is a third
> world country.
> I never said that.
> I said Southern Italy and Sicily are as
> poor as some third world countries. She said,
> well, that's true. But you can't say it. (33)

In Romano's poetry, Olive-ness becomes one of the defining aspects of her Sicilian/American identity. On the basis of this racialized and sexualized *sicilianamericanità*, the poet attempts to build allegiances and solidarities inside and outside her ethnic community.

In certain respects, with regards to some discourses circulating first in Italy and then in the US, Romano's discussion of racial identity is not entirely farfetched. It is, in fact, rooted in the nefarious doctrines of racial superiority disseminated in Italy by the so-called Positivist School of Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo, Giuseppe Sergi, Enrico Ferri, and others. At the end of the 19th century, and beginning of the 20th, these sociologists and criminologists claimed that anthropological differences between the

"Germanic" Northerners and the "African" Southerners accounted for the superior civilization of the former—in matters as diverse as economy, social structure, education, political culture, and so forth—, and the barbarity of the latter. In the US, where racial distinctions were much sharper than Italy, the discourses on the genetic inferiority of Southern Italians found a fertile environment, and provided a rationale for discrimination of newly arrived immigrants. Among the ethnic slurs hurled at Italians that Richard Gambino surveys in his Blood of My Blood, "black guinea" and "black dago" especially speak volumes of the early racialization of Italian immigrants in the United States (98-99). Most likely because of the island's geographical propinquity as well as its historical ties with Africa, Sicilians, arguably more than any other Italian regional group, have been oftentimes racially associated with their African neighbors.

One need only look at several recent and well-known texts belonging to the larger domain of Americana to grasp a better idea of the terms of the discussion on the racialization of Sicilians in the US. Italian/American director, actor and screenwriter Quentin Tarantino is the creator of arguably the most memorable cinematic association of Sicilian identity with African heritage. In True Romance (1993), scripted by Tarantino and directed by Tony Scott, Christopher Walken plays the role of Sicilian mob boss Vincenzo Coccotti. In an attempt to recover a suitcase full of cocaine taken by mistake, Coccotti confronts ex-cop Cliff Worley, played by Dennis Hopper in what is generally known as the "Sicilian scene," or, in Joshua Fausty and Edvige Giunta's terms, the "Sicilian interlude" ("Quentin Tarantino" 212). Knowing that he has no chance to survive that encounter, Worley decides to take his own personal revenge on the Sicilian boss by discussing matters historical. "You know I read a lot," he begins, "especially about things

that have to do with history. I find that shit fascinating. In fact, I don't know if you know this or not, Sicilians were spawned by niggers" (qtd. in Fausty and Giunta, 214). The wild look in Coccotti's eyes does not scare the ex-cop the least, for he continues:

> It's a fact. Sicilians have nigger blood pumpin' through their hearts. If you don't believe me, look it up. You see, hundreds and hundreds of years ago the Moors conquered Sicily. And Moors are niggers. Way back then, Sicilians were like the wops in northern Italy. Blonde hair, blue eyes. But, once the Moors moved in there, they changed the whole country. They did so much fuckin' with the Sicilian women, they changed the blood-line forever, from blonde hair and blue eyes to black hair and dark skin. I find it absolutely amazing to think that to this day, hundreds of years later, Sicilians still carry that nigger gene. I'm just quotin' history. It's a fact. It's written. Your ancestors were niggers. Your great, great, great, great, great-grandmother fucked a nigger, and she had a half-nigger kid. That is a fact. Now tell me, am I lying? (qtd. in Fausty and Giunta 214)

Worley's survey of the history of colonization in Sicily betrays a knowledge of the North-South divide in Italy, coupled with an American bias concerning racial issues. In his deliberately insulting speech, the blond haired and blue eyed Northern Italian can be assumed to correspond to the US Anglo-model, while the black haired and swarthy Sicilian occupies in Italy the place African Americans hold in the US. Confronted with this painful reality, Coccotti is left with nothing to do, except resort to the most common defense mechanism of Mafia, and summarily execute the offender.

Spike Lee's 2000 Bamboozled explores and problematizes racial representations not only of blacks, but also of Sicilians in the US.[70] The film features a Harvard-educated

[70] The Italian/American community has variously been at the center of Spike Lee's directing career, most notably in his 1999 Summer of Sam. The movie, inspired by the true story of serial killer David Berkowitz, focuses on the scapegoating mechanisms in an Italian/American neighborhood in the South Bronx during the summer of 1977 when the shootings of the self-styled "son of Sam" took place. Interracial relations between African Americans and Italian Americans are especially explored by Lee in his 1989 Do the Right Thing and the 1991 Jungle Fever. While in the former interracial relations take the form of conflicts between the Italian/American owners of a pizza parlor in Brooklyn and its predominantly African/American customers, in Jungle Fever race and class differences are at the roots of the attraction between an African/American architect and his Italian/American secretary from Bensonhurst, a

program executive who, when told his scripts are not cutting-edge for the cable TV network for which he works, thinks up a blackface minstrel show. To his own surprise, the variety show turns into a big success, especially among whites. The scene that interests us for the purpose of this study juxtaposes Honeycutt—one of the two homeless street-performers turned stars of the minstrel show—and a white audience in blackface. When Honeycutt confronts some people in the audience with the question "Is you a nigger?," one of the spectators stands up and proudly announces:

> I'm a Sicilian nigger, which means I'm more of a nigger than any nigger in here. Because you know what they say about Sicilians, we're darker than most niggers, we're bigger than most niggers, and we rap better than most niggers.

The scene seems to suggest that the position of racial in-betweenness which Sicilian Americans have historically occupied in the US is fraught with ambiguities and subtleties. In the context of a show that has become successful precisely for its deliberately exaggerated "black" content, Lee's Sicilian feels comfortable to claim status as the 'ultimate nigger,' so to speak, in the studio. However, his 'black identity,' deprived of any political or polemical value, is the result of a supine acceptance of a bundle of characteristics Sicilians allegedly have in common with blacks—among them, darker skin, sexual potency, and singing skills—and which have been assigned to both groups by those whom he designates as "they" in the rhetorical question "you know what they say about Sicilians." That "they," one might safely assume, designates non-Sicilian and non-African Americans vested with the power to define, i.e., whites. In other words,

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neighborhood that had become infamous two years earlier for the assassination of Yusuf Hawkins by a mob of Italian/American youths. For a critical discussion of Spike Lee's treatment of Italian/American characters and ethnic conflicts, see especially the essays that make up the section "Filming the Black and White" in Shades of Black and White, edited by Ashyk, Gardaphé, and Tamburri.

the Sicilian American initially builds up an alliance of sorts with the African/American Honeycutt on the grounds of racial commonalities. Soon after, though, the few rap verses sang by the Sicilian qualify the racial solidarity between him and Honeycutt as a fallacy. "I'm white, not black, but not all the time. I'm in blackface, and I'm feelin' fine. No matter what color, no matter what race, You know you're cold chillin' when you're in blackface," the self-styled "Sicilian nigger" sings. The short performance can be read as a commentary on the racial ambiguity of Sicilians in the States: "I'm white, not black" the Sicilian American declares, and further elaborates on the positive feelings he derives from a blackface performance. Lee's "Sicilian nigger" ultimately seems to imply that, in light of the recent achievements in social and economic mobility of Italian Americans, the Sicilian/American racial in-betweenness is now a mere blackface he can wear at will. Tarantino's and Lee's films above discussed are arguably the most notable and well-known instances in American popular culture in which the racialization of Sicilians in the United States problematizes the meaning of race as it is applied to ethnic groups whom the "bleaching" power of money has helped make the leap into the "white" category.

To be sure, Romano is not the only Sicilian/American writer to claim a racialized identity. Maria Famà, for example, echoes Romano's theme in a poem tellingly entitled "I Am Not White." Originated from an apparently real event in the poet's life, the poem speaks proudly of a hybrid identity: "The dentist says my teeth tell of invasions / mixed blood / the tale of a proud, mongrel people / I am Sicilian / I am not white / I will not check the box for white / on any form" (Sweet Lemons 217). In "Hail Mary," Rosette Capotorto joins the discussion by pointing to the power that painful memories of a racialized identity can have to cure the historical amnesia of racist Italian Americans:

My mother is black I say and the
room goes silent. A simple way
to halt racist talk
My mother *is* black.
Dark hair, dark skin, long legs. *Terrono*
Sicilian is Black is African.
Africani/Siciliani they chant
under my window.
The Black Madonna del Tindari
Lives around the corner.
Sicilians have a lot of explaining to do.
(Are Italians White?, "Italiani/Africani" 250-51)

Ronnie Mae Painter, in turn, opens up a more complex discussion on racial issues, informed by her biracial identity, in her reflection "Black Madonna." The daughter of an African/American father and a Sicilian mother, Painter shows the arbitrariness of any definition of race by focusing on the crucial role played by perspectives:

My mother is white but only to me.
She's Italian American not black like me
My black friends say she's white
So what else could she be
Other white folks say hell no
You're Italian American from Sicily
So we all look in the mirror
My brothers and sisters to see
If we're really black or really white
Or from Sicily? (250)

The questions formulated by Painter at the end of her poem are not rhetorical, but call attention to the arbitrariness of racial designations and demarcations. The lines between US and Italian history get blurred and overlap in matters of social inequalities and discrimination.

As the term "of color" is socially defined, Romano tries to resignify it so as to encompass the experience of a self-styled Olive "Sicilian-Italian-American Lesbian." However, as the poet approached the multicultural lesbian community, confident of being

welcomed as one of the many US Third-World feminists, she experienced rejection. "I have been censored in the lesbian press and ostracized in the lesbian community because I call myself Olive," she laments ("Coming Out Olive" 161). Romano questions the coalitional politics of the multicultural lesbian community, where identity is assessed through the place occupied in what she calls the "hierarchy of pain." According to this categorization, the poet continues,

> [a]s the skin colour of members of other races and ethnicities becomes lighter and lighter, those races and ethnicities are considered to have suffered less and less. Therefore, the lighter one's skin, the less respect one is entitled to. (161)

In the racial classification adopted by the lesbian publishing community, Romano was assigned a position of privilege for being "white." She was, therefore, expected to sit elbow to elbow with the "white oppressors," with whom she supposedly shares the burden of historical, cultural and social responsibilities. In other words, the equal opportunities advocated by her fellow *sisters* or *hermanas* did not, in fact, apply to her, an Olive woman, looking for *sorelle*. "In this time of lesbian feminist multiculturalism," Romano bitterly concludes, "some of us are more multi than others" ("The Drop of a Hat," The Wop Factor 10).

The paradox within the lesbian community was too self-evident to Romano to go unnoticed: a movement of ideological opposition, which supported the positions of a wide array of ethnic minorities, stubbornly persisted in an attitude that tended to silence her, a Sicilian/American woman—read, Olive—and asked her to disregard part of her heritage. Unable and unwilling to carry a WASP past on her shoulders, the poet promotes the recovery of a heritage she feels like she is expected to negate:

They tell her the past
is passed, why think of
pain all the time, didn't
the immigrants come to
America to get away
from the pain. They tell her
to forget the pain of
prejudice, forget the pain
of lynchings, forget the
pain of denial and of being
denied respect. ("Wop Talk," The Wop Factor 41)

In her poetry, cultural and ethnic pride are juxtaposed to the homogenizing expectations of those who remind her how easy it is for Italian Americans to pass, and also to the chameleonic attitude of those "good" Italian Americans she calls "wuppies," or "[t]he women [who] wax their / moustaches and the men / [who] drop the vowels from / their names. They've / lightened up their heritage / and themselves. They / cook pasta by American / recipes, laugh at wop / jokes, and never complain" ("Wop Talk," The Wop Factor 43-4). To claim one's whiteness in light of the recent achievements in social mobility of Italian Americans, in Romano's view, means to sweep under the carpet a not-too-distant past of discrimination and injustices.

