

### ***Italian American Studies: Territories, Paths, and Proposals***

*Donatella Izzo*

This essay offers a survey of Italian American literary studies, outlining the field's history and addressing some of its recurring themes and issues: the Italian Americans' complex and historically changing relationship with whiteness; gender roles and gender representation; the conflicted attitude to both Italy and the USA, and the ongoing negotiation with both linguistic and cultural traditions; the semiotics of (overt or covert) Italianness. After dealing with some of the landmark interventions in the field, the essays focuses on four recent volumes, respectively by Joseph Sciorra, John Gennari, Samuele Pardini, and Peter Carravetta, analyzing them as significant of some of the most recent and intellectually rewarding trends in the field.

### ***The Origins of Italian American Literature: Joseph Rocchietti***

*Leonardo Buonomo*

This essay examines the life and work of Joseph (born Giuseppe) Rocchietti (1798/99-1879), the earliest known Italian American novelist and playwright who moved to the United States in 1830, probably for political reasons. The first part of the essay reviews the research done so far on Rocchietti, from Carol Bonomo Albright's discovery of his 1835 epistolary novel *Lorenzo and Oonalaska* to Raymond Niro's invaluable biographical findings. To the latter, the essay adds an important chapter, in the

form of a letter to Ugo Foscolo written by Rocchietti when he was living in Switzerland and planning to emigrate to the United States. This letter is both an outpouring of admiration for the great poet and an expression of Rocchietti's balancing act between his own literary aspirations and the harsh reality of his condition as an impoverished expatriate.

The rest of the essay focuses on the novel *Lorenzo and Oonalaska* and the pamphlet *Why a National Literature Cannot Flourish in the United States of North America* which Rocchietti published in 1845. In particular, the essay calls attention to the surprising lack of descriptions of American manners and the American landscape in the section of the novel set in the United States, possibly a reflection of Rocchietti's own sense of alienation and displacement. The one significant exception is a reference to a recognizable location in New York's financial district, the center of what Rocchietti regarded as possibly the most worrying American malady: the national obsession with gain and profit. The analysis of the pamphlet (which was panned by none other than Edgar Allan Poe) also concentrates on Rocchietti's firm belief that the United States should strive to reconnect with its European roots (especially with the heritage of the classical world) rather than try to achieve cultural independence. Writing at the height of Nativism, Rocchietti emphasizes the valuable contribution of immigrants to American life both in cultural and economic terms.

**Sister Blandina Segale's Legacy: Missing Mothers, Intercultural Contacts, and Regional History**

*Elisa Bordin*

This essay explores the importance of Sister Blandina Segale's *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*, her personal diary written between 1872 and 1893 and the first example of Italian American literature in English by a woman. The essay analyzes Segale's report of her contact with Mexican Americans and Natives while in service in New Mexico and Colorado, and her emphasis on religious matters in the Southwest. Both lines of investigation indicate some distance from usual issues in ethnic literature such as nostalgia, assimilation, and identity claims. This approach to Segale's work rather shows how questions of ethnicity, gender, and religion overlap, thus marking new possible original readings in both the history of Italian American literature and the regional and gender history of the American Southwest.

**Farewell to the 1930s. Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* and the Italian American Novel**

*Cinzia Scarpino*

The article offers an account of how Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods*, a novel written between 1941 and 1949, overturns some of the central motifs of the 1930s' proletarian novel in order to portray an Italian American narrative reoriented toward a positive outcome of cultural integration. Set in Granitetown, the fictional counterpart of Barre, Vermont (by then, "the largest granite center in the world"), the novel

tells the intergenerational story of an Italian American family of stonecutters and quarry workers but chooses to silence political discourses of power by suppressing or subverting historical and cultural references to strikes – the unifying chronotope of the "strike and conversion novel" in the 1930s – and the plight of silico-tuberculosis – a recurring motif of the immigrant novels or ghetto pastorals of the same decade.

