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Immaginario Nuova York: New York City and New Jersey in Italian American Narratives and Cultural Production

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*Immaginario Nuova York: New York City and New Jersey in Italian American Narratives
and Cultural Production*

by

Paul Anthony Galante

A Dissertation

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee

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Immaginario Nuova York: New York City and New Jersey in Italian American Narratives and Cultural Production

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Abstract

This dissertation explores a representative range of cultural productions by Italian Americans that portray *Immaginario Nuova York* (imaginary New York) and New Jersey in the late nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Representations of the urban spaces of New York City and its environs in ethnic narrative function as an essential element in the inscription of what I term the circuitous, dynamic *percorso* (route) of Italian American identity (American *Italianita*). Representations of this ethnic identity process are integrally bound with perceptions, experiences, and memories of urban New York and suburban New Jersey places and spaces. Specifically, I locate the *mobilita dinamica* (dynamic mobility) *percorso* of American *Italianita* through an interrogation of cultural texts that portray Italian American identity as dynamic, hybridized cultural constructions transformed and informed by assimilation, acculturation and inter-ethnic interaction in New York urban and suburban sites. Representations of place in narratives figure profoundly in the ongoing, dynamic processes of ethnic self-constitution for Italian Americans. *Campanilismo* is still a feature of Italian American identity, but it has been re-configured, re-imagined, and displaced in American *Italianita*. Chapter one explores the translocation of Italians into the new world—focusing on impressions and representations of New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in two works: Luigi Donato Ventura’s *Peppino* the first Italian American fiction written in English, and Pascal D’Angelo’s *Son of Italy*, a non-fiction autobiographical immigrant narrative. Chapter two analyzes fictional accounts of individuals preserving a reconfigured *campanilismo* and *Italianita* through a process of reinterpretation as American *Italianita*. This chapter examines Garibaldi Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* and Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*. Chapter three offers an in-depth analysis of the New Jersey based HBO television series *The Sopranos*. The move out of New York into New Jersey suburban life for Italian Americans is often accompanied by a psychic dissonance in which the loss of ancestral past is accompanied by a deepening desire to reconnect with “authentic” ethnic identity. Thus the Italian American *percorso* expands and develops into suburban spaces accompanied by a threat of further diminishment and displacement of reconfigured *campanilismo*.

Introduction

“The starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is and knowing one’s self as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory. It is therefore imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory—

Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*

“The City, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls”—Italo Calvino,

Invisible Cities

“I believe that the great, true book: novel, epic poem, or whatever it might be, of the Italian in America, if it has not been written up to now, never will be . . . to be more exact this book, this poem has been written, but in letters of stone; it was carved into the rock of Manhattan, into the docks and the harbors and the railroad tracks” —Emilio Cecchi, *Pane al Pane e Vino al Vino*

“The meaning of “Italian American” emerged along a series of contested borders in the neighborhoods, churches, and workplaces, and in the imaginations of *americani*”—Robert Orsi

My Italian born father Guido, who immigrated to the United States from the central Italian province of Abruzzi in 1935 at the age of eleven, used two unique expressions about Italians and Italian Americans that I would hear periodically throughout my life. Growing up as an Italian in America with blond hair and green eyes, he was regularly informed by many people he met that he “did not look Italian.” He would always respond: “What does an Italian look like?” He, of course, was responding to the common impression that most Italians had dark hair and dark eyes. Therefore, without those specific features he did not “look Italian.” His second expression was not in response to how Italians look, but how Italians Americans act. When he did not act a certain way (usually with dramatic gestures) or speak in a certain volume (usually loud), or a specific accent (Brooklyn) he would be informed by some that he didn’t act like an Italian. He knew exactly what common stereotype they were evoking and would respond: “All Italians are not like New York or New Jersey Italians!” When I would hear those expressions I understood exactly what he meant. In both cases he was responding to

prevailing cultural ideas about Italians and Italian Americans, which arose from the superfluity of Italian American representations in cultural productions like films and television shows set in or near New York with Italian characters who definitely looked and acted in a unique way. Of course, the other undeniable major factor in this perception of how Italians act was the historical fact that vast numbers of Italian Americans were New Yorkers or New Jersey residents. And ironically, most of our Italian relatives in America lived in New York City or in the greater metropolitan New York area and had unique and identifiable ways of speaking and acting. And although my grandfather Giovanni and my father eventually migrated to Pennsylvania, the Galante family life in the “new world” began in New York City.

New York City, as a dynamic site of literary inspiration and imaginative invention, looms large in Italian American historical narrative, memory, and cultural identity and production. New York City contains within (or directly adjacent to) its urban borders, symbols of its place in the American imagination as a site of border crossings and an international gateway between the world and the United States, including immigration centers such as Ellis Island and Castle Gardens and the Statue of Liberty in New York Harbor. Sites such as these also function in the Italian American imagination as major gateways between an Italian past and an American future, gateways of hope and possibility for the newly arrived immigrants and sites of initial arrival, settlement, departure and acculturation for later generations of Americans of Italian descent. In the period known as the Great Migration, between 1880 and 1924, over five million Italians arrived in the United States. Over 97 percent of them disembarked in New York City and over 80 percent of the arrivals were from the southern Italian regions of Calabria,

Campagna, Sicily, Basilicata, Puglia, and Abruzzi. Hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrants moved into the growing urban enclaves of New York City from 1880 to 1920 alone, and, because of chain migration legal clauses, thousands more arrived even after the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 (a.k.a. The National Origins Act) restricted European immigration (almost my entire family arrived this way). In 1910, the Italian immigrant population of the New York City area was larger than the number of Italians living in Rome. By 1920 over 800,000 Italian immigrants, mostly from the regions south of Rome known as the *mezzogiorno*, and their New York-born offspring lived in the city in growing urban enclaves popularly known as Little Italys.¹ Not all of the immigrants, of course, remained in the city, and many Italians moved out to a wide range of areas in the greater New York metropolitan area, including New Jersey, where Italians became one of the largest ethnic groups in the state. Dennis Starr, in his study *The Italians of New Jersey*, points out that throughout the twentieth century the number of Italians in New Jersey steadily grew to the point where “in 1980 the state remained second to New York in the size of its Italian population” (7). But New York City was the main gateway to America for most Italians, and Italian American enclaves became a prominent feature of the literal and cultural geography of the city. Philip Cannistraro, in his introduction to the New-York Historical Society’s *The Italians of New York*, observes “with the massive influx of [Italian] immigrants arriving daily, New York soon began to assume the character of an Italian city outside Italy”(5). So many Italians were arriving in New York in the early twentieth century that the fact became the subject of an old joke that my

¹ For a historical overview of Italians in America and New York see The New-York Historical Society, *The Italians of New York*, and Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*.

father Guido used to recount to me. He says he overheard two New Yorkers talking in a bar. One man at the bar asks the other: “Do you know why so many Italians are called Tony”? The other man replies: “Because when they land in New York they have cards on their hats that say ‘To NY’?”

The arrival, settlement, and departure of Italian immigrants to and from New York City and beyond has been narrated in a wide range of historical, literary, and cultural sources, in novels, stories, non-fiction accounts, paintings, plays, films and television shows about Italian Americans in New York and its environs. The power of New York City in the Italian American imagination testifies to the power of place and space in Italian American history, ethnic memory, identity, and creativity. Inscribed in New York City’s history and layered in the complex palimpsest of the City’s wide range of cultural productions are not only descriptions of the material constructions of the city, but narratives that represent the imaginary construction of New York of Italian immigrants and their offspring. For most Italians, including my grandparents Giovanni and Anina, my father Guido, his brother Angelo, a myriad of other cousins, aunts and uncles and millions of other Italian immigrants, New York City was the literal site of arrival into their American experience and their point of departure for other American spaces and places. Notions of the centrality and mythic importance of New York City were already formed, however, in the minds of many Italians before they ever arrived.

Francesco Ventresca, in his autobiography *Personal Reminiscences of a Naturalized American*, states that before he emigrated from his native Abruzzi to the United States in 1891, the idea of success in America was intrinsically linked to a place he heard about in the stories of returning immigrants called “Nuova York” (17).