Romano wants to remember, and remind everyone of the most painful occurrences in the history of Italian immigration in the US. Among them, the most infamous one remains the New Orleans lynching, which Richard Gambino, borrowing from some documents of the time, defined in his 1977 monographic study Vendetta as "the slaughter of eleven men by what the grand jury called 'several thousand of the first, best and even most law abiding of the citizens' of New Orleans on March 14, 1891"

(ix).[71] Recognized as the largest lynching in American history, according to Gambino's research, it involved some estimated twelve to twenty thousand people against eleven Sicilians, who were held responsible for the death of New Orleans police superintendent David C. Hennessy. One of the youngest police chiefs in the country, Hennessy was thirty-two years old when he was shot to death. Asked by his friend/colleague O'Connor right before dying who had "given it to him," Hennessy reportedly whispered "the Dagoes." While "dago" is an ethnic slur for Italian Americans in general, it must be said that Sicilians had since 1880 especially arrived en masse in Louisiana to replace black labor in the sugar and cotton plantations.[72] In her article "Walking the Color Line: Italian Immigrants in Rural Louisiana 1880-1910," Vincenza Scarpaci calculates that "nine out of every ten immigrants during this period were Sicilian and originated in a cluster of towns in the central and western provinces" (68). Hennessy was then thought to be a victim of the Sicilian *vendetta*. Following the murder, Italians were arrested en masse, some of them with the most improbable excuses. All in all, nineteen Italian Americans were accused of Hennessy's murder. When six out of nineteen of the accused were acquitted, a mass meeting was called in town "'to take steps to remedy the failure of justice in the Hennessy case. Come prepared for action' the newspaper of New Orleans warned its citizens" (Vendetta 77). What followed is reconstructed by Romano in her poem "Dago Street" with abundance of details and angry emphasis:

Six Italians were shot,

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[71] The first edition of Vendetta carried a rather long subtitle which defined the scope and purpose of the study: "A true story of the worst lynching in America, the mass murder of Italian-Americans in New Orleans in 1891, the vicious motivations behind it, and the tragic repercussions that linger to this day." In 1999, tv director Nicholas Meyer draw inspiration from Gambino's book to build the storyline of his HBO movie Vendetta, starring Christopher Walken.

[72] According to Gambino, it was then and there that the epithet "black dagoes" was first coined to refer to Italian Americans (Vendetta 56).

Their bodies ripped apart, by sixty
men, white and black alike. In
the pile of bodies, Monasterio's hand
twitched. Someone came close, aimed,
and shot away the top of
Monasterio's head. Someone
laughed. One Italian was shot
in the head. One was hit in his
right eye by a shotgun blast, half
his head blown away. One was
shot in the head, his right hand
blown away when he raised it
to defend himself, the top of his
head gone; he waited nine hours
to die. Two Italians were shot.
Only half dead, they were brought
outside, tossed overhead by the
crowd to the other end of the
street, and were hanged, and were shot,
and were left hanging to be viewed. (The Wop Factor 21)

Romano does not sacrifice descriptive accuracy on the altar of poetic *pruderie*, and the assault is recounted in all its cruelty. The prosy nature of the poem signals the poet's intention to convey a clear message, and to deprive it of any metric sophistication which could alter its immediacy. To Romano, the act of remembering such instances of discrimination in the history of Italian immigration in the US is not a pointless poetic exercise. Rather, to overlook, or, worse still, forget such an atrocious episode as the New Orleans lynching is equal to the re-perpetration of the crime.

As much as Romano's articulation of a racialized *sicilianamericanità* is historically tenable, her call for a racial coalition in sisterhood in the 1990s is problematic on several levels. At the time when Romano was bringing forth her discourse on Olive-ness, Italian Americans as an ethnic group had already benefited from the realignment of

racial divisions in the US and made the figurative leap into "whiteness."[73] Therefore, her endorsement of a discourse of "perpetual" Olive-ness hardly seems like a viable political program for the Italian/American community at large. However, the racial ambiguity of the Italian/American past is particularly significant as it reveals in all its strength the arbitrariness of designated racial identities. Particularly apropos in this sense are historian Rudolph Vecoli's observations. Addressing an Italian/American audience in 1994, Vecoli pointed out: "Our experience has taught us the fallacy of the very idea of race and the mischief of racial labels...For these reasons, we, Italian Americans, have something important to contribute to the national dialogue" ("Are Italian Americans Just White Folks?" 17). Seen from this perspective, Romano's politics of identity has the merit of pointing to the shifting meanings of "race" in different historical contexts, and therefore exposing the socially constructed nature of race-based categories.

It should be clear by now that, to Romano, the adjective Italian, which is appropriately used to categorize people from the mainland, is a misleading label when applied to Sicilians. Historically, culturally, and, as we saw above, even racially, Romano argues, Sicilians are markedly different from any other Italian regional group. Hence, the process of identity construction in Romano's poetry involves the necessity of recovering a regional Sicilian heritage. However, as much as Romano's poetry is informed by the sense of a distinct *sicilianamericanità*, it is a literary expression subsumed under the broader context of Italian/American literature, with which it shares themes and symbols.

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[73] In the summer of 2002 African/American dj Chuck Nice remarked on air "Italians are niggaz with short memories," raising the ire and causing the protest of the Order of the Sons of Italy in America (see Guglielmo, "White Lies, Dark Truths"). For a more complete discussion on the question of race in Italian/American studies, see the essays that make up the 2003 Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America, edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno

According to critic Anthony Tamburri especially "food and family are great themes ubiquitous in Italian/American cultural productions" ("Beyond 'Pizza' and 'Nonna'" 149). Both themes inform Romano's poetry in a way that dynamically connects it to the work of other Italian/American women writers, thus deepening the understanding of Italian/American culture and literature at once.

For various economic and socio-dynamic reasons, it was not uncommon for Italian/American children to grow up in three-generation families, a custom derived from the larger kinship system of the Italian family. In the US, in fact, the persistence of extended family networks led to a situation in which the most common household was composed by the immigrant grandparents, their children, and grandchildren. The grandparents' involvement with the upbringing of the children was usually conspicuous. Even though child care was considered to be primarily the responsibility of the mother, grandmothers were called into service as a source of childrearing advice as well as active educators. In most cases, then, more than an elder family member, the grandmother, or *nonna*, was one of the most important sources of support and caregiving, in some instances more than the second-generation mother. A strong Mediterranean woman, *nonna* oftentimes played an authoritarian role, which overpowered that of the second-generation mother.[74] Most importantly, as Helen Barolini points out, to most Italian/American women the grandmother represents the origin of ethnic consciousness.[75] In the Preface to the 2000 edition of The Dream Book, the critic/writer emphasizes the

[74] In Tina De Rosa's 1990 novel Paper Fish the grandmother-granddaughter bond is stronger than the traditional mother-child dyad, fragmentary and fugacious in its overtones.

[75] In Helen Barolini's Umbertina (1979), the strong immigrant woman from Calabria of the title represents the origin of a female saga that involves four generations of Italian/American women who, one way or another, try to come to terms with their ethnic heritage.

role that grandparents, and especially *nonnas* play in the literature written by Italian/American women writers. Many are, in fact, the instances in Italian/American literature in which the immigrant woman inspires the creative world of second-, third-, and fourth-generation women writers. The grandparent, Barolini notes,

> is a rich mine of the Italian American imagination—mythical, real, imagined, idealized, venerated, or feared. The grandparent embodies the tribe, the whole heritage, for that, in overwhelmingly the most cases, is as far as a present-day Italian American can trace his or her descent. Often, uncannily often, what the women write of, where they start, is with a grandmother—those old women, sometimes illiterate or very little schooled, who had only their dreams, premonitions and feelings to read for guidance. [...] In our grandparents is incorporated all of the past, all of tradition and custom, and, we imagine, some archetypal wisdom and native intelligence. We start from the people who came here. (xiii-xvi)

With their characteristic mélange of roughness and sweetness, immigrant grandmothers are the primary source of ethnic transmission, and represent the forces of descent in Italian/American culture and literature.

In Romano's poetry, *nonna* plays a large role in defining the poet's identity as a woman of Southern Italian descent, so much so that she acknowledges the immigrant grandmother as "the beginning of the/ world without end,/ the beginning of [her] world, / [her] beginning" ("My Grandmother Cooking," Vendetta 27). The grandmother in Romano's poetry is a powerful figure who embodies both a real and a mythical lineage. In the domestic realm, she is a strong woman of peasant extraction, whose chores are not limited to what are considered typically female activities—such as cooking, cleaning, and raising children—, but extend so as to include male jobs. In the poem "The Chopping of Wood," Romano celebrates the strength of a woman who never recoiled from the

responsibilities of a household, to the point that, when her husband accidentally hurt his leg, she took over one of the most traditionally masculine jobs:

> My grandmother (who
> washed clothes by hand
> for twelve people
> washed sheets, towels,
> blankets by hand
> kneaded dough for macaroni,
> bread and pizza
> carried the wood
> into the house)
> took over the chopping of wood. (Vendetta 11)

Oftentimes, the real-life person gets transfigured into a divinity whom the poet calls upon for comfort, protection, and inspiration. In "Invocation to the Goddess as Grandmother," a poem included in Vendetta, this transformation is particularly evidenced by the anaphoric repetition of "Nonna" at the beginning, and "Nonna, come" at the end of each stanza, which echo the structure of the liturgical prayers of the Roman Catholic Church. The poetic boundaries between sacred and profane, historical and religious figures, and even between sexes are blurred again in another poem in the same volume. In "My Grandmother Cooking," in fact, when this strong immigrant woman from Southern Italy unexpectedly utters the Eucharistic formula "Take ye and eat," she usurps Jesus Christ of his role in the Roman Catholic tradition as the Savior of mankind (Vendetta 27).

As Gardaphé aptly points out, "[b]y replacing the Christ figure of religious ritual with the grandmother figure, [Romano] returns the matriarchal focus of Italian culture to the forefront of cultural knowledge" (Leaving Little Italy 147). In line with a Southern Italian spiritual heritage in which the official religious credo intertwines with deeply-rooted pagan and folkloric beliefs, Romano sets up a poetic Olympus of Christian and

pagan female deities which includes the ever present Madonna, various female saints — among whom, Santa Rosalia, Santa Lucia, Santa Barbara, and Santa Fara, all patron saints of various Sicilian towns and cities—, foremothers, immigrant grandmothers, and even the witches of folk beliefs.

Besides *nonnas*, in Romano's feminist design, the Madonna occupies a special place as "the Holy Mother—who prefigured all other mothers and symbolized them, the quintessential *mamma mia*" (Barolini, The Dream Book 14). However, in Romano's poetic recovery, the Madonna is not the traditional Virgin Mary of the Roman Catholic Church, who, in her role of obsequious womb, has managed to become the symbol of female oppression for some feminists. Rather, the poet's treatment of the Madonna's figure is a subversive form of Marianism that serves a feminist liberal agenda. Marian devotion, in fact, has the ultimate goal of re-introducing the female figure in a predominant role into the Judeo-Christian tradition, thus counterbalancing the sexism of Catholic teachings, dominated by male gods. The need of Italian/American women for a counter-spiritualism opposed to the male-centered Catholic faith is, then, fulfilled by Romano by conjuring up some of the most compelling images of a divine female Italian/American consciousness. In this process of unorthodox spiritual re-construction, Madonnas, female saints, witches, and *nonnas* all become metaphors for female bonding, a spiritual/political statement about women's alliance to one another, or as Adrienne Rich famously put it, of "primary intensity between and among women" ("Compulsory" 648).

Along with *nonnas*, another theme which runs through Romano's poetry, thus making it part and parcel of Italian/American literature at large, is food. And, indeed, the culinary imagery is one of the aspects of Romano's works that has received most

attention by critics. A quick look at the titles of some her poems—for instance, "Confirmation, aka The Sauce Poem," "Italian Bread," "That We Eat," and "My Grandmother Cooking"—justifies this critical attention. "My ethnicity isn't something I drag out / of a closet to celebrate quaint holidays / nobody heard of," she points out in "Ethnic Woman." And to prove her point further, she adds: "I could write my life / story with different shapes in / various sizes in limitless patterns of / pasta laid out to dry on a thick, white / tablecloth on my bed" (The Wop Factor 57). Always, in Romano's poetry, food signifies her Southern Italian/American identity.

In his article "Linguine and Lust: Food and Sex in Italian American Culture," Gardaphé analyzes various instances in Italian/American literature where food is presented a sensual experience. As the critic points out, in Romano's poem "That We Eat," "the grandmother figure actually becomes food: Grandmother, whose reason for coming to America was 'to eat,' whose breasts, 'hung like giant calzones.' The poet's persona cannot separate the nurturing of the creator and the created" (Leaving Little Italy 147). In the same article, Gardaphé also points out that *ars erotica* and *ars poetica* meet in Romano's work, where erotic images come by way of culinary metaphors. Making food, making love, and eating are all interrelated sensual experiences that help to celebrate lesbian sexuality. In Romano's poetic imagery—which includes "stuffed shells, like vulvas, oozing / ricotta" ("To Show Respect" 22)— food becomes the preferred purveyor of a lesbian erotic sensibility. In "To Show Respect," a hypothetical room full of Italian/American Lesbians enjoys a most complete Italian/American menu. Sipping "deep red wine / made in the cellar," the Lesbians of Romano's poetic imagination start their meal with *antipasti* ("black olives / stuffed green olives, marinated olives, / salami,

provolone, mozzarella dipped in / bread crumbs and fried, mushrooms dipped in / breadcrumbs and fried, scungilli dipped in / bread crumbs and fried"), and go on trying several *primi piatti* ("Escarole soup, / spaghetti, ravioli, lasagna, linguine, baked / ziti, stuffed shells, like vulvas, oozing / ricotta"), before passing on to *secondi piatti* ("Meatballs, / sausage, veal, lamb"), accompanied by the omnipresent bread. The menu, of course, includes traditional *dolci e frutta di stagione* ("Cannoli, chestnuts, / oranges"), and it is concluded, as customs dictate, by "espresso in tiny cups" (Vendetta 22). To be sure food is a traditional *topos* in Italian American writing, but "Romano's *tavola,*" Edvige Giunta observes, "is undeniably not a traditional one, for gay and lesbian Italian Americans have not quite negotiated their seat at the Italian American table" (Writing with an Accent 106).