**Lina, Tina, Miriam, and Mimi: Four Italian Actresses in American Silent Cinema**

*Giuliana Muscio*

The presence of a significant number of Italian performers in American silent cinema has received scarce attention, thus erasing the perception of the role played by Italian *cultura dello spettacolo* in the history of American media. The filmographies indicate that, while there were several male actors and even male stars (like Caruso and Valentino) the number of Italian actresses was tiny. And yet Italian silent cinema was characterized by its *dive*, who had never set foot in the United States. The only Italian actresses who interpreted protagonist roles in American silent cinema were Lina Cavalieri, Tina Modotti, and Miriam Battista. What explains the scarce visibility of their filmic careers was their being Italian women in 1920s United States; and beautiful, sensual, Mediterranean women. Their archetype as black-haired women is literally that of the *dark lady*, of the vamp, the natural antagonist of the *fair* angelic heroine of Victorian WASP culture.

**What's So Funny? Italians in Early American Humor***Fred Gardaphé*

Americans were laughing at Italians long before they were laughing with them. Like all new immigrants, Italians were the targets of American humor, first out of the fear of their difference, then out of the familiarity with their peculiarities. Some scholars have attributed this to the idea that making fun of a minority is part of the process by which that minority is incorporated into the identity mosaic of the United States. In one of the earliest studies of American humor, Constance Rourke noted that there is a progression in the incorporation of diverse identities into the body of American identity; and much of this incorporation came just after the Civil War, a time when the question of who was an American had been challenged as never before.

In the process of exposition of my subject, I look at how Italians were used in American humor before they created their own. Here, I explore representations in early journalism, cartoons, literary texts, theater, vaudeville, and film, and suggest these portrayals will help us understand such historical events as the New Orleans lynching, the Sacco and Vanzetti trial, the Red Scare, World War II and the onset of media-made mafia mania. I argue that humor by "others" was used to contain, repress, and restrain Italian immigrant presence in mainstream American culture.

**Signing Italian/American Cinema, Code-switching in the City: What Does Scorsese Mean in *Mean Streets*?***Anthony Julian Tamburri*

This essay examines the various possibilities of signification that emanate from Martin Scorsese's film *Mean Streets* (1973). It investigates in particular the semiotic use of signs, be they literal or metaphorical, in the creation of a potential polyvalence that is dependent on the cultural reservoir of the viewer. It is, indeed, the presence of code-switching that creates an added level of significability of Scorsese's cinematic text. Such a film, then, calls for a specific type of viewer who can interrogate further, as best possible, such a semiotic situation; it calls for a specific type of spectator who can decode those particular signs that belong to a culturally specific semiotic, namely, an Italian/American sign system. That person I call the "informed Italian/American spectator."

**Italian Immigrants in the United States and Their Sense of Belonging before World War II***Stefano Luconi*

This article investigates the sense of allegiance of Italian immigrants in the United States in the decades before World War II. Most newcomers were laborers, but their class consciousness was generally weak and ethnic identity often prevailed in shaping their attachment and loyalties. After experiencing the flaws of workers' solidarity across ethnic lines in America, many disavowed internationalism and developed patriotic

feelings. In the end, such nationalistic sentiments helped even fascism make inroads into the Italian American communities do to ethnic pride.

**Italian Appalachians: Italian American communities in Appalachian coalfields.**

*Enrico Grammaroli*

The migration to Appalachia is a small portion of the large Italian diaspora to the United States. More than one hundred thousand Italians moved in an area between Pennsylvania and East Kentucky, attracted by the opportunities offered by the coal industry. It is a little known and studied migration, profoundly different from the traditional urban and industrial frame of the Eastern coast's great cities. These communities were born and developed in a largely rural environment, in coal camps and boom towns, built by mining companies around mines as logistical support to extraction activities. It is a radically transcultural context where the Italian presence is juxtaposed to native Anglo-Saxon, African American and Central European components.