Ventresca says, “nobody ever spoke of a United States of America as a nation” but rather “we boys heard of a Nuova York, meaning a country where people get rich” (17). Carlo Levi, in *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, describes the mythical power of New York City in the imaginations of the local peasants in the Southern Italian town of Lucania. America is imagined as “an earthly paradise and the promised land” with New York as its “capital” (123). As many immigrants discovered after their arrival in New York, the reality of daily urban living quickly tarnished the gild on the myth of the land where they imagined the streets were paved with gold. New York City became a kind of *axis mundi* for millions of Italian immigrants, and when they arrived there, they both experienced and narrated it as a site of incredible vitality and danger that was exhilarating and appalling, vital and exhausting. In New York, Levi says, Italian immigrants “live next door to the earthly paradise, but they dare not enter” (124). Levi suggests that when mezzogiorno peasants immigrate to America they “remain just what they were [peasants]” and New York, despite its imaginary status as their mythical “capital” is mainly just “a place to work” that is “indifferent to them” (123). For some immigrants, only a few moments in New York deflated their airy ideas about *Nuova York*. Poet Emanuel Carnevali recorded his first impressions of the real New York, the place he calls “the city we had dreamed so much about,” in his autobiography (73). Carnevali states:

This was the long dreamed of New York, this awful network of fire escapes. This was not the New York we had dreamed of, so dear to the imagination, so cherished among all the hopes a man may hope: this dream of the dreamless, this shelter of all the homeless, this impossible

city. This miserable panorama before us was one of the greatest cities in the world. (73)

But despite the fact that abstract Italian ideas of *immaginario Nuova York* (imaginary New York) did not match their initial concrete experiences in the city, most of the Italians who settled the range of urban sites in New York demonstrated a pragmatic, keen awareness of present daily urban realities along with the haunted memory of their rural Italian past of *la miseria* in the *mezzogiorno*. Despite their awareness of the realities of New York, however, its mythic power continued to function for decades in the minds of Italian immigrants as the gateway from the experience of their traumas of economic impoverishment in the *mezzogiorno* or the oppressions of Mussolini's Fascist state to a new and better life in America.

The importance of "place" and its value as an important site for cultural analysis makes it particularly resonant in debates on the construction and maintenance of Italian American identity and how it informs Italian American cultural production. The notion of place for Italian Americans is not simply an idea of a neutral location or static space. Historically, Italians have always had a stronger sense of regional loyalty or *campanilismo* than a sense of national identity or an awareness of an "imaginary community" called the Italian nation. Italians are Abruzzese, Napolitanos, Toscanos, Sicilianos, Calabrese first and Italians second. The term *campanilismo* is derived from *campanile* (bell tower) which indicates that the primary place of Italian public identity was the local parish (a space marked by the sound of the church bells) and by extension the village and region. *Campanilismo* ruled the psyche of the immigrants who brought their territorial identities to the New World where they tended to congregate and often re-

create or reconfigure their regional identities in the Little Italys scattered all over New York and other cities in America. This resulted in culturally diverse groups of Italians in America striving to maintain identification with their regional origins and values. But (to make a very complex story short) through economic and social interaction, inter-marriage, social mobility, acculturation, and movement to the suburbs, gradually Americans of Italian descent were identified less by their regional loyalties and origins and more by the label Italians or Italian Americans. But *campanilismo* still functions as a feature of Italian American identity, and, as I will demonstrate in this dissertation, this concept has been re-configured and re-imagined in New York and New Jersey sites and a range of textual forms in what I term American *Italianita* (Italian-ness).² In short, I suggest that representation of place figures profoundly in the ongoing, dynamic process of ethnic self-constitution for Americans of Italian descent. The textual spaces and places that Italian American cultural productions traverse in the New York and New Jersey based narratives reconfigure *campanilismo* in the memories and imaginations of the writers. New York neighborhoods, streets, geographic areas and houses are often inscribed in Italian American literature as sites of positive, ethnic memories and identity formations as well as locations where feelings of dislocation, displacement, and mobility or stasis are represented in narrative form. Fixed Italian regional loyalties, such as Siciliani, Abruzzese, and Calabrese, are replaced, displaced or re-constituted as hybrid

² *Italianita* (Italian-ness) was not a pre-occupation of most lower class Southern Italians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their primary pre-occupation was material survival in the land of *la miseria*. Imagining Southern Italians into the unified nation of Italy has been and remains problematic in today's Italy. My term American *Italianita* describes the post immigration fluid ethnic self-fashionings of Americans of Italian descent in the U.S. in the late nineteenth, twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Italian American New York urban neighborhood loyalties, part of the transformation of Italian *campanilismo* into distinct, but often imagined forms of Italian American identity.

In this dissertation I explore a representative range of cultural productions by Italian Americans that portray *immaginario Nuova York* (and New Jersey) in literature and American television in the late nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. Representations in ethnic narrative of the urban spaces of New York City and its environs like New Jersey function as an essential element in the inscription of the circuitous, dynamic *percorso* (route) of Italian American identity (or American *Italianita*). Specifically, I will locate the *mobilita dinamica* (dynamic mobility) *percorso* to American *Italianita* through an interrogation of a wide range of Italian American cultural texts that portray Italian American identity as a dynamic, hybridized, but often displaced and fragmented cultural construction, transformed and informed by acculturation and inter- ethnic interaction in New York urban and New Jersey suburban sites.

In arguing for a dynamic notion of identity bound to place, I diverge from common notions of Italian American ethnic identity, which too often posit a homogenous set of essential attributes, familial codes, and culturally specific characteristics that may bear resemblance to *some* Italian Americans, but not all. The views of scholars such as Richard Gambino or Patrick Gallo tend to essentialize Italian American ethnic characteristics and culture, rather than reflecting the reality of ethnic and cultural identity formation as a fluid process of constant self- fashioning and social and cultural negotiation. All the creative works I examine in this dissertation openly challenge essentializing foreclosures on ideas of Italian American identity, instead offering a complex fluid characterization of Americans of Italian descent in a range of American

cultural and social urban situations. Focusing on the dynamic processes of urban interaction and ethnic identity formation in relationship to a discrete urban space by demonstrating the complex, circuitous *percorso* (route) of American *Italianita* challenges scholarship that emphasize traditional linear narratives of assimilation. The *percorso* of American *Italianita* is a dynamically mobile, circuitous process of invention and reinvention, that involves syncretized borrowing from other Italian regional characteristics and practices, and constant intercultural interactions.

My work is situated in relation to the theoretical models of Italian American literary history and Italian American identity offered by Italian American scholars such as Josephine Hendin and George Guida, but I move beyond them by stressing the importance of place in the formation of American *Italianita*. Hendin suggests that Italian American identity, like all ethnic identity, “is not fixed and immutable but an open, unfolding social process of exploration and self-fashioning” (142). She argues that the innovative aesthetics of Italian American literature are “part of a larger concern for more fluid cosmopolitan models of ethnicity” and that Italian American writing “not only exposes episodes of conflict between margin and mainstream, but also reveals the lasting impact of immigration on individuals who may be second or third generation” (13). Guida describes the relationships between Italian American narratives, Italian Americans and their heritage, and American culture as a process of “*impresa /ripresa*”—enterprise and recovery. *Impresa* (enterprise), according to Guida, is a process in which Italian American authors manipulate narrative language and form to create identifications with regional Italian culture, Italian American culture, and Anglo-American culture. *Ripresa* (recovery) is a process of re-constituting old world Italian values in American experience,

often through a process that critically interrogates American culture. My dissertation continues a discussion of these dynamic processes and aesthetic innovations by emphasizing the fluid dynamic mobility, the *percorso* of Italian American identity, and the important and problematic element of reconfigured *campanilismo*. The American *Italianita percorso* represents in textual forms on-going negotiations with mainstream American culture and the hybridized Italian American culture—but with a specific focus on discrete sites of literary ethnic self-fashioning—New York City and suburban New Jersey. The idea of the self-fashioned Italian American identity as a *percorso* adds the idea of a journey or route through a range of urban and suburban spaces and places and offers the idea of on-going mobility as an important element informing American *Italianita*.

Italian “Alienism” in New York

New York City was the classic borderland /contact zone, where a range of ethnic, socioeconomic, and racial groups lived, worked and interacted in literal and social spaces. Mary Louise Pratt, in *Imperial Eyes*, defines contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contests of highly asymmetrical relations of power” (4). Both the spatial and temporal co-presence of thousands and thousands of new Italians in the U.S., a large number of them living in and around New York, clearly created a new range of tensions and asymmetrical power relations that Italian American writers attempted to portray or resolve in their writings. New York City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was the dynamic, highly contested discursive contact zone for hordes of incoming Italian immigrants and the citizens of New York. Pratt notes that “transculturation is a phenomenon of the

contact zone” and that “subordinated or marginal groups elect and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (6). For Italian Americans, there was an asymmetry of discursive relations that the new breed of Italian writers in America set out to contest by carving out their own discursive spaces in the real neighborhoods and imaginary New Yorks portrayed in their cultural productions.

Italians arrived in New York in the midst of a flood of circulating discourses about Italians in general and southern Italian immigrants in particular. Two journalistic works published at the end of the nineteenth century offered contradictory images of the Italian immigrants in New York City. The anonymous writer of the April 1881 *Harper's Weekly* article “Italian Life in New York” describes the Italians in “Nuova York” as a “picturesque” people whose “idyllic life” in Italy and “yearnings toward the El Dorado of Nuova York” provides them with “poor preparation for the hand to hand struggle for bread of an overcrowded city” (677). The article portrays Italians as possessing “a quick instinct for beauty” and continues as a people who “are proud and high spirited, but yield easily to kindness, and are only defiant and revengeful when ill-treated” (678). The lower Manhattan Italian enclave offers an image to the writer of “neat and graceful poverty,” but the author reminds the reader “that the standard of prosperity in America is not that of Italy” (682). The one major element absent in New York, which the writer believes was a stabilizing force in Italy on Italians, is the sound of the village *campanile* (church tower bells) that “constantly remind them of the near resting place for soul and body” (682). The writer states, “when they are on the verge of quarrel or crime, and the hand voluntarily seeks the knife, the twilight angelus or the evening bell softens the angry heart and silences the quick tongue” (682). The author notes with a hint of caution to

readers that in the crowded, cacophonous streets of the Little Italys of Manhattan that influence is absent, so Americans need to be aware of the potential danger of Italians who have experienced “the sudden removal of religious influences from their lives” (682). Despite this potential problem, the writer concludes the article by praising the overall character of Little Italy and its inhabitants by proclaiming “In view of the general assimilation of Italian with their American surroundings, it is surprising and delightful to find a place that retains so picturesque and Italian a flavor” (684). This writer’s stress on the picturesque and attractive elements of the urban enclaves, or what the Italian immigrants termed *la colonia* (the colony), is a common feature of descriptive writing about Italians. But the writer of the *Harper’s Weekly* article does not reflect the very real xenophobic and troubling elements circulating in other discourses offered by a range of writers.