In the Italian/American literary panorama, feminist/lesbian/editor/writer/poet Rose Romano—together with Jerre Mangione, and, as we shall see in the next chapter, Ben Morreale—is one of the descendants of Sicilian immigrants who have especially distinguished themselves in the sense of a regional self-ascription by informing their works with a sense of *sicilianamericanità*, or Sicilian Americanness. At the core of *sicilianamericanità,* as it surfaces in Romano's poetic/autobiographical works, is a process of identity construction built upon essentialistic grounds and which pushes her to rewrite the position of Sicilians in both the Italian and the US contexts in exceptionalistic terms. Through the trope of "the scum of the scum of the scum," Romano questioned all kinds of binomial categorizations, because dualisms and dichotomies such as Italian vs. American, "of color" vs. white, (hetero) men vs. (hetero) women, do not take into account the complexities of a multi-faceted identity such as that of an Olive

Sicilian/American lesbian. Romano's *sicilianamericanità* has a subversive potential that serves to denaturalize dominant constructions of *Italianità*, traditional gender roles, and sexed poetic expressions. Through her discourse on a distinct sense of Sicilian Americanness, Romano has managed to dislodge any monolithic articulation of Italian-ness in Italian/American literary discourses. Most importantly, though, the seminal work of this self-styled "Sicilian-Italian-American-Lesbian" poet has served, and will continue to serve, the purpose of underpinning the efforts of Italian/American women writers and critics towards the assertion of a distinctiveness that feeds into, but goes beyond, questions of ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation.

Chap. 4

"Sicilo-American"

Sicilianamericanità in Ben Morreale's Novels

> Bisogna che, come al solito, non siano i vasi di creta a spezzarsi tra i vasi di rame che la nave presa nella burrasca fa impazzire ed agitare.[76]
>
> Antonio Gramsci, "Il Mezzogiorno e la Guerra" (1916)

In a 1979 interview with French journalist Marcelle Padovani, Sicilian intellectual/writer Leonardo Sciascia, in a feat of *campanilismo*,[77] claimed: "Tutti amiamo il luogo in cui siamo nati, e siamo portati ad esaltarlo. Ma Racalmuto è davvero un paese straordinario" (La Sicilia Come Metafora 22).[78] Sciascia's hometown was, in fact, the source of literary

[76] "We must be careful to avoid, as it usually happens, that the clay vases break among the copper ones when the ship runs in the storms and rocks them" (tr. in Pedro Calvalcanti and Paul Piccone's History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci 103).

[77] In his 1974 study Blood of My Blood: the Dilemma of Italian Americans, Richard Gambino explains the meaning of the Italian word *campanilismo* by rightfully linking it to the issue of regionalism in Italy: "The extraordinary regionalism of Italy, strong to this day, was particularly characteristic of the Mezzogiorno. Not only each region, but each town considers itself a self-contained, unique culture, its people feeling no kinship with those even a few miles away. The attitude is labeled *campanilismo*, from the Italian word for 'bell' (*campana*), meaning that whatever "national" affinity the people feel is limited to those who live within hearing range of their village's church bell. Italian-Americans retain the habit of friendly banter and rivalry between those derived from different regions. Sicilians and Neapolitans maintain that Calabrians have *testedure*, 'hard heads,' meaning that they are stubborn. Sicilians are called schemers by others, and Neapolitans rascals, etc" (65).

[78] "We all love the place where we were born, and tend to praise it. But Racalmuto is really an extraordinary town" (my translation).

inspiration for many of his works, most notably his 1956 Le Parrocchie di Regalpetra.[79] Curiously, this small town in the province of Agrigento also stimulated the literary imagination of Sicilian/American writer Ben Morreale. Born in New York's Lower East Side, Morreale spent part of his life in Racalmuto, the town his parents left in 1910 in search of the American Dream, and to which they regularly returned, sometimes for long periods of time, while their American-born son was still a child.[80] The years spent in Racalmuto left an indelible mark on Morreale, which is especially evident in his literary production. In most of this writer's works there is a constant focus on the Sicilian reality that echoes, and, in many ways, amplifies the literary quest of the other Sicilian/American writers considered in this study. As critic Fred Gardaphé observes, "Morreale has used Sicily as a foil for the creation of American identity" ("Reinventing Sicily" 57). Moreover, arguably more than any other Sicilian/American writer, Morreale has used Sicilian literature for the creation of his Sicilian/American writings. While the influence of Sciascia is too obvious to ignore,[81] more generally, Morreale inscribes his own works in the regional literary tradition of the island. "I read a lot of Sicilian history and discovered Vittorini and Pirandello," the writer confessed in a 1986 interview with Gardaphé and added: "I first wrote The Seventh Saracen as an imitation of Vittorini's

[79] Le Parrocchie di Regalpetra was translated in English, and published by Orion Press in 1969 with the title Salt in the Wound.

[80] At the age of twelve, the writer went to Sicily for the second time, and in his parents' intention, for good. This stay, however, only lasted two years, because when Morreale's father found out that he was about to be drafted in the Italian Army, the family went back to New York and settled there permanently (Sicily: the Hallowed Land 10-11).

[81] In his 2000 memoir Sicily: the Hallowed Land, Morreale recalls Sciascia first as the kid who was two years ahead of him at school in Racalmuto, and, later on, as the now-famous writer whom he "often interviewed informally while walking in the *chiazza*" (13). From a literary perspective, Morreale's novels are closer to Sciascia's early works—such as Le Parrocchie di Regalpetra, Gli Zii di Sicilia, and Il Giorno della Civetta—which are populated by farmers, sulphur miners, and workers, than to his later works, whose protagonists are mostly middle-class doctors, attorneys, teachers and the like. Sciascia makes a cameo appearance in The Seventh Saracen, and features as one of the main characters of A Few Virtuous Men under the guise of writer Nardu Pantaleone.

Conversations in Sicily" ("Morreale Uncovers" 163).[82] Therefore, as we shall see, in Morreale's works, Sicilian literature surfaces in the form of implicit and explicit meta-literary motifs. In this chapter, I will look at how Ben Morreale articulates his Sicilian Americanness in three of his novels, namely The Seventh Saracen (1958), A Few Virtuous Men (Li Cornuti) (1973), and Monday, Tuesday...Never Come Sunday (1977). I will especially analyze how, through the use of a series of literary strategies—such as intertextual references and allusions as well as various themes and topoi, Morreale's Sicilian/American texts reveal their literary (af)filiation with Sicilian literature. By turning *sicilianamericanità* into part of a greater discourse on Sicilian-ness—or, in Sciascia's words, *sicilitudine*—[83] enacted by Sicilian writers, Morreale's novels become an ideal bridge between the fields of Italian and Italian/American studies.

Morreale's first novel, The Seventh Saracen, is entirely set in the "extraordinary town" of Racalmuto. Immortalized under the fictional name of Racalmorra, this predominantly mining and agricultural town in the south-west coast of the island is the real protagonist of the novel. Racalmorra is a microcosm, which reflects the tangled threads and strains of the larger Sicilian culture that, since Giovanni Verga, through Luigi Pirandello, to Andrea Camilleri, have been a constant source of literary inspiration for Sicilian writers. Morreale's fictional town is a miniature Sicily, characterized by *latifondi* and *zolfare*—big landed estates and sulphur mines—in the hands of a few, who are

[82] In Elio Vittorini's 1941 novel, the desperation and spiritual barrenness of a Sicilian town make it a perfect allegory for the hopelessness of the world in that particular historical moment: "the world is offended" is the leitmotiv that runs through the novel, and which makes it one of the most accomplished examples of what has come to be known in Italy as "letteratura resistenziale," or "Resistance literature." The designation of "Resistance literature" applies to those works which are, in different ways, representative of the Italian Resistance Movement to Nazi-Fascism in literature.

[83] For a more in-depth analysis of Sciascia's discourse on *sicilitudine*, see Chapter I.

ruthlessly indifferent to the living and working conditions of the working masses. Racalmorra also reflects the topography of a typical Sicilian town, where the remains of a Saracen fortress, called *lu Castidruzzu* by the townspeople, overlook a cluster of cube-like houses, and the life of the villagers revolves around the sulphur mine--"quiet, still, the one tall chimney pouring a thick olive-oil-yellow ribbon of smoke" (11)--, but also the church, the local tavern, and most importantly the town's *chiazza*, or *piazza*. On one end of the *chiazza,* the pharmacy of Buruanu is the place where the self-styled intellectuals of the town gather to talk about literature and try to recreate a salon-like atmosphere through the occasional use of a few words in French. The intellectuals of Racalmorra are depicted by Morreale with bittersweet irony as follows: "lawyer so-and-so, who lived from his mother's pension; and the engineer this-and-that, who at night went gathering wild escarole and snails for the next day's meal; and the professor who gave lessons to the mine owner Farubi's son while he waited sixteen years for a post" (72). The list of pompous titles sharply contrasts with the description of the intellectuals' meager means of support to underscore the uselessness of such titles in a land where education alone does not guarantee employment. However, the intellectuals in Racalmorra are very few in number, for most of the people in town are illiterate farmers and miners. From the fields, and the subterranean tunnels of the mine, the men of the village emerge every evening to join others in the traditional *passeggiata*, the almost institutional leisure stroll along the town's main street. "Walking in the *chiazza* was a tradition and had all the ceremonial quality of a thing done for thousands of years," the narrator explains and continues:

> A man chose his walking partners more carefully than his woman, for more confidences were exchanged in the *chiazza* than in a matrimonial bed. So that there were various pacing groups: those of the scholars, like the schoolteachers, the pharmacist, and all those laureated unemployed; those of the merchants; the religious group; and, of course, the Workers Party group that always walked faster than any other, in spite of the fact that once it reached one end of the *chiazza*, it only turned and then rushed back to the other. (21)

As the passage above shows, life in Racalmorra is a complex system of hierarchies and relations, and harmony in town is maintained through the individual's observance of the unwritten rules of the community.

In this close-knit town, personal events become communal experiences. Thus, the routine of the daily life of Racalmorra is shaken by the news of the arrival of an "American" in town. Gaetano, or, better, Guy Licata is, in fact, arriving from New York to claim his legacy as the only heir to the properties of his deceased grandfather Papa Giuliano. The arrival of the second-generation Sicilian/American Guy—which coincides with the festival in honor of the town's patron saint, the Black Virgin of Racalmorra--[84] sets in motion a series of events that will affect the life of all the townspeople.

Guy's two elderly aunts, Pipina and Rosa, are understandably thrilled by the news of their nephew's visit. Knowing that Guy can inherit his grandfather's properties only on the condition that he marries a woman from the village, the two women see Grazia—the sweet and beautiful daughter of their neighbors—as the perfect wife for him. Also intrigued by the arrival of the American, for reasons that will become clearer later in the novel, is Carlu Spina. A most mysterious character, Carlu is described as a solitary man,

[84] In the field of Italian/American Studies, feminist scholar Lucia Chiavola Birnbaum digs into the realms of spirituality in order to unearth and bring forth the existence of the African dark foremothers of Southern Italian women, i.e., the Black Madonnas of the title of her 1993 study.

who works as a truck-driver, bringing the workers to and from the mine. Having lost his wife, Carlu tends his sick son, an eight-year-old kid who needs surgery to save his leg. Because of his reserved manners, and, especially, his close friendship with Pitruzzella, the local Mafia boss, Carlu is rumored to be a "man with mustaches," a circumlocution used by the villagers to indicate Mafia affiliates. Finally, the town priest, Father Jouffá is particularly excited about Guy Licata's arrival in Racalmorra.