The symbolic connections created underground are reflected on the surface in daily survival and in the social struggle for work rights. Italians and other miners lead one of the most important seasons in the labor history of the country. Transnational communities, raised around these miners, base their cohesion on the ability to deal with a difficult natural environment, an extremely dangerous job, and the often harsh confrontation with companies' interests.

In those decades, Appalachia was deeply transformed from a wild border land to the source of the propellant that was going to move the national industrial destiny. Italian migrants lived at the heart of that epoch-making change and actively contributed to the opposite elements and actions that led to this development.

**Memoir as a Cross-Cultural Practice**

*Edvoige Giunta*

The reflective memoir encourages a narrative agency which can prove vital to the making and survival of a self that embraces the full complexity of its social, historical, psychological, familial, and linguistic situatedness. Drawing on two decades of teaching memoir informed by her work in Italian American studies, the author argues that Italian American studies stands to benefit from the inclusion of a culturally informed creative writing pedagogy of memoir in its curriculum. Incorporating memoir writing workshops in Italian American studies can help students develop responsible cultural agency and citizenship in a cross-cultural community.

**Il poeta e i suoi fantasmi: W. H. Auden in *Four Quartets***

*Mario Martino*

The essay argues for the presence of an Audenean palimpsest in Eliot's *Four Quartets*, by referring to a specific passage in "Little Gidding" and to the poem "In Memory of W. B. Yeats". The

temporal proximity suggesting the connection between the two texts – written, respectively, in 1941-42 and in February 1939, following Yeates' death in January of that year – is substantiated by their common thematic object: the recently departed Yeats. The Irish poet, now among the dead, provides the occasion for a critical reflection on poetry as well as on artistic and intellectual practice. Transitively referred to Yeats, both Auden's and Eliot's concerns center around the opposition between thought and theory, on the one hand, and the poetic "gift", on the other; between the limitations and distortions of politico-ideological militancy and the exercise of a poetry as a way to redeem them. Yeats is thus the "dead master" in whom both Eliot and Auden can see mirrored their own intellectual trajectory, detecting in the purgatorial words of the "compound ghost", no matter how elusive, traces of moral-religious and aesthetic, but also ideological and political meanings, otherwise undetectable.

**Da Wounded Knee alla Sapienza. La figura dell'indiano nel movimento del 1977: comunicazione transatlantica e ibridazione culturale.**

*Maria Elena Cantilena e Marco Grifo*

The "Indiani metropolitani" (Metropolitan Indians) were an informal group active in the Italian far-left protest Movement of 1977. Why did they refer to themselves as Native Americans? This essay shows how this identification did not materialize overnight and was instead the outcome of a longer process. During the Sixties, the counterculture

movements looked at Native Americans as a model of an alternative way of life. Cinema, literature and the alternative press spread this view outside the USA. Since the beginning of the Seventies, Italian far-left groups represented Native Americans as a people not only closer to nature but also as victims of the capitalist system. Native Americans thus became a symbol that in some ways obfuscated the real people that had inspired the symbol. This essay studies this process through the analyses of films, magazines and newspapers. It also shows how Native American histories, images, and mythologies were twisted to suit a variety of different social and political needs, in tune with the Italian historical and cultural contexts of the times.

**Raccontare l'invisibile: il cinema, il documentario e la Grande Recessione**

*Cinzia Schiavini*

The essay investigates the representations of the Great Recession (the financial and economic crisis that started with the collapse of the Lehman Brothers) in American documentaries and docufiction movies of the last decade like *American Casino* (2009), *Collapse* (2009), *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009), *Inside Job* (2010), *All Watched Over by Machine of Loving Grace* (2011) and *The Big Short* (2015). Moving at the intersection of economic and cultural studies, the essay focuses on the relation between crisis and language, and the strategies adopted by filmmakers to find a visual and linguistic grammar capable of staging the voids left by the crisis, both in material and in cultural terms.