Photo journalist and social reformer Jacob Riis ends his landmark 1890 study on the tenement crisis in ethnic neighborhoods in New York City *How the Other Half Lives*, by proclaiming “I have aimed to tell the truth as I saw it” (254). In the chapter “The Italian in New York,” Riis uses similar language to the writer of the *Harper’s* article, but offers a sharp contrast to the writer’s perspectives on the living conditions and potential influence of Italians in New York. Riis begins the chapter by describing Italians as “picturesque” but quickly deconstructs that notion by highlighting that they are also degraded, depraved, dangerous, and ignorant. He writes:

Certainly a picturesque, if not very tidy, element has been added to the population in the "assisted" Italian immigrant who claims so large a share of public attention, partly because he keeps coming at such a tremendous

rate, but chiefly because he elects to stay in New York, or near enough for it to serve as his base of operations, and here promptly reproduces conditions of destitution and disorder which, set in the frame-work of Mediterranean exuberance, are the delight of the artist, but in a matter-of-fact American community become its danger and reproach. The reproduction is made easier in New York because he finds the material ready to hand in the worst of the slum tenements; but even where it is not he soon reduces what he does find to his own level, if allowed to follow his natural bent. The Italian comes in at the bottom, and in the generation that came over the sea he stays there. (91-92)

The Italian, for Riis, is both an aesthetic object for study and a threatening degraded subject whose potential unassimilability in America and growing presence in New York constitutes a danger to American progress and safety. Echoing the *Harper's* writer, he concludes the chapter by pointing out that despite “all his conspicuous faults, the swarthy Italian immigrant has his redeeming traits” (94). Riis points out that the Italian is “as honest as he is hot-headed” but “the women are faithful wives and devoted mothers” and their “vivid and picturesque costumes lend a tinge of color to the otherwise dull monotony of the slums they inhabit” (95). While Riis is willing to concede that the new immigrant Italian hordes swarming into Manhattan may have some “picturesque” and “redeeming” qualities, the overall tenor of his chapter is that the Italian contribution to American progress and character is problematic at best and most likely, a potential source of danger and shame.

Two years after he published *How the Other Half Lives*, Riis focused specifically on the Southern Italian presence in New York in his 1892 work *The Children of the Poor*. In his chapter “The Italian Slum Children,” Riis is very specific about the type of Italians that he believes perpetuate material and psycho-social misery among their own kind in New York. Rather than generically labeling the urban enclave dwellers as simply “Italians,” Riis specifies their Italian regional origins by pointing out that “the worst old rookeries fall everywhere in this city to the share of the immigrants from Southern Italy” (11). He ironically remarks, “Is it to be marveled at, if the first impression of them is sometimes not favorable” (17). Riis describes the children of these immigrants as “the black eyed brigade of guineas” who scavenge the dumps of the city “as crows scenting carrion” (19, 21). The entire chapter functions as a reaffirmation of the conclusions he made about the presence of Italians in New York and America in *How the Other Half Lives*, but now he terms the entire group of Italian American enclave dwellers as “the children of the dump” and degradation “the background of the social life of Mulberry Street” (28).

Riis was not an aberrant soloist, but only one part of a discursive chorus that raised alarms about or questioned the presence of the Italians in New York and America. In the literary field, the two major American writers who offered problematic impressions of Italians in New York and America and joined this xenophobic choir were William Dean Howells and Henry James. James, in his 1907 non-fiction work *The American Scene* records his impression of early twentieth century New York and the Italian Americans whom he meets as he travels through the city. As he tours the lower Manhattan Italian enclave near Grand Street where, “the alien was as truly in possession”

of the city and where he sees some Italian street laborers, he registers a puzzling response (117). He describes them as “Italians of a superlatively southern type” with whom he expects “some palpable exchange” (118). Having lived in Italy for many years, James expects “an element of communication with the workers” and “the play of mutual recognition founded on old familiarities and heredity,” but he discovers that any communication with them “struck me as absent” (118). James is genuinely surprised that any real contact and discourse with this group of Italians is “out of the question” and he is left with only “a staring silence” (119). This event seems to perplex James, who, after this encounter, concludes “there is no claim to brotherhood with aliens in the first grossness of their alienism” (120). This event inspires James to ruminate on what he terms “the great ethnic question” and how the presence of these southern Italians will affect “the American character” if formed from “such a hotch-potch of racial ingredients” (120-121). In particular, James suggests that the influx of southern Italians in New York are distinctly inferior to the Italians he was familiar with in Italy. His extensive travels and sojourn in Italy afforded him ample opportunities for observation and interaction with Italians of every class. But James says in New York, “The Italians meet us at every turn only to make us ask what has become of that element of the agreeable address to them which has, from far back, so enhanced for the stranger the interest and pleasure of a visit to their beautiful country” (128). While James is evoking his many positive memories of Italians in Italy, he speculates about the reasons for their transformation in New York. He concludes by lamenting that all the positive characteristics that he so fondly experienced during his sojourn in Italy seem to disappear in New York. He wonders, “what has become of the various positive properties” of Italians which had “taken long

ages of history in the other world [Italy] to produce” that in New York “may really be extinguishable in an hour” (129). James registers dismay at a type of problematic Italian presence in New York that is alien and even threatening. He reacts with palpable anxiety at what he terms the immigrant “conquest of New York” (132). And he concludes with a condescending observation that Italians and many other immigrants in New York resemble “for a time the dog who sniffs round the freshly acquired bone, giving it a push and a lick, betraying a sense of its possibilities, but not . . . directly attacking it” (128). Like Riis, James questioned the potential contribution to American progress and stability of these Italians in New York and also sounded a literary warning note in *The American Scene*--one that was echoed by another distinguished American writer and social commentator, William Dean Howells.

Howells in the April, 1909 essay “Our Italian Assimilators” in *Harper’s Weekly* argued that for Italians in New York “it was not for us to assimilate them, but for them to assimilate us” (28). Because of the growing Italian presence, New York, according to Howells, “after Milan and Naples is the largest Italian city in the world” (28). While Howells lauds the accomplishments of the “the noble Italian” heritage, and Italy as the land of art, architecture, classic beauty, he excoriates the Italians of New York having formed as a culture fraught with “defects” (28). Howells notes that the defects “appear more frankly, more obviously in these southern Italians” (28). The vast influx of these southern Italians is rendered as very problematic by Howells who describes them as “too often passionate, jealous, revengeful, homicidal, quick with the knife and revolver, and reckless of the law” because “the law was solely in southern Italy the enemy of humanity” (28). Howells warns his readers that unless the American Italians change their

ways, they will influence the dominant American culture in a type of reverse, atavistic assimilation, and that “civilization may say [of America] how Italian, how Sicilian, how Corsican, how medieval” (28). Howells, for the most part, condemns and decries the distinctive southern Italian traits of the New York Italians, but offers the hope that they may assimilate eventually in American life if they embrace northern Italian traits and emulate accomplishments of such northern Italians as “the Mazzinis, the Garibaldis, the Cavours, the Vergas, the Mascagnis, the Marconis” (28). But the strong undertone in Howell’s essay involves an ominous warning about the characteristics of the southern Italian who form the vast majority of “five hundred thousand Italians in New York” (28).

James and Howell were both reflecting a centuries old discursive pattern that was best represented by Sir Henry Wotten, the English ambassador to Venice sent by King James I, who described Italy as “a paradise inhabited with devils” (Vol. I, 281). Encoded in Wotten’s brief description of Italy was a profound ambivalence towards Italy and Italians that was perpetuated in writing about Italians for centuries. Italy is constructed as a type of classic “paradise” with beautiful geography, compelling architecture, inspiring beauty, rich historical association, sublime landscapes, classical monuments and ruins, and the great cultural heritage of the Renaissance and ancient Rome, but inhabited by superstitious, sensual, violent, ignorant custodial “devils” called Italians. And, of course, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these “devils,” specifically the southern version, were leaving “paradise” by the hundreds of thousands and settling in New York!