One of the best-portrayed characters in The Seventh Saracen, the priest echoes a series of spineless and hypocritical clergymen in Italian literature, among whom Alessandro Manzoni's Don Abbondio is arguably the most memorable one. To those familiar with Siciliana, the priest's name also recalls the legendary Giufà, the protagonist of a number of Sicilian folk legends. Akin to a Shakespearean fool, Giufà is a simpleton whose apparent stupidity, in some cases, may hide an unexpected wisdom. To Father Jouffá, priesthood is less a divine call than a worldly career that has allowed him to escape the sad reality of mine workers. He has none of the attributes that one would expect from a priest. When he is first introduced, he is walking fast in the *chiazza*, faster than the proverbially fast workers because, as the narrator tells us, "To anyone that quoted him the proverb, 'He who goes slowly goes well,' he always answered, 'He who goes slowly loses the race'" (22). Father Jouffá is a caricatural village priest infatuated with modernity. The greatest event in his life, we are told, was a trip to the United States, where he had toured the Italian/American communities and raised funds in order to

renovate his church.[85] From this trip, the priest had returned to Racalmorra with a large sum of money, and, especially, with a knowledge of the ways through which his Irish colleagues made money in their parishes. "Being a man who never denied reality, [Father Jouffá] finally admitted that he must apply these modern ways if the village church were to prosper. And he thanked the Lord for showing him this truth" (22). Among the most radical innovations the priest has introduced in his church is a series of neon tubes bought in Rome, which make the church look like a train station; various Christmas decorations imported from his trip to the States, and which decorate the church all year long; and a phonograph on which he usually plays the "Ave Maria" sung by Beniamino Gigli, and, on occasions, his own sermons for the benefit of a few old ladies who attend the mass. Most importantly, though, since his return from the US,

> Father Jouffá had installed a siren in his steeple which he sounded at seven in the morning, at twelve noon, at one, and at five, as a service to the villagers. He had made it automatic by connecting it to the steeple clock. But the clock was not always accurate, so that often at three in the morning the siren sounded and the roosters crowed, the chickens rustled and the donkeys brayed through the village, for they thought the new day had begun. At such times many a man reached for his shotgun, swearing to blow off the head of 'that Father Jouffá.' (23)

Jouffá's insistence on adopting the "modern ways" of his American counterparts destabilizes the life of the village, shaped by century-old natural rhythms. The confusion created by the Father's "modern" siren foreshadows the disorder the "American" will bring to the village. To situate a second-generation Sicilian American in close contact with his Sicilian roots allows the reader to explore some of the most burning issues at the

[85] A profoundly different Father Juffá is also the protagonist of Morreale's 1973 novel A Few Virtuous Men. As we shall see later, one of the three parts of the novel tells of the Sicilian priest's trip to the US and Canada.

core of the gap between Old and New worlds, and, finally, between *sicilianità* and *sicilianamericanità*.

The experience of New York-raised and Princeton-educated Guy in a Sicilian entourage allows Morreale to present, in all its complexity, the intricacies of a bicultural identity. Critic Anthony Tamburri notes that today's Italian Americans can pride themselves on the glories of Italy's past, but

> a large number of their ancestors came to the United States as an escape from insufferable poverty and socio-political oppression in Italy, especially in Southern Italy. In this respect, then, Southern Italy and the Italian/American sense of Italianness may bring to the fore contrasting sentiments of pride and shame, attraction and repulsion, and love and resentment. These emotions often surface, at different times and with different levels of intensity, in the blatantly ethnic literature and films of Italian/American artists. (A Semiotic of Ethnicity 81)

The tension between shame and pride of having a Sicilian father, and, therefore, of being partly Sicilian himself characterizes Guy's process of identity ascription. While crossing the island on a train headed to Racalmorra, Guy is enchanted by the pastoral landscape: "Damn nice country, damn nice country," he repeatedly comments (27). An Arcadia of sorts, Sicily seems at first to hold the promise of a life closer to Mother Earth. Most importantly, the glories of the island's past work to strengthen Guy's connection to it. The names of the towns the train passes "sounded ancient to Guy, ancient in his life, ancient in the life of the world. And suddenly a pride filled him; he came from this land" (32). The college-educated Guy, the narrator further explains, "had felt this pride at Princeton in class, when they spoke of Cyclops, of the Sirens, of Dionysius, of Archimedes, of a people who wrote their history when the rest of the world was still in infancy" (32). Guy, then, chooses to tie his sense of belonging to an image of Sicily he

has derived from his studies, rather than from his first-hand experience as a Sicilian American born and raised in New York's Lower East Side.

Guy's *sicilianamericanità* is the result of a selective process which favors the historical and mythical aspects of his ancestral heritage, and weeds out the less "glorious" ones. The Sicilian American, in fact, refuses to trace his roots to post-Unification Sicily, a land which was, in that precise historical moment, characterized by extreme poverty and high emigration rates. In fact, when an old man on the train asks him in Sicilian whether he is a "Sicilo-American," Guy resolutely replies, in the proper Italian learned at Princeton, that "If one is born in America he is an American." The little old man, though, insists: "But no, a man is a Sicilian, it does not matter where he is born. And you have the air of some of our people. You have the air of a Sicilian" (31), thus forcing Guy to rethink his assumptions on the meaning of ethnic identity, and creating in him ambivalent feelings about it. When he finally arrives in Racalmorra in the still of the night, the "American" is confronted with the most uncomfortable aspects of his heritage. The welcome reserved to the visiting guest, in fact, is not among the most cordial ones:

> The road was pockmarked with manure and water that in the moonlight seemed gray. The ground felt gritty, and Guy for the first time smelled the village, a smell of human decay, long nurtured in the bowels of the villagers and now growing in their vineyards, in their stalks of wheat, and in the loins of their animals. He looked up at the stars, clean and bright in the sky, and he felt shame well up in him. Just behind them a shutter opened, a flash of white, a stream of water lanced out and hit the street with a swash, plop. (49)

Guy's unpleasant acquaintance with the sewage system of Racalmorra represents a baptism of sorts and serves to remind him of the uncomfortable truth that he should not look back at the time of Cyclops as described by Homer in order to find his roots. He, in

fact, is a Sicilian because from his parents he has inherited a vernacular culture with which, eventually, he will need to come to terms in order to make sense of his American ethnic identity.

As an American ethnic writer, Morreale tries to establish literary connections through ancestry with his Sicilian predecessors. The author's transcontinental dialogue with Sicilian literature is most fully realized in the employment of certain topoi and metaphors which have been used by Sicilian writers to fashion their regional identity in literature. One of the most traditional snapshots of Sicily in literature as well as films, features a random Sicilian town on a hot summer afternoon, burnt by oppressive blasts of the sirocco wind blowing from sub-Saharan Africa.[86] Because of the sultriness of the weather, all activities in town are deferred to a later time, and the village is suspended in an almost surreal calm. In The Seventh Saracen this traditionally Sicilian atmosphere is created as follows:

> In the pharmacy of Buruanu, where the intellectuals met, there was a hush, for it was late afternoon. The curtain of beaded strings hung limp in the doorway, and from time to time the hot breeze clicked past it, bringing in the droning green flies and the smell of the hot sun lying heaving and orange in the dry *chiazza*. (55)

Through the use of a series of sensory images that appeal to the reader's five senses, Morreale places himself in relation to a tradition that reaches across the Atlantic Ocean, and connects Sicilian/American to Sicilian literature, thus turning Racalmorra from an actual place into a literary *locus*.

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[86] One of the most extensive literary treatments of this topos is Francesco Lanza's 1929 short story "Paese al Sole," in which a small Sicilian town, caught in the early afternoon of a summer day, is described as "un immenso deserto, dove non si ha il coraggio e la forza di avventurarsi" (Valguarnera da Leggere 85) ("a vast desert, where one has neither the courage nor the strength to venture," my translation).

Another classic topos of Sicilian literature is that of *zolfare*, or sulphur mines. Luigi Pirandello's short story "Ciaula Scopre la Luna"—"Ciaula Discovers the Moon"—is, arguably, the most accomplished literary statement on a ruthless system of exploitation, especially of young boys, who were forced to work in inhuman conditions. The protagonist, Ciaula, is a *caruso* who has become so used to being inside the mine shaft that he is terrified by the vast darkness that awaits him outside.[87] In one particular instance, Ciaula happens to come out of the shaft on a full-moon night only to "discover," for the first time, the moonlight in all its glory. The mines of Racalmorra are no exception in the history of mining in Sicily, as they represent a source of riches for a few like Farubi, and a source of poverty, tragedy, physical malformations, and the like for the vast majority of mine workers. Keeping with his promise that he would show Guy the "wonders" of Sicily, Father Jouffá takes him on an early morning visit to the sulphur mine. The descent into the mine shaft is a slow and painful journey into Hell. The mine has the power to turn the workers into sub-human creatures. Enveloped by sulphur dust, the miners work "naked except for a diaperlike cloth around their loins and large red handkerchiefs tied around their heads. They were singing, ending each line with 'umph' and a blow on the wall" (67). The visit profoundly affects Guy, who is led to re-evaluate the meaning of his sense of belonging and community by tying it not only to the glories of Sicily's past, but also to the hardships of Sicilians' present: "Pride welled in his throat. He tried to swallow it down and he grew angry for feeling this pride, for he understood; it

[87] The *caruso*—Sicilian for 'young boy'—is one of the most tragic figures of the history of mine labor in Sicily. The young son of a poor family, the *caruso* was literally sold by his parents to the mine-owner for little money. His job usually consisted in transporting the extracted material inside big baskets that rested on his back, and which usually turned him, with time, into a hunchback. Before Pirandello, Giovanni Verga had already dealt with the figure of the *caruso* in a short story entitled "Rosso Malpelo," included in his 1880 collection Vita Dei Campi. The *caruso* was also immortalized by Sicilian painter Renato Guttuso in his 1952 "Zolfatorello ferito."

was a pride in belonging, being part of those who found it hard to earn a piece of bread" (70). The visit to Farubi's mine also prompts Guy to consider the role that chance has played in his life, and he starts wondering what would have happened if only his parents had not decided to leave Racalmorra and settle in the New World: "But for the accident of leaving, sheer accident, you would be naked in a sulphur mine," he tells himself (71).

Guy's descent into the mine shaft is premonitory of a much more dramatically claustrophobic experience. Needing some money for his son's urgent surgery, Carlu Spina decides to kidnap the American and ask for ransom. As it turns out, Carlu, who, according to a town rumor, belonged to the Mafia, had, in fact, been deported by the US Government because of his affiliation with the Black Hand of the Lower East Side of New York. He is, therefore, familiar with the violent methods employed by organized crime to resolve personal issues. On the day of the celebrations in honor of the Black Virgin of Racalmorra, Carlu invites Guy to meet him at the local tavern to drink some wine and watch the procession pass by with the Madonna being paraded around the town. The two keep on drinking, when Guy, under the effect of alcohol, starts boasting about the greatness of America, which, he believes, "is the best place in the world" (114). "I feel that that land has opened up a new world," Guy continues, "it has given me an education, it has taken the black shawl off my back...this clean suit..." (115). When the festival is over, the streets are empty, and Guy has drunk himself into a semi-conscious state, Carlu takes him to the old Saracen castle that dominates Racalmorra below, and there he lowers him into a well. "Make yourself courage," he says to his victim, "Those in the village won't forget an American" (124).

The search for Papa Giuliano's grandson is, however, delayed. For a strange twist of destiny, in fact, Guy's personal drama takes place at the same time that a dramatic event shakes the town of Racalmorra. As a consequence of the torrential rains that lash the town for a couple of days right after the festival, the mine gets flooded, thus hurting the already poor economy of the town. Furthermore, just when some volunteers are getting ready to search the area for the missing American man, the poorest houses in town start collapsing due to the heavy rains. The men's attention is then diverted to the community, as they start working furiously to help the victims and the injured survivors.

Guy is, therefore, forced to spend two full days at the bottom of the well, pleading Carlu to set him free. His wailing and crying is once interrupted by a most interesting dialogue between the two on the issue of justice. The contrast between the victim and the victimizer is particularly significant in that it dramatizes the conflict between the Sicilian's and the Sicilian American's respective value frames. By recalling his personal experience as a Sicilian immigrant, Carlu seems to identify with all those who, at the turn of the 20th century, arrived in the US "with a slip of paper in [their] hand marked 'Immigrant,' and a number yoked around [their] neck" (140). However, in order to escape poverty, Carlu resorted to a notoriously Sicilian form of organized crime, and joined the "men with mustaches" who run things in the Lower East Side. Ranting against the American justice system, Carlu complains to Guy: "The first thing they try to do is to make a rat out of you" (142). As a member of an organization that thrives on *omertà*, [88]

[88] *Omertà* should properly be intended as an unwritten law, engendered by fear and/or voluntary connivance, which imposes silence on anyone who could in any way help the police to solve a case. In the field of Italian/American Studies, the term has come to be used very loosely to signify any instance in which the Italian cultural code suggests or imposes silence, thus losing its specificity as its meaning becomes more extended.

Carlu believes that to become an informer for the police would mean not only to betray his partners in crime, but ultimately to sacrifice his identity on the altar of assimilation to American standards. "They wanted to make 'an upstanding American 'a me," he complains to Guy (142). In the confrontation between Old World's and New World's views, the Princeton-educated Sicilian American makes a stand for his native country when he sardonically asks Carlu: "So what do you want these guys to do, sit around and let you run the country?" (143). When the discussion shifts from Carlu's experience in the US, to Guy's present conditions in Sicily, the "man with mustaches" warns the "American:"

> I'm on the side of the law now, Licata boy, and you're the sucker now. And if anybody breaks our law, he'll be made an example of. Have you ever seen a Sicilian example of justice, Licata boy? It's like any other justice, but when the suckers see it, they keep in line. (163)

In Carlu's representation of Sicily, the island is a self-ruling kingdom, dominated by the "men with mustaches," whose authority and idea of justice replace the law as traditionally understood. In this world, Guy is twice an outsider: because of his American birth and his education, in fact, he could never fully belong.

Guy's position as an outsider in the novel is alluded to in the various explanations provided to him by the locals. In the form of definitions, clarifications, instructions, and so forth, the tips given to Guy all throughout the novel serve to inform the non-Sicilian reader as to the meaning of certain words and actions, while at the same time they remind him of Guy's foreignness to Sicilian culture. Explanations, then, serve to fill the cultural gap between the Sicilian and the American worlds. For instance, upon his arrival in Racalmorra, Guy naively inquires about the Mafia in the pharmacy of Buruanu. Among

the educated *habitués* of the place, the lawyer Farauto undertakes to satisfy the American's curiosity. "The Mafia, dear sir, is a complicated affair," he announces and then continues in a tone meant to mock Guy's naiveté:

> Mafia, Mafia: an organization founded soon after the Norman invasion of Sicily, 1072 or 1090. There is a question as to the exact date. But Professor Calandruni, the great professor of history, a friend of mine, compromised and set the date at 1083, a truly great contribution to the historiography of Sicily. (73)[89]

Despite his Sicilian heritage, Guy is not able to grasp the full extent of the power exercised by Mafia and its cultural implications. He, for example, cannot understand the cultural meaning of *omertà*, succinctly condensed in the Sicilian expression: "Do not go stirring *merda* [trans., shit] that stinks" (238). It is, therefore, only natural that once liberated, the "American" should try to bring Carlu to justice. Little by little, Guy comes to realize that his real enemy is not just Carlu Spina, the actual perpetrator of the crime, but the culture that supports, openly or quietly, the power system that Carlu represents. Father Jouffá is the spokesperson for a community of people who have not found the courage to rebel against the subversive organization led by the "men with mustaches." When Guy expresses his intention to find Carlu with the help of the police, Father Jouffá advises him otherwise:

> Listen to me, Gaetanu. They are not men that fool. Let us suppose it was Carlu. I am not saying it was, but let us suppose it was. If it was, then forget about it. It has not cost you money. You still have your skin in one piece [...] They are desperate men. They are not joking [...] to those that inform...they assassinate entire families. It may take years, but they never forget. They cannot forget, or they are lost. They will kill themselves to

[89] It must be noted here that the name of the "great professor of history" adds to the general mocking tone, given that the word *calandruni*, besides designating a weevil, in Sicilian is also an epithet that means 'idiot.'

> hold onto their law...Gaetanu, where there is hunger and misery, men are driven to the devil itself...I know. (236-37)

An American Don Quixote in Sicily, Guy engages in a solitary struggle against the windmills of Mafia.

However, in The Seventh Saracen, good and evil are not so purely separated. Carlu Spina's actions, in fact, are not motivated by greed, which would have made his crime an even more repulsive one. Rather, he is moved by the noblest paternal sentiments, given that he kidnaps Guy in order to provide his son with the best medical care. In a way, the victimizer is really a victim of a political/economic system which has contributed to the flourishing of an organization—the Mafia—which resorts to violence as a means of solving problems. Guy, on the other hand, is not the most sympathetic character in the novel. His stay in Sicily, in fact, is punctuated by a vaunted sense of superiority he derives from his American roots. It should not come as a surprise that one who, we are told, has "come to see in himself the American Hero, educated in a proper school, wearing proper clothes, and speaking the language properly" (33) looks down at Sicilians as inferior human beings. Often in the novel Guy curses these "simple, coarse people" (80) who, in his opinion, are conspiring to keep him trapped in the island. While inside the well, Guy has a weird dream in which a fat man in black robes asks him repeatedly whether his parents are Sicilians. "I was a Sicilian," Guy answers, "but I detest them now. I spit on them. They are cowards, murderers, they even belch at the dinner table" (188). For a good portion of the novel, then, Guy is really a victimizer who, out of frustration, patronizes at best and even mistreats those he meets, his aunts included. Most importantly, he deceives Grazia, whom he has seduced but does not want to marry

because, we are told, his "plan was to marry an American girl and a protestant; for he wanted his children to have the comfort of being truly American early in life. He wanted them to be easy, natural Americans" (95). In short, Guy considers his ethnic heritage an obstacle that forbids him a full participation in the American nation.

As there is not a clearly identified villain, there is no one single hero either in Morreale's The Seventh Saracen, but each and every character contributes to create a tale of the cultural encounter/clash of an American of Sicilian descent with his heritage. Interestingly, there is no one single character the reader might reasonably assume serves as the author's spokesperson. In other words, it is not clear whether Morreale sympathizes more with his Sicilian characters or the Sicilian/American Guy. At the origin of this ambiguity, one might assume, there is the author's competence in both the American and Sicilian cultural systems as well as a willingness to delve into the possibilities offered by both cultures, and those denied by each. Guy's point of view, in fact, enables the reader to take a critical stance with respect to the mafia-ridden reality of Racalmorra. The description of the harsh conditions of life in a small mining town in Sicily, on the other hand, provide him with a better understanding of the origins of the phenomenon. In the last scene, accompanied by his aunt Pipina, Grazia and her mother, Guy walks to the train station to take a train to Agrigento. During this short walk, he feels like everyone is staring at him, and that upsets him and reinforces his desire to break free from the island and its people:

> the staring faces irritated him. The captive was being dragged in triumph through the streets by the conquerors. But there was the train; he would escape. He'd be free, away from them, and the devil take them all. He just

> wanted to get away now, make the break, get it over with. He looked at Grazia and quickened his step. (250)

It is not clear in the end whether Guy will ever return to Sicily to marry Grazia, and thus obtain Papa Giuliano's legacy, or if he will never come back again. This open ending leaves the reader to reflect upon the feasibility of a project of grafting of a Sicilian American into Sicilian soil, and to weigh the complexities of American ethnic identities.

Of Morreale's three novels analyzed in this study, his 1973 A Few Virtuous Men (Li Cornuti)[90] can be thought of as a transition of sorts from a narrative entirely set in Sicily (The Seventh Saracen) to one which takes place exclusively in the US (Monday, Tuesday...Never Come Sunday). This second novel brings back some of the characters the reader has already met in the first, but it primarily revolves around Father Juffa and a most interesting trip the priest takes to the United States. Whereas in The Seventh Saracen the focus was on a Sicilian American—Guy Licata—interacting within a Sicilian milieu, in this novel a Sicilian—Father Juffa—is shown building bridges with the Sicilian/American community. The two novels, read together, offer a multi-dimensional view of both Sicilian and Sicilian/American identities and realities.

The graphemic changes in the Father's name from the Jouffá of The Seventh Saracen to the Juffa of A Few Virtuous Men signify a change in the character's personality. He is still the simple priest of the church of Our Lady of the Mount, for whom priesthood is an obstacle to his full realization as a man, as he makes clear by often repeating: "If I didn't have this frock tangling my feet, I'd turn this town around and have it in my pocket" (15). But what characterizes Father Juffa are his literary ambitions, and

[90] *Cornuto*, or cuckold, is one of the most common insults in the Italian language.

his relationships with women, which take the form of a lustful affair with la Pippitunna, and a pathological devotion to his mother, Donna Rosalia. At the beginning of the novel, Father Juffa is said to be in the process of writing his memoirs, entitled *Svolta Pericolosa*—"by which he meant 'dangerous turning' or 'life's dangerous turning point, attention!!!'" (19)—in which he intends to report the most important events in the life of a town priest. One of the first chapters is "The Temptation of Father Juffa," and refers to the Father's first encounter with the widow Grazia Pepitone, aka la Pippitunna, who, since her husband's mysterious death, had been turned by the town's Mafiosi into their sexual toy. Haunted by the image of La Pippitunna's mounds of flesh pressed against him, Father Juffa makes her his housekeeper, and, eventually, his lover. The narrator informs us that

> Before La Pippitunna came into Father Juffa's life, he had loved his mother with a filial adoration that was immense. After a meal with some good wine he found himself crying over the great sacrifices his mother had made in order to have him become a priest. It was only natural that in his *ricordi* he devoted a chapter to La Donna Rosalia, as she was known to all the village, which he began, 'Mamma, Sweet and solemn returns to my lips the wonderful and adored name of Mother!!!' (27)

Torn between filial devotion and carnal desire, Father Juffa is ironically obsessed by the only two images from which the Catholic Church has allowed women to draw inspiration, that is Mary and Mary Magdalene.[91]

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[91] Of all the women in Morreale's works, who usually play inconsequential roles compared to the men, La Pippitunna is the only one with some semblance of personality. A widow with no kids, she is considered as a "used" woman in Sicilian society, and thus can only play the role of a prostitute. Morreale's La Pippitunna is a very sensual creature, and the suggestion that she might represent for Father Juffa what Mary Magdalene was for Christ is expressed by Don Tarralla: "Everyone knew that Father Juffa *si la faciva* with La Pippitunna, which was a Sicilian way of saying that she was making it with her ...It was accepted as another privilege for those who made the law. Then too, Don Tarralla let it be known that such talk

Besides women, the other group that plays an important part in Father Juffa's life is that of the "few virtuous men" of the novel's title, as the author this time sarcastically refers to the "men with mustaches" who rule the town of Racalmora. At the beginning of the novel, in fact, Father Juffa is said to be very "proud that, over the years, the men with mustaches left half a slaughtered kid on his doorstep each Christmas Eve" (8). Besides its economic value at a time in which meat was a luxury in which not many Sicilians could indulge, the gift is especially flattering for it signifies the priest's acceptance by and support from an exclusive circle of rulers.

In his 2006 book-length study on the figure of the gangster in Italian/American literature and films, and how the gangster has impacted the construction of an Italian/American sense of masculinity, Gardaphé writes: "At the same time that Puzo created the Corleones and Talese was writing about the Bonnano [sic] family, Ben Morreale was bringing his own realistic version of the gangster to fiction" (From Wiseguys to Wise Men 61). In a Few Virtuous Men, the gangster Morreale creates is Don Raphaeli Petrocelli, called Don Tarralla after the traditional Sicilian cookies the boss always carries in his pocket. Through Don Tarralla, Morreale lays out the workings of Mafia and shows how pervasive its power could be on all aspects of the life of a Sicilian town.

Don Tarralla's philosophy on life revolves around the word *sistemato* or, as the narrator explains,

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against Juffa was blasphemy, a lie against a good man, as if to say that Christ was making it with Mary Magdalene. And, of course Pantaleone, encouraged by Tarralla's mocking tone, could not help but say in the noblemen's club that some scholars thought that that was just the case" (35).

> arranged, orderly, and in its place. This had become the most important thing in life to him. Everything in its place and all would be well with the world, harmonious as the blue tiles in the room behind him. Order was more important than money. He had learned that to disturb the harmony of society, to break its laws, the order of things, is to destroy what little beauty and meaning there is in this life. This was very important to Tarralla, so important that it had prevented him from going to America, or, more precisely, to New York with his boyhood friend, Pepi Salemi. (31)

As it is typical of Mafiosi, Don Tarralla downplays his own power and importance within the community of Racalmora: "I'm a nobody in this town....I know very little and can do even less" is his refrain (17). The friendship between Father Juffa and Don Tarralla grows over the years till the moment when the priest accidentally discovers that his "virtuous" friend might be responsible for the assassination of La Pippitunna's husband. Right when their relationship is turning difficult, Father Juffa is relieved of his burden by Mussolini. Don Tarralla, in fact, mysteriously disappears at the same time that the dictator is launching his first serious attack on Mafia, leaving the people in Racalmora to wonder whether, as someone in town says, he really "was made a saint and was sent to heaven" (57).