Locating Italian American Writers in New York and New Jersey

In response to the discursive chorus of Riis, James, and Howells, who offered warnings about the presence of Italians in New York and America, the counter discursive momentum and practices evident in late nineteenth century and early and mid twentieth century Italian American narratives functioned as a stabilizing and countervailing elemental force in creating and sustaining American Italian culture and cultural production. This force was marked by an emerging, distinctive American *Italianita*, as Italians settled in America and created a culture in the urban neighborhoods of New York that constituted a reconfigured *campanilismo*. And it began a fertile period of literary cultural production by Italian Americans.³ Chapter one explores two early Italian American narratives linked to the translocation of Italians from Italy into the new world and New York, Luigi Donato Ventura's 1886 novella *Peppino* and Pascal D'Angelo's 1924 autobiography *Son of Italy*. These two seminal Italian American narratives signal key moments in the early stages of the *percorso* of American *Italianita* when the often-marginalized narrators of the American Italian experience created their own space in American letters, born out of both the necessity of inventing a language to describe their unique Southern Italian immigrant experience and the profound difficulty of maintaining an intellectual and articulate life in profoundly difficult material conditions. Ventura's and D'Angelo's texts describe individuals who experience a profound sense of displacement in their immigrant crossings into a new world and culture and who created narrative spaces expressing their initial experiences of transculturation in New York City. Both writers also redress discourses that stereotyped or marginalized their culture during

³ The only historical overview of Italian American writers of New York that I have been able to locate is a brief chapter by Fred Gardaphe "Italian /American Writers of New York" in The New-York Historical Society, *The Italians of New York*.

the massive influx of Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These early writers of American Italian narrative create characters and plot tensions that enact a fluid cultural identity that attempts to contest the destabilizing forces in their American New York experience that often threaten them with the possibility of being rendered socially impotent and culturally inarticulate in the American cityscape.

Chapter two examines the American Italian *percorso* in New York enacted in two fictional accounts of first-generation Italian immigrants' lives set in the Italian enclaves of Manhattan, Garibaldi Lapolla's 1935 *The Grand Gennaro* and Pietro Di Donato's 1939 *Christ in Concrete*. Both novels reflect the reality of New York ethnic urban identity formation as a fluid space of constant self-fashioning and social and cultural negotiation that functions as important elements in understanding the *percorso* of American *Italianita*. Lapolla and Di Donato record an emerging, adaptive, American Italian consciousness by vividly demonstrating the reciprocal influences of New York urban spaces, cultural pressures and ethnic identity formation. Both novels dramatically represent the desire to "make America" in New York as highly problematic by portraying critical transitional moments in American *Italianita* when residents of Italian ethnic enclaves continue their struggle to reformulate old world rural Italian values in the new American urban spaces without radically unmaking their own ethnic identities.

William Boelhower, in *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States*, says of urban ethnic enclaves (Little Italys) "*tutto parla* (everything speaks); the streets, the signs, the buildings, the market stands, the statues of the saints, the signs in the shop windows, people's dress, the color of their eyes, and all the rest that comes with a teeming immigrant colony" (vii). But what happens to the culture when it moves away

from these enclaves into suburbia? In chapter three I will assert that a very place-specific Italian American cultural production extends the narrative of American Italian *percorso* beyond the fluid boundaries of Little Italys and other ethnic enclaves in New York City but still *anche parlate di tutti* (also speaks of everything) concerning the emergent Italian American identity. New York City's imaginative dimensions in Italian American narrative and cultural production expand beyond the boundaries of the immigrant story and American Italian settlement narrative, to an imaginative "moving out" into the suburbs, a re-imagining of life as an Italian American in which both the meaning of recent urban enclave experience as well as the more distant memory of regional life in Italy are problematically re-imagined in cultural productions. The move out of New York into the boroughs or New Jersey suburban life for Italian Americans, along with deepening assimilation or resistance to assimilation, is often accompanied by a psychic dissonance in which the loss of an ancestral past is accompanied by a profound desire to re-connect with what they believe is an "authentic" ethnic identity informed by a host of ethnic cultural signifiers, while at the same time struggling to maintain a strong sense of the power of place in ongoing reconfigurations of displaced *campanilismo*. In chapter three I will explore these resonant Italian American issues with an in-depth analysis of the New Jersey based HBO television series *The Sopranos*. Creator David Chase's *The Sopranos* is the most complex representation of Italian American culture and New Jersey Italian Americans in recent history. This chapter explores the complex problematic cultural trajectory that Italian Americans must constantly negotiate in their *percorso* through the American social landscape, as demonstrated in a wide range of episodes in *The Sopranos*. The show's opening montage of a rambling, circuitous New Jersey circuit

or course (*percorso*) of travel offers an image of a central problematic for Italian Americans that the series represents over the course of its six seasons. My main focus in the chapter is on Tony Soprano, the main character of *The Sopranos*. His *percorso* is portrayed in the series as a circuitous “route to roots” that is challenged by his rootless suburban life, emblemized by the rambling commute he takes from New York to New Jersey at the opening of every episode, and problematized by ongoing tensions with a New York crime family.

In this dissertation I am not writing a history or offering a survey of all New York (or New Jersey) Italian American writers or cultural productions, but focusing on representative glimpses into the lives of a select group of Italian Americans whose work reflects the dynamism and complexity of city and suburban life in New York and its environs. New York writer Pete Hamill, in *Downtown*, suggests the difficulty, even the virtual impossibility, of even New York born residents ever fully “knowing” the city. He states “nobody in such a vast and various place can absorb everything” and New Yorkers learn “to settle for glimpses” (16). The multiplicity of glimpses that I offer in this dissertation are through the lens of a few select writers of American Italian experience who were attempting to understand their own American *percorso*. City and suburban experience is marked by a profound complexity, diversity, and dynamic change that seems to resist any notion of a singular way of narrating it. Also, the American Italian cultural productions explored in this dissertation do not simply “represent” the city (or the suburbs), because the complexities of New York City and New Jersey suburban life disrupts the assumption that “reality” can be simply represented in totality in any cultural production. At best, the works considered here render unique, vivid representations of

American *Italianita* that are important strata in the complex palimpsest of New York and New Jersey life and history.

Chapter One: “New York State of Mind”: Italian American New York Early Fiction and Commencement Narratives

The most difficult thing to get hold of in studying any past period is the felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time: a sense of the ways in which the particular activities combined into a way of thinking and living . . . And I think we are most conscious of such contact in the arts of a period.

Raymond Williams, *The Long Revolution*

NEW YORK! The sigh of every derelict of the old world; the refuge of hearts longed for by the delinquent; the cradle of fortune sought by the disinherited of all peoples.

NEW YORK! Chaos, where hope and disillusion swirl, gold and tin, virtue and vice, wealth and misery; and the greedy hand of every newcomer gropes as it attempts to seize the good part and often ends up only grasping the bad. --Menotti Pellegrino, *The Mysteries of New York*

The next morning, oblivious of the trials ahead of me, I came to New York . . . When I first arrived in America the city through which I had passed had been a vast dream swirling around me. Gradually it had taken shape and form, but had still remained alien to me in spirit. Now, however, as I walked through its crowded streets, I felt sort of a kinship with it. I felt I was an integral part of this tremendous, living, bustling metropolis—Pascal D’Angelo, *Son of Italy*

Don't care if it's Chinatown or on Riverside / I don't have any reasons
I've left them all behind / I'm in a New York state of mind—Billy Joel “New York State of Mind”

Stories about the arrival and settlement of Italian immigrants in America and New York City abound in a wide range of historical, literary, cultural and personal sources in the novels, stories, non-fiction accounts, paintings, plays, films and television shows about Italian Americans in New York and its environs. For example, my late father Guido loved to recount the story of his trans-Atlantic *viaggio* with his mother Anina and brother Angelo as a young eleven year old Italian immigrant on board the ship *Roma* from his sea-side hometown of Casalbordino in Abruzzi. He particularly enjoyed describing his first encounter with *L’America* at the sight of the Statue of Liberty and the immigration departure point on the Hudson River in New York in 1935. He told me that he experienced first-hand the symbolic and deeply resonant power of New York City for Italian immigrants as he recalled being awe-inspired at the powerful sight of the expansive lower Manhattan skyline, after the ship slowly passed the Statue of Liberty. He also remembered a false alarm earlier in the journey as fellow passengers claimed

they could see the Statue of Liberty, causing all the Italians to rush up to the deck for their first sight of *L'America*. It was a false alarm, but it demonstrated the deep feelings of hope and anxiety on board the *Roma*. And he particularly loved to recall the dramatic moment when the Statue actually appeared as they neared New York Harbor and the immigrants gathered on deck as the *Roma* came within sight of New York City and passed the Statue. Many cheered, many cried, and many stood silent as lower Manhattan and their future lives in America came within view. A specific memory of that moment impressed my father. A young fellow Italian stood silent and still next to my father while the deck erupted with a panoply of emotions. He was wearing what my father called *un grande capello* (a great hat) and as they reached the Statue of Liberty near Ellis Island (where my grandfather Giovanni had entered America shortly before my father's birth in 1923 as he fled Fascist Italy--he nicknamed it "Hell's Island"), the young Italian man (to my father's great surprise) took off his brand new hat and flung it with a wide arc into the waters of the Harbor. When he was asked why he threw his hat off the side of the ship into the harbor waters, the man replied—"I won't need it in America! I can buy a thousand hats! The streets are paved with gold!" My father wondered to the end of his life what happened to that young man when his feet touched down on the concrete and steel canyons of New York City. An Italian American saying I often heard as a young child growing up in an Italian American household expressed the sentiments of many Italian immigrants: before the Italians arrived in the *nuova mundo* (new world) they imagined that the streets of America were paved with gold. When they arrived in New York they discovered three certain truths: the streets were not paved with gold; most streets were not paved at all; and the Italians were the ones hired to pave the streets!