On the subject of anti-fascist feelings surfacing in Italian/American literature, Gardaphé notes that

> Not until after the 1940s do antifascist ideas find their way into the fiction of Italian American writers. [...] however, in spite of the absence of works published during the period of the rise and fall of Italian fascism, fascism looms large in the literary imagination of American writers of Italian descent. Its presence as a theme and a force that inspired stories, novels, and poems is something that demands further consideration and analysis. (Leaving Little Italy 27)

Along with Michael DeCapite's 1944 No Bright Banner, Gardaphé lists Ben Morreale's Monday, Tuesday... Never Come Sunday as a prime example of Italian/American

narrative that denounces the dictatorships of the 20th century. However, before then, Morreale had dealt with the most popular aspects of the pro-fascist sentiments of the masses in A Few Virtuous Men, through the character of Father Juffa. In the years that precede World War II, the priest expresses his own enthusiasm for a historical juncture in which "Italy was showing the world that it too had *potenza*—power. New Roman legions were tramping again in Abyssinia. It was just the beginning of a rebirth of the old Roman power" (42). Together with this renewed sense of glory derived from Mussolini's military campaign in Ethiopia, the priest also basks in the alleged safety and order of the community at large propagandized by the regime: "Juffa felt a sense of relief and pride in the regime of Il Duce who brought a new reality to law and order. Now country homes were safe and disputes were settled in the courts. One could stay in the countryside at night. If the farmers still came in each night, it was out of habit, Juffa said" (57). What is more important to Father Juffa, especially now that he has developed a deep mistrust for Don Tarralla, is that Mussolini undertook to uproot the self-styled "virile and virtuous" cancer from the island, "just as surely as it was to bring honor, power and glory to all of Italy, and" the narrator maliciously adds, "maybe even to Sicily" (57). Juffa's infatuation with Fascism does not last long, and when the Germans make their first appearance in town, the Father puts away his fascist uniform. Finally, three years after his disappearance, accompanied by the forces of AMGOT,[92] Don Tarralla makes his triumphal return to Racalmora. Mafia, thus, resumes power in the town, and its relationship with the Allies is the object of the speculations of many people "who still

[92] The Allied Military Government of Occupied Territories was a government of military occupation ruled by American and British officers in charge of administrating the newly liberated territories in Italy during WWII.

believe that the Americans brought Tarralla back, and a few who are still awed to think that Tarralla really brought the Americans" (68).[93]

The middle part of A Few Virtuous Men focuses on Father Juffa's preaching tour of various Sicilian/American communities in the United States in order to gather money to renovate his church. By bringing into play the encounter between Sicilian and Sicilian/American cultures on American soil, Morreale is able to provide the reader with a deeper understanding of the cultural codes and dynamics that shape the Sicilian/American identity of his characters, or their *sicilianamericanità*. Before his trip to the US, Father Juffa shared with his townspeople the deep-seated belief that America is a land of opportunities. To the people in Racalmora, in fact, America "was an envelope with money, a place where half of the village had gone and sent back pictures of children grown tall, healthy and fat, with curious names such as Connie, Donny, Phil or Joe, in first communion dresses, wedding gowns, but never the notice of a funeral" (99). Upon his arrival in Brooklyn, though, Father Juffa is confronted with the full extent of changes brought on by emigration to the core values of Sicilian culture, particularly in his host family. In the United States, in fact, Marco and Santa Di Licata's children have married "at least once" (110), one of them, Giuliano, aka Julie, has married a Jewish girl at the "*City Ollu,*" 'City Hall', while the youngest daughter, Connie—which in Sicilian sounds like *cane*, or 'dog' to Juffa—lives all by herself in Manhattan. Commenting on the erosion of his own family, Marco Di Licata himself admits: "What family? Family. Here it's better to raise pigs. Then at the end of the year you can just slit their throats" (109).

[93] For a discussion of the role that the Allies played in 1943 in the "rebirth" of Mafia, see Salvatore Lupo's 1993 Storia della Mafia. Dalle Origini ai Giorni Nostri.

The inner conflicts of second-generation ethnics generated by the need to negotiate between ethnic heritage and American identity are especially explored by Morreale through Connie Di Licata. By focusing on Connie, Morreale is able to show how the ethnic dilemma impinges on the life of a Sicilian/American woman, especially affecting her psychological well-being. A strict Catholic by upbringing, Connie decides early on in her life to join the convent. Following some unknown events, however, she comes back home, disillusioned with the church and in need of therapy. Her psychiatrist believes that Connie's distress is originated by a sexual dysfunction due to the clash in values between a "19th century Italian-Catholic ethic in 20th century multi-ethnical America" (122). Helen Barolini's discussion on the repressive effects that the Madonna model has had on the sexual life of Italian/American women is particularly apropos here. Furthering Andrew Rolle's discussion of the role of the Madonna on the psychological life of Italian Americans, Barolini goes as far as pointing to the pop singer Madonna as the example of an Italian/American woman whose "obsession when publicly acting out sex when she sang 'Papa, don't preach,'" is an attempt to "vehemently [cut] loose from the childhood bonds of Catholic education and strict patriarchal family mores" (The Dream Book 14). Connie Di Licata initially tries to assert her own sexuality, and, eventually, in her own way, come to terms with her bicultural identity by sleeping around with various partners. The influence of her Catholic upbringing, however, is too strong to fight, and the confusion derived from her unsuccessful therapy surfaces in the woman's nightly prayer, which parodies the "Our Father:"

> Forgive yourself your frustrations, as I have forgiven mine; adjust to what your world has made of you; compensate for your hated-cherished mother-father image, envy not the penis as others fear castration, give us our daily

> good orgasm. In the name of Oedipus the Rex, the Libido and Phallic Symbol, Amen. (123)

According to Father Juffa, the ethnic heterogeneity of the American mosaic is the source of Connie's—and, for that matter, any other ethnic American's—psychological instability. He prompts the Di Licatas' daughter to think how the multi-ethnic character of America weakens one's sense of identity, "because all have to give up what took them thousands of years to become, when they come here. And to become what? You don't even know yourself," he argues (131). A core principle of Juffa's stance on the identity problem of second-generation Americans of Sicilian descent is a strong belief in the family as the only viable social institution. In his memoir, the town priest would later record his discussion with Connie by way of a learned quotation as follows: "As Cicero counseled Marcus Antonius, I spoke to her, 'I beg you, think of those from whom you have sprung, not those among whom you live" (132).

While second-generation Sicilian Americans struggle to make sense of their Sicilian Selves, first-generation immigrants cherish their ties with Sicily and try to maintain them especially through money. As it is the case of many so-called developing countries today, remittances by migrant workers played an important role in the economy of Sicily all throughout the 20th century, affecting the island both in terms of immediate economic impact and long-term social change. As Sciascia pointed out in the late 70s,

> L'emigrazione ha contribuito a migliorare il livello di vita e a far entrare la Sicilia nell'universo del consumismo. Quelle piccole somme inviate ogni mese dagli emigrati hanno per effetto che oggi il livello di vita medio

> dell'isola non differisce sostanzialmente da quello delle altre regioni italiane.[94] (La Sicilia Come Metafora 38)

In their relationship with their origins, then, Sicilian Americans featured as major contributors to the economy of the island and acted as catalysts for its process of modernization. Thanks to the donations of Sicilian Americans, in fact, Father Juffa can dispose of a large sum of money to renovate his church. The changes he intends to make in his house of worship are meant as a tribute to the generosity of Sicilians in the US. For this reason, the priest envisions a series of enhancements in the fashion of the American churches he has visited in the States. Huge glass sliding doors to replace the front wooden portals, electric candles instead of those made of wax, a blue neon cross, and a hi-fi sound system are only the basic renovations Father Juffa has in mind for his Church of the Mount, which, eventually, will make it look like "a bit of Brooklyn-Irish-baroque transplanted to Sicily" (197). Ironically enough, as Gardaphé notes, "Sicily is ultimately changed by those who left, the very people who struggle to maintain a sense of Sicilian identity as they confront the challenges of life in the United States" (From Wiseguys 58).

Morreale's A Few Virtuous Men ends on a pessimistic note, as we learn that, as the result of an apoplectic stroke, Father Juffa spends most of his time in bed and eventually dies in the arms of La Pippitunna. The priest's maid, now deformed by a bad attack of flu, starts working as a housekeeper for Carlu Spina, who, since Don Tarralla's assassination, has become the most "virtuous man" in Racalmora. Not much later, Spina is found dead, with an axe embedded in his skull. Nardu Pantaleone, the character

[94] "Emigration has contributed to improve the life of Sicilians and to make Sicily part of the universe of consumerism. The small monthly sums of money sent by the emigrants have caused the average living standards of Sicily to be not significantly different from the other Italian regions" (my translation).

inspired by Leonardo Sciascia,[95] is chosen by Morreale to express some final considerations, which provide a glimmer of hope for the future of the island:

> Pantaleone ...grew more and more pessimistic, resigned to the fact that nothing would ever change. What he found hateful in others—a tendency to become apathetic and pessimistic—was happening to him. "This island is doomed," he found himself muttering. And yet he knew it wasn't so. It wasn't always so; it had flowered once, he told himself. After all, this is the land of Prosperina [sic] and Demeter. With some good sense and a few good men it could really be paradise, as most men wished it to be. (203)

A collective "good sense," and the work of a few non-"virtuous," and yet good men are some of the measures Pantaleone suggests to reduce pessimism and build confidence and pride in Sicilians and Sicilian Americans alike.

These are both ideas that Morreale will explore in his next novel. In his 1977 Monday, Tuesday ... Never Come Sunday, the writer focuses on a Sicilian immigrant couple and the struggles of the whole family to carry on their Sicilian ways in the Brooklyn neighborhood where they live. Unlike the previous two novels considered in this chapter, Monday, Tuesday is written in the first person from the point of view of second-generation Sicilian/American Calogero Chiarocielo, aka Cholly Carcelli. The novel is a coming-of-age narrative, which presents the reader with a rather bleak but realistic account of the challenges facing the life of a young ethnic American in the 30s. The social realism that informed both The Seventh Saracen and A Few Virtuous Men inspires this novel too, which focuses on social problems and the hardships of the

[95] All throughout the novel, Pantaleone/Sciascia appears in specific moments to express his own thoughts mostly in the form of asides on various issues of the "nature" of Sicilians, such as their "innate" suspiciousness, pessimism, and the like. In many cases, Morreale simply translates from Sciascia's works. While it is certainly worth mentioning the presence of these instances of a dialogue between Sicilian and Sicilian/American literatures, I did not deem it necessary to delve further into Pantaleone's thoughts because I have extensively dealt with Sciascia's concept of *sicilitudine* in Chapter I.

everyday life of the working-class people in a multi-ethnic section of New York. In a sense, Morreale's 1977 novel can be considered as the third of a sort of trilogy about Sicilians, which is not connected by characters or a storyline, but by History, as it follows the life-journey of a people from their birthplace—i.e., Sicily—to the place where many of them settled, that is America.[96]

In this novel, the cube-like houses of Racalmorra/Racalmora/Racalmuto have been replaced by tenements, and there is no *chiazza* around which the social life of the people might revolve. Most importantly, factories have taken the place of the Sicilian mines—a symptom of the industrial model of economic progress embraced by the US, which sharply contrasts with the traditional economy of Sicily. Their differences notwithstanding, the American and the Sicilian economic systems share a model of private ownership of the means of production—the Sicilian mine like the American factory—the goal of which is ever increasing profits for a minority of wealthy few, irrespective of the human costs. In the United States, the class question intertwines in significant ways with the ethnic one. The status as an immigrant at the bottom of the economic and social pyramid in the US affects Mimi's—Cholly's father—self-image to

[96] The suggestion that History might be the bridge linking all three novels is all the more significant in light of the fact that, before retiring, Morreale was a Professor of European History at SUNY at Plattsburgh. His interest in all things Sicilian and Sicilian/American is comparable to Jerre Mangione's unrelenting commitment to the advancement of the cause of Italian/American studies. Their dedication culminated in 1992 in the joint publication of La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience. While Robert Viscusi defines La Storia as "the grant-funded construction of a collective history as an act against collective forgetting" (Buried Caesars 97), and Frank Gallo as "the best book available on the Italian American experience" (202), Dino Cinel questions the usefulness of such a book. While he is ready to admit that a book like this is sorely needed, especially among the young Italian Americans, on other hand he notes that "such narratives are usually passionate, but they should also strive for objectivity... In ethnic studies we have not found the way to write histories that are both popular and scientifically accurate. Perhaps this is a reflection of our larger inability to find a resolution between ethnic and national identities. This book is a further reminder of an agenda that we, both as scholars and citizens, cannot escape for much longer" (1311).

the point that the man first joins organized crime, and, eventually, overwhelmed by sense of guilt, goes crazy. All in all, Morreale's Monday, Tuesday is a powerful portrait of America during the Great Depression, and the effects that the economic crisis had on immigrant families.

The novel opens in 1933, when, in the middle of the Depression, the Civil Works Administration was established to provide temporary jobs for the unemployed. From Christie Street in Manhattan, where they live in a six-story tenement renamed by the Sicilian occupants *lu Vaticanu,* 'the Vatican', the Chiarocielos—Mimi, his wife Theresa, and their first-born Cholly—gather after dinner around the kitchen table to glue rhinestones to American flags and religious pins till late at night in order to eke out a living. When Mimi gets a job on the CWA measuring the water near Coney Island, the family moves to Brooklyn. Unemployment is a constant theme in this novel, and a source of constant worry for the Chiarocelo family. In the end, it is the specter of long-term unemployment that pushes Cholly's father to resort to organized crime as a way out of poverty, and as a means of gaining respect in mainstream America. Once again, then, the "men with mustaches," this time led by *lu zi* Luigi—'uncle Luigi'—pull the strings of the novel's events.

The focus on the *modus operandi* of Mafia as it bears on the question of the Sicilian diaspora in the US is part of Morreale's interest in certain themes that, especially since the publication of Sciascia's 1961 novel Il Giorno della Civetta—The Day of the Owl--, have become classic topoi of Sicilian literature. The unfavorable economic and social conditions faced by Mimi Chiarocielo make him succumb to the lure of mafia

wealth. To this Sicilian immigrant in the US, money represents not only the most immediate means of support, but also a passport of sorts into Americanness. The degree of assimilation into mainstream America, in fact, is also measured in terms of the general standards of living that immigrants have attained. Significantly, Mimi's request for help to the "men with mustaches" occurs right after an incident that involves a radio, a form of entertainment which, through its various commercial broadcasts, was crucial in creating a sense of community, and, therefore, of belonging. When Cholly asks his father to buy a radio, Mimi interprets his son's request as a whim generated by the child's exposure to what he perceives as the generally high living standards of the country. Mimi further comments on consumerism as a phenomenon that seems to have engulfed even the children of immigrants, spoiling them to excess. The father never fails to compare his childhood in Sicily to his son's in the US, thus underlining the gulf that separates his world from America:

> "When I was your age I was carrying sulphur on my back," he'd say, "in the mines of Sicily, and I'd make four jumps of a dead one." (It's difficult to translate Sicilian.) He'd holler and pace up and down. "In this cursed country we have to have everything: meat every day, spaghetti before it. In the old country a piece of onion and bread in the dark, off to bed, and you used rocks for toilet paper. But we forget that here. Here they complain because we use orange wrappings." He'd always end his anger with, "Better to raise pigs, like my grandfather, the good soul, used to say. At the end of the year you can cut their throats and sell them." (40)

Despite his grumbling, Mimi joins his son's efforts to save enough money to buy a radio. The two eventually succeed, and the winter nights spent on the linoleum floor listening to "The Witch's Tale" strengthen the father-son bond. After two months, though, the family cannot afford making the payments anymore, and a man comes by to take the radio with

him. "The next day," the narrator recalls with a powerful ellipsis, "my father didn't go to his CWA job and instead went to see *lu zi* Luigi" (41).

As Gardaphé observes, "the new association of Cholly's father with [the men with mustaches] is marked by a change in his dress," quite typical when becoming a gangster (From Wiseguys 64-65). The narrator, in fact, remembers his father's changes as follows: "He got a black overcoat that looked very tight on him. Every time he wore it he seemed out of breath. He bought a white, white hat with a black band, like somebody had died. It had a very small brim, but it was high, like one of my mother's pots. On his shoes he wore spats buttoned on the side by little pear knobs" (68). Needless to add that a forty-five automatic pistol completes the gangster attire. Paradoxically, right when he resorts to Old World's ways, Mimi starts feeling more American and even speaks more English than before. The power bestowed upon him by Mafia serves to improve his self-image, and the money that he makes remind him that even an immigrant can buy "a piece of America."[97] As an immigrant in the US, whose past as a *caruso* in the Sicilian mines still haunts him, Mimi believes that Americanness is first and foremost an economic status, which he means to achieve through his affiliation with organized crime.[98]

As a second-generation Sicilian American, Cholly, on the other hand, seems to have different ideas on the meaning of being an American:

> To be an American for me meant a lot. First, I would have a nice American name like Johnson or Scott, Carol maybe. [...] I'd live in a

[97] Later in the novel, when Mimi is tricked by an attorney into investing his money on some shares, he returns home and proudly announces "We have a piece of America" (146).
[98] In his article "A Class Act," Gardaphé explores the figure of the Italian/American gangster in relation to the question of class-based power, and, therefore, as "a trope for signifying the gain of cultural power that comes through class mobility" (52).

> house on a quiet street filled with trees and brand-new Buicks, and there would be a hose to wash my old jalopy. I'd go with girls that smelled of sweet soap and clean hair and I'd only kiss them and never do anything dirty. [...] And when I grew up I would marry a pretty girl with teeth like kernels on a cob, no breasts so she couldn't be like my Aunt Santa who fed her baby at the dinner table, but she'd wear a pleated skirt and a pink sweater and brown and white shoes. [...] We'd only have two children -a girl first and then a boy. [...] And when I grew old I would smoke a pipe and say wise things to stupid young people. And I would never go to the bathroom or use toilet paper, or pick my nose, or fart or belch. And maybe I would wear spats and carry a cane with a silver handle like a real gentleman. (73-74)

The images selected by Cholly to represent the American man par excellence are clearly patterned after Anglo standards. Particularly striking in the kid's fantasy is the contrast between the refined American—with no biological urges whatsoever, married to a clean, neatly dressed, flat-breasted woman—and the coarse Sicilian—whose foreign last name marks him as a member of a community of people with excessively physical, and, therefore, embarrassing habits. Cholly is keenly aware of the privileges of being an Anglo-American in the 30s. "How I wished that I could be [an American] and never be Cholly Carcelli and never speak Sicilian and never be I-talian," he recalls, in a feat of nostalgia and painful memories (74).

Cholly's Sicilian/American identity sets him aside not only from the (Anglo-American) dominant culture, but also from the other ethnic groups with which he comes into contact in Brooklyn. Cholly's friendship with Iggy, the only child of a family of Russian Jews, is particularly significant in that it allows the reader to better understand the implications of cultural heritage through a comparison between two different ways of living one's ethnic status in the US. A couple of years Cholly's senior, Iggy, like an older brother, represents a role model for the young Sicilian American, as a student, as a friend,

and, especially, as a person. A precocious intellectual, Iggy sets out to teach Cholly the importance of a good education and free thinking. Compared to him, Cholly is a naïve young boy who can never make sense of the guy's teachings beyond their literal meaning, as shown in the following passage: "'Question everything they're teaching you. For in Doubting you Learn.' But I didn't even *answer* the questions the teacher asked me, let alone ask questions. I never opened my mouth in the class, I had so much to learn" (17). Equally important is Iggy's attempt to conscientize Cholly about working-class issues by introducing to him the concepts of "labor market," "pink slip," and "bourgeois propaganda," just to mention a few. Even a simple lesson on how to be rough on the football field turns, in Iggy's hands, into an opportunity to lecture the young Sicilian/American boy on the necessity of revolution: "Game my aspirin!," he tells Cholly,

> "Those biscuits would break your behind if you gave them a chance! Little people have been turning the other cheek for too long. It's about time they kicked somebody in the billiards; their own are black and blue. That's the mentality they want you to have: it's only a game – so you take it easy while those biscuits take it damned seriously and you find yourself on your can, wondering what hit you!" (75)

The two boys, however, are heirs to two different cultural legacies inherited by their respective parents. In this sense, the dialogue between Natasha, Iggy's mother, and Cholly's father speaks volumes of the Russian's and the Sicilian's respective historical/cultural backgrounds. Sitting on the steps of their house, Mrs. Lazarus and Mr. Chiarocielo engage in a political discussion which proceeds in the following terms:

> "Well, Mr. Carcello, the worker must see that the labor movement is the vanguard of the class struggle."

> "They might be okay at the beginning but as soon as they start collecting dues – they're all a bunch of rack-a-teers"
> "But an organization must function."
> ...
> "When I see a union boss riding around in a car, when I can't send my boy to the movies for a month, Mrs. Lazari, I feel cheated. Like if I stole from my brother. They're all a bunch of rack-a-teers." (83-84)

Drawing from her experience as a Russian Communist militant in the United States, Natasha affirms the necessity of studying dialectic materialism, knowing the processes of formation of surplus capital, and realizing the possibilities of the proletariat. As an illiterate immigrant from Sicily, Mimi, in turn, exemplifies the skepticism of many southern Italian men when he concludes the discussion as follows: "Mrs. Lazari, I'm no man of upper education, but there is one thing will help: a lot of bombs. Because, I tell you, they're all a bunch of rack-a-teers" (86). The friendship between these families of Sicilian Americans and Jewish Americans sheds some light on ethnic relations in the United States. The bond between the Lazarus and the Chiarocielo families is a remarkable literary example of inter-ethnic collaboration, and serves as a reminder of the role played by inter-ethnic contact in the shaping of ethnic identities in the United States.

As a novel about the Sicilian ethnic experience in the US, Morreale's Monday, Tuesday can be read as a metaphor of the plight of immigrants in the US during the Depression. Mimi's choice to resort to the violent methods of Mafia reflects a historically-justified lack of trust in the ability of the government to redress economic and social inequalities. Mimi's decision is also due, in no small part, to his status as a second-class citizen in a land where the label "immigrant" is a stigma. Unable to cope with the inner conflicts arising out of cultural cross-pressures, the Chiarocielo family degenerates into a dysfunctional state. Mimi collapses under the psychological burden of his Mafia

deeds, and suffers from bouts of melancholia and persecution mania. His wife, on the other hand, slips into a pathological form of religious devotion that prompts her to desert her family for two years in order to be "cured" by *la signora* Theresa, a woman from Northern Italy who is said to be in friendly terms with saints and runs a rather expensive rest home in New Jersey. A teenager at the end of the novel, Cholly is left to recollect the pieces of his broken family as well as the shattered remains of the American Dream they, like many immigrants, had pursued. The boy is also left to make sense of Iggy's death in Spain, where his idealist friend had gone to join the volunteers and fight against Franco's fascist forces. The final image of the "sidewalk of time," which is a recurring theme all throughout the novel, signals not only that time is slipping away, but especially that Cholly seems to have lost his grip on his own life. Each tile in the "sidewalk of time" indicates a day of the week, a season, or a month of the year. Cholly dreams of it in the following terms:

> It was as I always knew time. But that night I saw it move beneath my feet, faster and faster, and I started to run. I ran as fast as I could, and all I could do was to stay in the box I knew was Friday. Then the sidewalk slid under me faster and faster and weeks went by, and no matter how fast I ran time raced under me. I opened my eyes and tried to think of something else. I was almost scared for I knew I wasn't walking forward in time anymore, but that time was rushing toward me and away from me, and even as fast as I could run I couldn't keep up with it. (168)

Cholly's nightmare reveals the trauma of a split identity and the subconscious fear that stems from a sense of inadequacy and powerlessness in relation to his ethnic identity crisis. Ultimately, the novel addresses personal and social identity issues, and through the double focus on two generations of Sicilian Americans, it offers insights in the multifarious aspects of the ethnic dilemma.

The three novels by Ben Morreale discussed in this chapter—The Seventh Saracen, A Few Virtuous Men (Li Cornuti), and Monday, Tuesday...Never Come Sunday—exemplify the claims on *sicilianamericanità* which constitute the theoretical starting point of this study. Along with Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano and many other Sicilian/American writers, Morreale has explicitly coded his ethnic literary experience in regional terms by consistently focusing on the reality of Sicilians both in Sicily and in the US. Given his familiarity with both the American and the Sicilian systems, Morreale has been able to reproduce with equal vigor the life of a Sicilian town as well as that of a multi-ethnic enclave in Brooklyn. Through the use of a set of topoi and themes with which Italian literature has been concerned across the centuries, the author has also fashioned himself as the heir to a literary tradition which should, indeed, be part of the "cultural baggage" of any Italian/American writer. Through his novels, then, Morreale builds a convincing case for the reading of Italian/American literature as a phenomenon that needs, as indeed it should, be studied not only in relationship to mainstream US American literature, but also in relationship to Italian literature. Scholars of Italian literature, both in Italy and in the United States, on the other hand, could only profit from the critical perspectives found in Italian/American writings, which could problematize in productive ways any long-standing understanding of Italian-ness, thus opening a healthy debate on what constitutes a "national literature." By making his literary experience part of the larger project of Sicilian regional literature in Italy, Morreale has contributed to the creation of the phenomenon of Sicilian/American literature, and to bridge the supposed gap between Italian and Italian/American literatures.

Conclusion

> "Italy without Sicily forms no image at all in the soul; only here is the key to everything."
>
> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, Italian Journey (1816).

> "Forse è colpa di Goethe e del suo viaggio in Sicilia: è qui – scrisse – che si trova la chiave di tutto. Lui però non fa testo: ha sempre trovato troppe chiavi in troppi posti."[99]
>
> Andrea Camilleri

In this study I have sought to show how a distinct sense of Sicilian/American identity, which I have called *sicilianamericanità*, has seeped into Italian/American literature. I was especially interested in initiating a discussion about the ways this characteristic literary phenomenon in the US is paralleled in the history of Italian literature by the works of Sicilian writers such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Maria Messina, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Vitaliano Brancati, and more recently, Leonardo Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, and Andrea Camilleri, just to mention a few. I have tried to answer questions such as: Why and how have some Sicilian/American

[99] "It is probably Goethe's fault, and of his journey to Sicily: only here, he wrote, is the key to everything. However, he doesn't count: he found too many keys in too many places" (my translation).

authors fashioned their Italian/American identity in regional terms? How is the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity articulated and represented in the Italian/American texts by the authors under examination?

The first obvious finding of this study was that cultural regionalism(s) surfaces in Italian/American culture at large. Granted, today's Italian/American ethnic identity was shaped at its core by immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno,* the area that extends south and east of Rome, and from which most of today's Italian Americans can claim their ancestry. However, this identity encompasses regional specifities that often make their way into the larger culture and its literature in such ways that they demand to be addressed. As historian Eric Hobsbawm points out in his 1990 study Nations and Nationalism Since 1780, "'national consciousness' develops unevenly among the social groupings and *regions* of a country; this regional diversity and its reasons have in the past been notably neglected" (12, emphasis added). In fact, despite any claim to the contrary, Italian-ness, in Italy as well as in the US, has always been a multifarious concept. As its Italian counterpart, then, Italian/American culture too can be said to be an ensemble of various regional experiences combined, of course, with the American component.