Whatever the young man's later history, his first encounter with America was probably (like my own family's) the expansive, congested, tough streets of Manhattan (if he made it through the bureaucratic nightmare that arriving immigrants endured at the immigration processing point). This proverb reminds later generations of Americans of Italian descent (like me) of the vivid gap between ideas about America that the Italian immigrants carried with them from Italy and the American reality they experienced as millions of them disembarked and settled in New York and other parts of the United States. New York City in particular functions as a significant Italian American site in resonant memories and narratives of dramatic arrival, mythical first contact, and later assimilation and acculturation into American experience and history. For my grandfather, my father, grandmother, uncles, aunts, and cousins, the hatless, but hopeful Italian man, and millions of other Italian immigrants, that initial contact with New York was a powerful beginning element in their American *percorso* (route, journey).

In this chapter I explore a range of early Italian American narratives linked to the translocation of Italians from Italy into the new world and New York—specifically focusing on the first Italian American novella written in English and a non-fictional autobiographical immigrant “greenhorn” narrative written in the early part of the twentieth century. The early immigrant narratives and fictional representations of Italian American experience in America and New York, and the transition to English language narratives, signal a key moment in the beginning *percorso* of what I term American *Italianita*. Beyond merely portraying the highly ambivalent, often vexed relationship that the new waves of Southern Italian immigrant writers had with New York urban spaces, the dominant American culture, and xenophobic, American literary discursive spaces, the

often-marginalized narrators of the American Italian experience created their own space in American letters. This was born out of both the necessity of inventing a language to describe their unique Southern Italian immigrant experience and the profound difficulty of maintaining an intellectual and articulate life and cultural production in profoundly difficult material conditions. The representative Italian American texts I explore with these issues in mind are Luigi Donato Ventura's 1886 novella *Peppino* and Pascal D'Angelo's 1924 autobiography *Son of Italy*. These two seminal Italian American fictional and non-fictional narratives were crucial elements in the formation of American *Italianita* and both texts register the initial impressions and urban experiences of the Italian *percorso* in the new world by Southern Italian immigrants in New York. Ventura's and D'Angelo's texts describe individuals who experienced a profound sense of displacement in their immigrant crossings into a new world and culture and who created narrative spaces expressing their initial experiences of transculturation in New York City. Both writers redress discourses that stereotyped or marginalized their culture during the massive influx of Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These writers resisted those ideologies that resonated with American nativist concern, fear, and downright xenophobia over the Southern Italian presence in America, most notably demonstrated in the writing by such American authors as Jacob Riis, Henry James, William Dean Howells, and Edward Steiner.⁴ Ventura's novella, with its unique place as the first Italian American English language work of fiction, functions as a kind of first step in the *percorso* of American *Italianita* set entirely in *immaginario Nuova*

⁴ See my introduction. See also Joseph Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions, 1880-1910* for a detailed study of ideas about Italians by a range of American writers.

York. It also represents, in its short form, a wide range of discourse about issues such as the inter-country emigration of Italians (termed *uccelli di passaggio* or “Birds of passage”), intercultural interactions within New York, inter-regional interactions and attitudes among Italians in New York, and descriptive, ethnographic passages about the Manhattan Italian ethnic enclave. D’Angelo’s *Son of Italy* creatively advances and expands the themes explored by Ventura by creating a dynamic counter-discursive text that resists the prevailing stereotypes about the new wave of Southern Italian immigrants to New York and portrays the expansiveness of city life for an Italian immigrant writer, as well as the challenges of urban street level life. Both Ventura and D’Angelo record moments when Italians struggling to survive in New York shift from being the object of discourse into the subject of their own discourse.

In the southern Italian imagination (and both Ventura and D’Angelo were Southerners), ideas and ideals about America and New York City were an amalgam of visions of imaginary spaces of freedom, absence of oppression, and a potential site for a fulfilling material life. These ideas informed their worldview and their ideas about America long before they experienced the challenging material realities of the immigrant journey, New York urban contact and settlement, or the eventual assimilation process. Most of the first Italian American writers in English, including Ventura and D’Angelo, deconstructed the Italian myth of a streets-paved-in-gold-American land of opportunity, while narratively reconstructing an equally imaginary New York. These narratives arise out of the shock of the encounter of Southern Italian, rural proletarians--deeply entrenched in *campanilismo* and stultified by the rigid Italian socio-economic hierarchy, with congested, oppressive, dynamic, fluid, ethnically diverse New York, urban

conditions. While “Little Italys” were literally being created in New York neighborhoods, Italian immigrant writers like Ventura and D’Angelo were creating narrative spaces and modes of representing the unique Southern Italian response to the immigrant story that becomes nascent American *Italianita*—no longer only Italian, but not quite recognizably American. They wrote American Italian narratives that portray characters as not quite assimilated, but rigorously adaptive, and facing a panoply of discursive and material marginalizations. The significance of both Ventura and D’Angelo is their recording of an emerging, adaptive, American Italian consciousness responding to unsettling and threatening urban realities through the creative development of Italian American characters in New York spaces.

Luigi Ventura’s 1886 *Peppino*

It is appropriate that the first sentence of the first Italian American fictional work totally set in New York and published in English would begin with a mention of New York by a self-fashioning Italian narrator familiar with negotiating a range of specific urban spaces. Luigi Ventura’s novella *Peppino* begins with a direct address to its readers, “If you should ever go to New York . . .” (223). Frank Lentricchia, in his article “Luigi Ventura and the Origins of Italian-American Fiction,” asserts “that Luigi Ventura was among the first Italian American authors of fiction” (189). Rose Basile Green, in her seminal study of Italian American writing, *The Italian American Novel*, includes Luigi Donato Ventura, along with Bernardino Ciambelli, Italo Stanco, Silvio Villa and others as examples of “the first great flux of Italian immigrants who were pioneers in the literary “early impact of explanatory narratives that describe the early problems the immigrants had when they first encountered American civilization” (62-63). Green describes

Ventura's novella as a story that "emphasizes the near brutality of the first encounter of one culture with another" (63). While Green never explains the brutal, clashing cultural elements she discovered in the text, and offers little analysis of the novella, her main point about the novella ironically is that it is best known for being first published in French in 1885, rather than in English or Italian. Her explanation is that it was an advantage for Italians in the early years of the migration "to pretend they were French" (63). But Ventura's 1886 English version of *Peppino* has a distinction not noted by Green. While Lorenzo Rochhietti's 1835 novel *Lorenzo and Oonalaska* may be the first Italian American novel written in English that briefly mentions a main character's sojourn in New York, Ventura's novella is the first Italian American English language work of fiction set entirely in New York, representing the Italian American New York experience in a range of city settings and populated by an array of types of Italians. Ventura's novella, moreover, entered the body of American literature at an important critical nexus of American and Italian experience (the early part of the massive wave of Italians flooding into New York) -- functioning as a foundational text in the nascent corpus of Italian American literature and a touchstone text in the American Italian *percorso*.

The 1886 English version of *Peppino* originally appeared in a collection titled *Misfits and Remnants* edited by Ventura and Russian writer S. E. Shevitch.⁵ The English language publication of *Peppino* in 1886 preceded works (written in Italian) by Italian American writers such as Bernardino Ciambelli's 1893 detective novel *I Misteri di*

⁵ For more information on the publication and history of *Peppino* see Frank Lentricchia, "Luigi Ventura and the Origins of Italian American Fiction" and Alide Cagidmetrio, introduction to *Peppino* in *The Multilingual Anthology of American Literature* (2000), 214-18.