Of all the regional groups that make up the Italian/American mosaic, Sicilians, arguably more than any other group of Italians, for the geographical, socio-economic, and cultural reasons explored throughout this work, have especially distinguished themselves in the sense of a regional self-ascription. I have found that, while attempting to redefine the concept of Americanness and expand the canon of American literature so that it embraces articulations of ethnic identities, many Sicilian/American writers have defined

themselves in relation to the island, rather than claiming allegiance to the "Italian nation." In their writings, this marked propensity to regional identification takes the form of a constant preoccupation with the compelling questions of a hybrid consciousness: *sicilianamericanità*. Hence, my investigation provided an opportunity to examine this specific process of identity construction and to evaluate its reflections on Italian/American literature.

Literature became one of the privileged sites for the construction of an ethnic regional identity for American authors of Sicilian descent such as Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, and Ben Morreale. The authors considered in this study have, in different ways and through different genres, turned their works into literary manifestations of their *sicilianamericanità*. As ethnic works, their memoirs, poems, and novels all deal with the clash between ethnic heritage and national status, and explore the possibilities offered by the Old and the New Worlds as well as those denied by each or both. Since the outset of his literary career, Mangione joined the US literary "multicultural awakening" by fashioning himself as an ethnic writer. Interestingly, he always made a point of articulating his identity in literature—especially in his memoirs—as a Sicilian American, so as to deserve the title of "dean of Sicilian American writers" (Gardaphé, "Re-inventing Sicily" 56). Rose Romano, on the other hand, uses her regional ethnic identity in poetry as a tool of resistance to certain pre-constituted categories, thus bringing to the fore the issues of gender and sexual preference as they affect the way *sicilianamericanità* is experienced. By forcing her stormy poetic persona into the national literary panorama, Romano rejects the nationalist, sexist, and hetero-normative fabric of the Italian/American community, and dominant culture at large. Ben Morreale, in turn, has

added to the phenomenon of Sicilian/American literature by attaching himself, more evidently, and deliberately than anyone else, to the Sicilian tradition. In Morreale's works, in fact, *sicilianamericanità* takes on intertextual aspects, as it sets in motion a closely-knit net of relations with the Sicilian tradition in Italian literature. By dealing with issues of regional ethnic identity in literature, Mangione, Romano, and Morreale, each in his/her own way, have joined the efforts of all those ethnic writers who are still struggling to engender a radical rethinking of the notions of "inclusion" and "exclusion" in US national literature, and transform its dominant representational practices.

Mangione, Romano, and Morreale are only a few reflections of the prismatic nature of the phenomenon of Sicilian Americana as it surfaces in Italian/American literature. The re-investment of the Sicilian cultural capital in the works of other Sicilian/American writers takes the most disparate forms, as it intertwines with the authors' all-too-personal aesthetic choices and ways of dealing with issues of regionalism, gender, class, sexual preference, political affiliation, religious sentiments, and the like. For instance, poet Vincenzo Ancona, and story-teller Gioia Timpanelli both draw inspiration from Sicilian oral traditions, folklore, legends, and humor for their works. Ancona is the author of a collection of poems, the 1990 Malidittu La Lingua: Damned Language, published in Sicilian with English translations, while Timpanelli has dealt with Sicilian folktales most explicitly in her 1998 Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily. The paucity of their published production is consistent with the oral and performed nature of their works. Ancona and Timpanelli, in fact, imported in the US, respectively, the Sicilian tradition of the *poeta contadino*—or 'poet-farmer,' or 'illiterate

poet'—, and that of the *cantastorie* or the professional storyteller who, in the old days, roamed from town to town enchanting the crowds with his stories.

After a literary debut in the tradition of mainstream short stories, third-generation Sicilian/American Tony Ardizzone published in 1997 In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu. In the narrative of Papa Santuzzu, Ardizzone weaves, in an original fashion, Sicilian folkloric tales with a recollection of immigration stories. The writer plays with his *sicilianamericanità* through a literary trip back in time and place to Sicily in the early 1900. That is the origin of a series of tales of immigration, displacement, and adjustment to the New World through which the Sicilian/American characters as well as the author, are able to inscribe their presence onto the American palimpsest.

Second-generation Nat Scammacca inverted the immigration trajectory of his parents by moving from the United States, where he was born, to Sicily, where he died in 2006. "I supply myself with ideological excuses for my choices and destiny," he confessed in a 1988 interview with Fred Gardaphé, "Like Odysseus, I had to return to Sicily if life had any meaning at all" (Dagoes Read 201). In Sicily, Scammacca joined the *Antigruppo*, a populist movement which expressed its anti-establishment attitudes by bringing free public poetry readings to small towns' piazzas. In his numerous poems as well as his autobiographical works—such as the collection of short stories Bye Bye America, first published in Italian in 1972 with the subtitle Ricordi di un Wop, or 'Memories of a Wop," the 1979 novel Due Mondi, and the 1989 Sikano l'Amerikano!—Scammacca took to writing about what it means to be a Sicilian American in Italian.

The questions and issues raised by Sicilian/American women writers reveal a problematization of patriarchal and sexist practices within the Italian/American family and community. In her 1988 novel The Right Thing To Do, Josephine Gattuso Hendin fictionalizes inter-regional, gender, and assimilation conflicts in the lives of a Sicilian man, his Neapolitan wife, and their rebellious American-born daughter. The emotional problems faced by a dysfunctional Sicilian/American family also inform Rachel Guido De Vries's 1986 novel Tender Warriors. The DeMarco brothers try to overcome their respective social "handicaps"—Rose is a lesbian, Lorraine an ex-junkie, while Sonny suffers from epileptic seizures—for the sake of recovering the sacredness of family unity. Together with Rose Romano and Rachel Guido De Vries, Dodici Azpadu contributed to the discussion about gender and sexual identity with her 1983 novel Saturday Night in the Prime of Life. The protagonist, Neddie Zingaro, is a Sicilian/American woman who is estranged by her family, and particularly by her mother, because of her sexual identity. Interestingly, Azpadu too, like Romano, portrays her Sicilian/American characters as racially defined. What especially connects Neddie to her mother Concetta, in fact, besides the fact that Neddie is the only child who can still speak Sicilian, is that they are both characterized by a markedly olive complexion. Despite these connections though, the mother cannot accept Neddie's lesbian identity, and in one last desperate attempt to save their relationship, she breaks with her daughter for good. The above-mentioned women writers negotiate a Sicilian/American feminist subjecthood within and against the boundaries of both the greater Italian and American national identities. Through their feminist and lesbian counter-narratives, these poets and writers are able to subvert a century-old passivity and acceptance of the normative role of women in traditional

Sicilian culture, and thus re-write the larger social and sexual narratives of Italian/American identity.

Although a sense of *sicilianamericanità* is not a clearly distinctive trait in their works, other American authors of Sicilian descent, such as poet/critic Sandra Mortola Gilbert, novelist and short-story writer Rita Ciresi, Beat poet Diane Di Prima, poet Maria Luisa Famà, Susan Caperna Lloyd, and others have, in different ways, dealt with their Sicilian/American identity. These and other writers have contributed in characteristic, yet original ways to the construction of Italian/American literature. None of the authors I have dealt with in depth or simply hinted at in this study is truly representative of *sicilianamericanità*, but each suggests a way to cope with issues of identity construction, and regional allegiances in literature. Most of these authors do not feel completely at ease in mainstream America, and their works explore the conflicts due to the continuous negotiations between traditional Sicilian and modern American ways. Most of them were unable, and in many cases unwilling to totally shrug off their tradition-bound ethnic identity. Generally, they all felt compelled to cope with their *sicilianamericanità*, and seem to believe, just like their Sicilian colleagues, that being a Sicilian in the United States is a "special" occurrence. Sicilian/American writers too, just like Sicilian writers, have come to see their "distinctiveness" not as an obstacle to literary development, but rather as a source of inspiration for the growth of a distinctive literary tradition. On the whole, in fact, their writings make quite a substantial body of work within the more encompassing field of Italian/American literature.

An analysis of *sicilianamericanità* as it surfaces in Italian/American literature should not be perceived as a further fragmentation of US national literature, let alone a balkanization of the field of Italian/American Studies. Its goal, in fact, is not that of further dividing up categories into smaller units. Rather, my study is better understood as a work parallel to that of scholars who look for intersections of ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identities in literature. In other words, central to this study is the tenet that, in the case of Italian/American literature, issues of ethnic, class, gender, sexual identity, *and* regionalism are all interrelated. Differently put, as the Italian/American works marked by feminist or working-class concerns are still Italian/American works within the domain of American literature, what I have, at times, defined as Sicilian/American literature is the literary manifestation of a specific process of identity construction which is part and parcel of Italian/American identity and literature as well as multicultural Americana at large.

In his 1996 Dagoes Read—a collection of reviews, articles and interviews conducted between 1984 and 1994—Gardaphé acutely observed:

> a significant cultural presence is strengthened by the development of the critical voice which is able to enter into a dialogue with the critics of the dominant culture. In the case of Italian/American literature, such a dialogue is necessary on two cultural fronts: Italy and America. The development of this dialogue is a collective project that requires the participation of three groups of intellectuals: Italianists, Americanists and the newly developing Italian/Americanists: cooperation, and in many cases collaboration, of all three groups is essential for the creation of a discourse that centers on the work of Italian/American writers. (15)

I too believe that the claim that Italian/American literature is a phenomenon that relates not only to US national literature but also to Italian literature must be taken seriously and

deserves further exploration. This study has been conceived as a first small step towards a wider process of inquiry and exploration of the common ground between Italian and Italian/American literatures. Even though it is not a traditional comparative study, particular attention has been paid to the influence of one culture on the other. Whenever possible, I have also pointed to some significant parallels between the Italian and Italian/American literary experiences. Further studies might be able to identify an identical treatment of certain themes in both literatures and thus ascertain the power of the forces of "descent" on US national literature. Other studies, on the other hand, might point to how certain themes are treated in ways that disclose the author's closer identification with his/her national identity, rather than his/her ethnic background. The lack of, or insistence on certain themes, and topoi as well as the use of certain stylistic devices and literary strategies might be significant signs of convergence or divergence of the two literary traditions as well as symptoms of the dominant ideologies in each culture. In any case, critical investigations that take into account both Italian and Italian/American literatures could only bring to a better understanding of both cultures.

Italian literature too would benefit from a pluralistic perspective granted by the non-normative contributions of the literature of emigration, written by first-, second-, third- or more generation descendants of Italians in the world. In his 1997 book Bound By Distance, critic Pasquale Verdicchio laments the "dismissive attitudes" of Italianists vis-à-vis emigrant literature, which he attributes to their linguistic and cultural chauvinism:

> while it is well recognized by Italianists that any approach to emigrant culture must involve a methodology of 'pluri-disciplinary contamination',

> it appears that the sense of Italian national language and culture is so strong within the discipline as to override this necessity. Perhaps the first methodological breakdown in many studies of emigrant literature is in the assumption that it must be written either in Italian or by a 'great' Italian writer. Even when Italianists take the time to write on the work of emigrants, it is invariable presented with the usual apologetic tone that wants to distinguish the writing in question from 'literature.' (93-94)

An attention paid to the phenomenon of Italian/American literature could provide scholars of Italian Studies with precious insights about the meaning of the cultural construction(s) of Italian identity and of national literature.

Reconsidering the case of *sicilianamericanità* within the domain of Italian Americana, and in relation to Italian writings, could add much to contemporary scholarly discussions on Ethnic Literatures. If we accept the premise that Ethnic Studies are, by definition, characterized by their close relation to heritage and to a national culture other than that of the United States, then my suggestion is that the field could only profit from an investigation of its literature(s) not only in relation to US national literature, but also to the literatures of the cultures of origins. In fact, the aspects that mark a US ethnic literary tradition as different from mainstream American literature might be precisely those that bring it closer to their cultures of origins. In other words, my suggestion is that each ethnic critical community establishes ties with the critics of the national matrix they embody in the United States. Together with a common cultural capital, in fact, ethnic and non-US national literatures might share expertise, resources, and scholarly fora of discussion, such as conferences and journals. This international cooperation could strengthen in significant ways the status of ethnic literatures within *and* outside the national critical community.

In conclusion, in the past thirty years the study of Ethnic literature in the United States has made major strides toward serious study and inclusion into the literary canon. Further advancements could be made by crossing national disciplinary boundaries and through joint ventures of US and non-US literary scholarships. The abandonment of disciplinary loyalties could open a venue for intriguing dialogues among different national literary traditions. Seen from this perspective, a seemingly particularistic study on *sicilianamericanità* would be a modest contribution to the study of literature as a transnational phenomenon.

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