Mulberry and Menotti Pellegrino's 1903 crime novel *I Misteri di New York* that became popular among Italians in the urban ethnic enclaves.⁶ Writers such as Ciambelli and Pellegrino wrote vivid, sensationalized, crime fictions of Little Italy for entertainment purposes that may have had the unexpected effect of reinforcing the stereotype of Italians in New York as an intrinsically criminal element living, working, and committing crimes in a dangerous, hostile city. Martino Marazzi in his brief introduction to Ann Goldstein's translation of Pellegrino's novel describes the work as "an almost indecipherable hodgepodge" of "crime, corruption, and political entanglements within and without the Italian community" (65). Nonetheless, Pellegrino's novel does open with a series of very vivid images of New York that offer a scathing indictment of urban life as well as evidence of the range of ways some Italians in New York imagined their new found urban milieu. In the opening of chapter one Pellegrino writes:

NEW YORK! The sigh of every derelict of the old world; the refuge of hearts longed for by the delinquent the cradle of fortune sought by the disinherited of all peoples. NEW YORK! Chaos, where hope and disillusion swirl, gold and tin, virtue and vice, wealth and misery and the greedy hand of every newcomer gropes as it attempts to seize the good part and often ends up grasping only the bad . . . NEW YORK is the synthetic world, it is America for the majority of the innumerable worshippers of the Almighty Dollar . . . where the bitterest natures, the most savage characters, the most quarrelsome souls, the most perverse

⁶ See Martino Marazzi, *Voices of Italian America* (2004) for background and translated excerpts of Ciambelli and Menotti.

hearts, the most reckless minds are tempered, it seems by the strong northern cold. (65-66)

Pellegrino, in this introductory section, offers a vivid litany of dark images of “Nuova York” that represent an array of cultural, psychological, and socio-economic forces that the narrator believes the city embodies. Ventura’s work, on the other hand, appealed to a wider, non-Italian audience. Ventura’s novella avoids the hyperbolic, imagist discourse of Pellegrino and instead offers a straightforward story demonstrating a vivid array of New York spaces resonating with inter-cultural, intra-Italian, and interpersonal interactions. The novella introduces into the nascent body of Italian American literature a range of tropes about New York and the place of Italians in New York as the displaced immigrant in a hostile urban environment. *Peppino* is New York, Italian American, street-level fiction.

In *Peppino*, the relationships of Italian characters to New York spaces (and by extension America) are important elements in the text, emphasized by the narrator in his vivid descriptions of Italian immigrant life in a range of city spaces throughout the novella. The narrator of *Peppino* is an impoverished writer and intellectual identified as “Mr. Fortuna” (233). Mr. Fortuna (Mr. Lucky) discursively functions in the novella as a cultural negotiator and apologist for Italian American culture and eventually as a father figure for a twelve year old immigrant bootblack from the southern Italian region of Basilicata, Peppino, who lives in an Italian enclave and works in lower Manhattan.

Ventura’s novella portrays an emergent, adaptive, American Italian consciousness creatively responding to unsettling and threatening realities in New York spaces. The basic plot line of the short novella, narrated by Fortuna, an impoverished but cultured

Italian immigrant and unpublished writer, involves Fortuna's attempts at getting his work published and his relationship with Peppino. The story opens with a narration that serves as a short travel guide through lower Manhattan and offers a range of realistic details about late nineteenth century New York. Fortuna's narration immediately signals to the reader that he is observant, erudite, knowledgeable about negotiating New York streets, able to find the time for leisure, and possibly tri-lingual (he can speak English, Italian, and sprinkles his narrative with French terms). He opens by informing the reader:

If you should ever go to New York, and on some fine day in the month of May should saunter, half on business, half on pleasure, in the direction of the Post-Office, take my advice,--do not get into the horse-car which goes through Union Square to Barclay Street, for you will surely be crushed to suffocation in the mass of stout women who seem to frequent those vehicles. Not only should you not take the omnibus—that relic of barbarism, that unblushing exhibitor of pretty ankles; but take my advice, I repeat, light a good cigar, and quietly pursue your way on foot, following the right hand side-walk . . . you will be amused by the absurd walking advertisements, and edified by the soles of boots at the windows of the reading rooms of the St. Nicholas and the New York Hotel; and besides al this you will make the acquaintance of Peppino. (223)

Fortuna invites the reader to “come with me to the corner of Prince Street, opposite the Metropolitan Hotel to be introduced to “the poor Italian” twelve year old bootblack Peppino who is “not dirty” but according to the characteristics Fortuna ascribes to him

clearly Southern Italian with his “brown skin made yet browner by the sun, a head covered in thick, curly hair, a pug-nose, and a *je ne sais quoi* in his appearance” (223). Fortuna immediately sets himself apart from the type of Italian that Peppino represents in New York (poor Southern Italians), those he describes as “my poor countrymen” who “have a right to exist, were it only by selling melons or blacking boots” (223). Despite Peppino’s obvious poverty, Fortuna perceives that “Peppino is an aristocrat in his own way” and encourages his reader to “stop and confide your boots to him while he makes them shine like a mirror” (225). Peppino, like so many other “birds of passage” Italian immigrants in New York, only plans to work for a brief period in America, save money, and then return to Italy. Peppino desires “to be able to possess, one of these days, by the aid of your boots, a swell front in his native town, a little America in the heart of Southern Italy” (225). Fortuna seems fascinated by the irony that Peppino, a resident of Little Italy in America, plans to recreate a “little America” in Italy. Peppino sacrifices upward mobility in America for a kind of horizontal mobility—a return to Italy where he and his brothers’ earnings will enable them to recreate a type of imaginary New York in their small Basilicatan village.

Ventura proceeds with Fortuna’s flashback to his arrival in America and his initial contact with Peppino. Fortuna’s narration of his own immigration to New York and initial settlement challenges in the city includes a range of detailed observations and common immigrant tropes that serve to remind the reader that he is a literate, cultured, but somewhat idealistic, and economically naïve immigrant, who imagined in Italy “that in America money ran like a river in the streets and therefore it was not necessary for me to bring any but to simply come and gather it up” (225). He spends the little bit of money

he brings eating not at what he terms “an underground restaurant” but at the best restaurants in New York City such as “the bill of fare at Delmonico’s” (225). Fortuna experiences “my financial Waterloo” and is forced to live in a cheap boarding house in the Lower East Side (226). He then attempts to earn money getting his writing published, but for the most part experiences a range of humiliating rejections by editors. After these series of rejections on a shopping trip for “ten cents worth of crackers and cheese” Fortuna passes by Peppino working near the Metropolitan Hotel and he proceeds to shine Fortuna’s shoes without Fortuna’s approval. But after discovering that Fortuna has no money to pay him, he lets him go with the blessing “The Madonna be with you” (229). Fortuna is initially struck by the boy’s honesty and charity, but after leaving him he is able to get an obituary for the recently deceased Italian Minister of Justice published in the New York Herald and is paid “the enormous sum of seven dollars” (229). He considers Peppino’s blessing to be the cause of this *buon fortuna* (good fortune) and he returns to Prince Street to repay Peppino for the first shine and to arrange for Peppino to come to his apartment on Ludlow Place to shine his shoes “every morning at eight o’clock” (231). Although Fortuna’s landlady chases Peppino away the first time he arrives to shine Fortuna’s boots, because she says he’s “a dirty little Italian brigand,” Fortuna asserts to her that Peppino must be allowed to come and shine his shoes because he “is a compatriot of mine and an honest gentleman” (235). Thus begins Fortuna’s ongoing friendship with Peppino whom he describes as “a ray of warm sunshine from my dear native land” and “very intelligent, and always respectful and polite, never coming in without knocking at the door and saying ‘Buon giorno, signore’ ” (237). He learns from Peppino that he and his two brothers Antonio and Filippo, who live in the squalid Italian

enclave near Mulberry Street, are working and saving most of their money in hope of returning to their native village in the Basilicata region to build a house. Antonio is a boot black who works at Union Square and Broadway and Filippo is a violinist who plays on boats at Coney Island. Peppino and his brothers represent Southern Italians in New York living a life in a transient and contingent borderlands material existence. Franco Moretti suggests that “city life mitigates extremes and extends the range of intermediate possibilities” for immigrants who arm themselves “against catastrophe by adapting more pliant and provisional attitudes” (117). Like Fortuna, Peppino and his brothers quickly learn to adapt and survive in urban contact zones characterized by heterogeneity and flux.

Fortuna describes and classifies the Italian American neighborhood and the type of Italians who inhabit the space he encounters near Crosby Street as a typical site of intractable, subaltern Southern Italian degradation. When Fortuna visits Peppino for Sunday morning pasta in Little Italy, he also distances himself from both the squalid urban spaces, the Italian denizens who inhabit them, and the cultural characteristics and practices of the inhabitants. Almost sounding like a social documentarian like Jacob Riis, Fortuna’s passage on the lower Manhattan Little Italy demonstrates a journalistic and ethnographic impulse in its vivid description of the picturesque squalor of the enclave. Ventura portrays Fortuna as simultaneously experiencing attraction and revulsion towards his fellow Italians. Fortuna lives in the boarding house on Ludlow Place on the Lower East Side, while Peppino and his brothers live on Crosby Street in the heart of the Italian area in lower Manhattan northwest of Mulberry Street. Peppino invites Fortuna to Crosby Street for a Sunday morning “macaroni” feast that Peppino states will be a “*feste grande*” [grand feast] (241). Fortuna describes this invitation in a slightly condescending

manner, indicating again to the reader that even though he is also Italian, he is a different type of Italian from the Southern Italian denizens of the ethnic enclave. He states “at nine o’clock in the morning I confess I was not enormously inclined to do much honor to the Neapolitan dainty” (245). He describes the place where Peppino and his brothers live as “of dismal appearance, in the most crowded part of Crosby Street, where human lives and rubbish of every description seem to be thrown pell-mell, in a heap” (243). Fortuna, who is respectfully named by the inhabitants as “the signore” (which reinforces his notion of himself as a social superior), offers a vivid, detailed, ethnographic description of what sounds like a typical Southern Italian scene:

Olive-skinned women were combing each other’s long black hair; others, of the true Abruzzi [rustic, rough, peasants] type, wore bright petticoats, somewhat ragged, and scarlet *bustini* according to the custom of their country. They had gold necklaces with pendant crosses, and long earrings, called *sciocagli*, which almost touched their shoulders. Old women were pulling over rags in baskets, while the men disposed themselves in various attitudes, enjoying the *dolce far niente* [the sweetness of doing nothing], smoking bad cigars and drinking worse beer. (243)

Fortuna states with a tone of surprise, an element of disgust, and a degree of condescension that although he knows that he is in a New York neighborhood “I found that I was really in the midst of Southern Italy” and notes that he is surrounded by “little children, dirty and ill-clothed, others rolling happily in the mud” (243). Despite Fortuna’s

attempt at an objective description of the neighborhood these passages reveals his deeply rooted ambivalence towards his fellow Italian immigrants.

Although Fortuna in his narrative of his visit to Little Italy seems to offer observations that reinforce prevailing notions of southern Italian intransigence to assimilation, he nevertheless, stresses many positive qualities of himself and Peppino in a range of discursive gestures in the text. Fortuna discovers that the brothers have an unusual plan for their American earnings. Peppino's brothers inform Fortuna that the real goal of their work in New York is to recreate a version of New York back in Basilicata! Peppino's brother Filippo informs Fortuna at the Sunday morning spaghetti dinner that Peppino and his two brothers intend to spend the money they have earned and saved in New York to "buy for us a lot on Broadway" (249). This puzzles Fortuna, but he learns from Filippo that the Broadway he references is not in mid-town Manhattan, but the middle of the Basilicatan village of Viggiano. Filippo says that "Broadway is the name of our great street, half a mile long" that he claims was "called so by one of our mayors who had been a chief boot-black in New York" (249). To Fortuna's astonishment, Filippo goes on to suggest that because of the labors and capital of those who return from New York to Italy, "thirty years ago Viggiano was only a cluster of poor little cottages, whereas now everyone who comes back from America speaks more English than Italian and has a house with a swell-front" even though they are "not fine houses like the ones on Fifth Avenue" (249). Fortuna reacts by admitting to his astonishment "that I had never dreamed that there was this curious little reflection, as it were, of American life and manners among the mountains of Basilicata" (249). But Fortuna concludes his observations of his Sunday morning pasta dinner by noting that he "went to sleep that

night, my head full of swell fronts and Broadways; and I blessed America, that makes of my poor countrymen so many good and industrious citizens” (253).

Ventura’s novella functions as one of the first examples of Italian American texts written in English that attempts to counter the prevailing negative discourses circulating in America about the new waves of Southern Italian immigrants. Ventura ends with an incident that emphasizes the notion that Peppino is representative of positive, redeemable qualities of poor, but honest, hard-working, virtuous Italians in America. Fortuna travels to the Western United States for three months to earn money writing for newspapers and on his return to New York falls ill which results in the money he earned in his Western work flying “away like summer flies, so that I was penniless” (255). Facing eviction, he meets Peppino who offers to pay his rent. This gesture of Peppino not only prevents Fortuna from getting evicted, but he believes it is another source of luck, as he sells an article to a New York newspaper for forty dollars. He asks Peppino to cash the check he receives for the article, but Peppino never returns and there is no sign of the money. After a week and no sign of Peppino, Fortuna believes his money has been lost or stolen by Peppino and admits that he falls “back on whatever skepticism I possessed on the subject of Italian boys” (267). Fortuna attempts to find Peppino and eventually discovers him at Bellevue Hospital where he is “lame in his right leg” and “frightfully pale” (267). Peppino recounts that he had cashed Fortuna’s check, left it in an envelope in a book in Fortuna’s apartment, was “run over by a heavy cart” on the street, and needed to recover from his injuries in Bellevue. His plight was compounded by the facts that his brothers were away from New York, no one in the hospital could understand Italian, and he was unable to inform anyone about Fortuna because he did not know his name. He only knew

Fortuna as “the signore” (269). The story ends as it begins, with Fortuna encouraging his readers to “never go by the corner of Prince Street without stopping to have your boots blacked by Peppino” whom he declares is an Italian boy with “a good and honest heart” (269). In the end it is these qualities combined with Peppino’s industry that signal to Ventura’s readers the possibility that Southern Italian immigrants possess characteristics and values that indicate the potential for a positive presence both in New York and America.

Peppino is just the first in the series of Italian American New York narratives, novels, and films that resists negative discourses about Italians throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The representation of Italians in New York, whose identities in Italy were deeply connected to *campanilismo*, involves an attempt by Italian American writers either to explore their liminality or directly address discourses about Italians by imagining Italian experiences in the New York cityscape. Ventura’s work, written before Jacob Riis’s 1890 *How the Other Half Lives*, nevertheless offers a distinctive set of cultural and sociological details about Italians in New York from an insider’s perspective that both verifies and resists Riis’ evaluation of Italian potential in America, specifically his assertion that the Italian presence in New York was “in a matter- of-fact American community” a “danger and reproach” (91). In its vivid descriptions of the squalor of the Italian New York enclave it anticipates Riis’s own descriptions of the same type of spaces. But in a sense, *Peppino*, though a precursor to Riis’ work, offers a pre-emptive counter discourse to the ideas perpetuated by Riis and others that Italians were a potential threat to American stability. The central point of writers such as Riis were notions that the new wave of Southern Italians in New York

would not and could not contribute to American progress, would have tremendous difficulty assimilating and acculturating, were potentially political anarchists, and generally were violent, suspicious, ignorant, and criminal by nature. But Ventura's depiction in *Peppino* of the Italian American New York presence underscores instead the material and cultural challenges facing the new immigrants and emphasizes notable qualities that may contribute to American life. Fortuna is impoverished in Ventura's story, but is highly knowledgeable, literate, and articulate. Peppino and his two brothers Fillippo and Antonio dwell in the urban squalor of the Lower Manhattan Italian enclave and live a spartan, minimal, barely subsistent existence, but they dream, work hard, and save money for an upwardly mobile return to Italy, a return that will carry America (specifically New York City) back with them. Hostility and suspicion are not the main characteristics of the Italians of New York portrayed in *Peppino*, but of non-Italians. The Italians in *Peppino* are honest, open, sociable, considerate characters. But the street urchin Peppino and his two brothers, the denizens of the Italian enclave, and the educated, cultured, articulate narrator Mr. Fortuna are clearly presented in the text as different types of Italians in New York, which is an important element in the characterization of Ventura's Italian American characters and life in their *percorso* in his imaginary New York.

Pascal D'Angelo *Son of Italy*

Cyrus Patell, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, points out that New York's unique cultural diversity offers spaces for creative opportunities for writers and enacts the dynamics of the daily social contests that city dwellers experience. He observes, "Arising from the rich variety of experiences to be

found on the streets and in the neighborhoods of the city, New York writing dramatizes the ways in which the difference--whether it is based on culture, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, or class—is not a problem to be solved, but rather an opportunity for individual and cultural growth” (3). Pascal D’Angelo’s points of contact with New York City in his autobiography *Son of Italy* published in 1924 dramatizes an example of this interpenetration of immigrant experience and creative capability that results in a seminal Italian American cultural production set in New York City. He illustrates both the expansiveness of city life for an Italian immigrant writer and the protractions, limitations, challenges, and daily realism of urban street level life. His autobiography functions as a counter -discursive text that resists and deconstructs the prevailing stereotypes about the new wave of Southern Italian immigrants to New York as corrupt, primitive, illiterate, and ignorant peasants. D’Angelo records in the narrative a key moment in his Italian American New York *percorso* wherein at the beginning of the assimilation process he reconciles his subaltern Southern Italian self with the problematic urban New York spaces in his American present. And the way that he achieves this is by imagining and writing New York as an Italian American writer and no longer just an unassimilated Southern Italian immigrant outsider.

Carl Van Doren, the editor of *The Nation* and the individual attributed with the literary discovery of Pascal D’Angelo by first publishing D’Angelo’s poetry in *The Nation* in 1922, writes the introduction to D’Angelo’s 1924 autobiography *Son of Italy*. He calls D’Angelo’s story “one of the most thrilling episodes in American Literature” that “unquestionably belongs with the precious documents of the literature of Pascal D’Angelo’s adopted country” (xi). Van Doren goes on to suggest that D’Angelo’s work

is different from “most of the autobiographies of immigrants” because it “adds a new note” (xii). Van Doren points out in a very general way that most other Italian American writers, or for that matter any other American immigrant autobiographies, merely detail “how this or that new –comer fought his way up to the level of a competence and some public post,” but D’Angelo, he claims, is different (xii). Van Doren provides no specific example or evidence to support this claim; he just states it, therefore consigning all other immigrant cultural production to the category of mundane, predictable American immigrant assimilation stories. The “new note” that D’Angelo offers according to Van Doren is that his text demonstrates the literary potential of what Van Doren calls “the peasants of his [D’Angelo’s] race” (xi). Van Doren claims that “no American hereafter watching a gang of brown Italians busy in a ditch, can help asking himself whether or not there is not some Pascal D’Angelo among them” (xii) Since gangs of “brown Italians” were very busy in the construction trades and public works doing jobs in New York like ditch digging, sanitation work, bricklaying, concrete work, sanitation and many other manual or menial labors by the thousands in 1924, Van Doren and his fellow non Italian literati would have a virtual endless array of potential material for discovery. Such literary discourses could offer answers to the questions about immigrants’ possible enfranchisement into the American world of letters and by extension the literal nation. D’Angelo, who reconstructs himself in his autobiography as a literary proletarian exemplar by nicknaming himself “the pick and shovel poet,” casts himself in his narrative as an individual example of someone trying to represent his humanity in the dehumanizing context of urban life and menial labor. Ironically, in his introduction to *Son of Italy*, while valorizing D’Angelo and elevating him to the status of important

writer, poet, and representative “son of that Ovid whose fame is still the glory of Sulmona,” Van Doren simultaneously reduces and categorizes D’Angelo using common classist and racially charged categories circulating in the discourse about Italian immigrants in New York. But Van Doren, of course, is responsible for giving the unknown “pick and shovel poet” his New York and new world publishing break, and D’Angelo devotes the end chapters of his narrative to praising Van Doren for the publishing opportunity. It is, according to D’Angelo, a transformative moment in his American experience.

D’Angelo’s autobiography details his early life as a young boy in the rustic, central Italian region of Abruzzo, his emigration to the United States, his arrival in New York City, his subsequent material, emotional, and artistic struggles to survive, work, and write in America, his changing perceptions of New York, and his eventual publishing opportunity. The narrative is a story with two main parts: four chapters are devoted to his life as a poor child in the rustic town of Introdaqua in the mountainous Southern Italian Abruzzo region, and eleven chapters detail his experiences in New York City and a range of American work sites in various states. In the section set in Italy, D’Angelo reconstructs a rustic, bucolic world of “the uplands of Abruzzi” as a place of shepherding, lush mountain scenery, and ancient traditions located in the shadow of the Apennine mountain peak “our glorious Majella, the mother mountain” (13). He describes the origins of the Abruzzese people of the mountainous region around his hometown town of Introdaqua:

We of the uplands of Abruzzi are a different race. The inhabitants of the soft Plains of Latium and Apulia where in winter we pasture our sheep consider us a people of seers and poets. We believe in dreams. There are

strange beings walking through our towns whose existence, we know, are phantasies. We have men who can tell the future and ageless hags who know the secrets of the mountain and can cure all illness save witchcraft with a few words. (14)

This passage and much of D'Angelo's reconstructed memories of Abruzzo in the early chapters provide the reader with a deep sense of rustic, wild places and spaces of great beauty, deeply rooted superstitious beliefs and practices, and ancient traditions that are profoundly informed by what William Boelhower terms a "closed but dynamic folkloric environment" (106). D'Angelo simply notes it as a "quiet land" where "the old traditions have never entirely died out" (17). Boelhower describes D'Angelo's Italian section as a site that "offers a therapy of shepherds, bagpipes, mystic mountains and dreams to create an ordered cultural space out of an insecure world" (105). D'Angelo's Abruzzese *campanilismo* seems to ground his identity and provide him with a deep rootedness in this place and an aesthetic heritage. Fred Gardaphe, in *Italian Signs, American Streets*, describes D'Angelo's autobiographical narrative as part of the linear progression of Italian American writers that he terms the "poetic mode" of writing. This type of writing according to Gardaphe is "rooted heavily in Italian folk culture" "and is characterized by behavior based on divine models and a strong sense of destiny as the means of determining one's fate" (16).

But despite elements of the text where D'Angelo offers a dream-like, magical rendering of life in Abruzzo as noted by Boelhower and Gardaphe, it is the graphic, concrete material realities that D'Angelo describes that underscore a clear contrast with the more ethereal, abstract, folkloric or poetic elements of Abruzzese life rendered in the

early part of the text. He quickly deconstructs his own fairy-tale like imagery of the imaginary world of Introdaqua into a nightmare site of proletarian terror with clear caustic commentary on the oppressive, daily living conditions of the people. He does not hesitate to depict the traumas of the very real economic and social oppressions inflicted on a daily basis in the lives of the peasants of Introdaqua. He states that his life is one of “continuous toil” and that many residents constantly fear the specter of hunger and poverty and as a result are forced to emigrate “to alien lands” (24). As he meditates on the magical elements in the lives and mystical world views of his fellow Abruzzese (and specifically Introdaquans), D’Angelo reminds the reader of the traumatic material concerns of the people in this land. He points out that displacement and the pressure to uproot themselves is also a central feature of the people of Introdaqua and emigration and escape become a virtual necessity. D’Angelo inserts a commentary on the absolute necessity of escaping the oppressions of *galantuomini* landowners as well as the rigid, social hierarchy that stifles the working class. He proclaims, “Our people have to emigrate. It is a matter of too much boundless life and too little space. Every bit of cultivable soil is owned by those fortunate few who lord over us” (48). In D’Angelo’s mind, only one place can provide “escape” from a fate of “being ground under the hard power of necessity” and that is “The New World” (48).

It is the United States of America that D’Angelo had imagined earlier as “alien lands” where the men of Abruzzi go to escape the oppressive poverty of the region (24). Because of his inability to earn enough money as a tenant farmer to support his family, D’Angelo’s own father is forced to make a decision to emigrate to America and when he announces his intentions to his family D’Angelo describes his initial response as “a wild

pain” (47). America, in Pascal’s mind, is “a strange place into which people we knew had vanished and had never returned” (47). Italy, according to D’Angelo, is a land of economic, social, and psychic limitations, and America is the land of vast, “boundless” spaces that can accommodate both the possibility of economic opportunity and freedom for the indomitable Abruzzese spirit (48). America is transformed in his imagination from an ominous, alien site to a mythic, promised land. Emigration to the “New World” and “boundless Americas,” he states, is “escape from the rich landowners, from the terrors of drought, from the spectre of starvation” and it is a site that provides the possibility of not only material but psychic survival (48). The thought of emigrating to America “saves the man and keeps him from being ground under the hard power of necessity” (48). So D’Angelo decides to emigrate with his father because he imagines that America is “a desirable place” that will “confer such blessings,” and he believes in the possibility of “the new happy life we would lead when my father returned from America laden with riches” (50). In his rendering of the promise of America, D’Angelo offers the classic immigrant trope of America as a place to escape from material deprivation and social stultification, but also as a place promising “fabulous tales and thousands of lira—riches unheard of before among peasants” (48-49). D’Angelo records that he is already invested in the idea of America, but as the second part of his narrative demonstrates, he discovers a profound gap between how he imagines America and the stark reality he faces in his literal American experience. Negotiating that gap becomes the substantive element of the rest of his narrative.

D’Angelo and his father arrive in the United States in 1910 and his actual American experience for the most part is detailed in the text as a dismal, traumatizing,

dehumanizing, series of menial jobs, abysmal living conditions, and depressed states of mind amidst the squalor and misery of urban enclaves and work camps. Although D'Angelo's primary home base throughout the narrative is New York City, he, his father, and a group of fellow Abruzzese travel and work in New Jersey, Maryland, Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Vermont, and upstate New York. He learns shortly after his arrival that the strategy for survival in America as a transient worker barely surviving "toil—endless, continuous toil in the flooding blaze of the sun, or in the slashing rain" is a reformulated *campanilismo*, not in ethnic urban sites such as a "Little Italy" but in the company of his fellow Abruzzese (71). D'Angelo works with "fellow-townsmen" from Abruzzi whom he terms "the new gang" and he informs the reader: "In this country immigrants of the same town stick together like a swarm of bees from the same hive" (61-62). D'Angelo notes "We formed our own little world—one of many in this country" (68). This initial experience of Italian intra-regional solidarity provides a degree of stability and a displaced *campanilismo* in the face of a range of pressures: "We fellow townsmen in this strange land clung desperately to one another. To be separated from our relatives and friends and to work alone was something that frightened us old and young" (81). But D'Angelo says, "our first four years in America were a monotonous repetition of laborious days" and "everywhere was toil" (71). For the majority of his time, he lives in New York City in what he terms "an enforced sojourn in the city . . . in the slums where people of ill repute are not difficult to find" (81). D'Angelo attempts to transcend the sordid urban spaces he inhabits by seeking a place within literary traditions, but his narrative evidences a deepening liminality, a sense of in-between-ness. He always seems to be on the threshold of material, or cultural degrees of success, but finds himself

pushed back into the margins. And no matter where D'Angelo finds work, his American *percorso* brings him back to New York City and it becomes the primary site for his self-fashioning narrative, as he writes himself into the literary spaces of New York and America.

When D'Angelo actually immigrates to America he immediately records the New York impressions registering on his consciousness which parallel his transformation from disoriented, alienated, Italian outsider in an impenetrable city to acculturated individual in the process of becoming an integrated, part of New York and America. D'Angelo's changing perceptions of New York are recorded as directly linked to the acculturation and assimilation process in America. His narrative details the process of transforming imaginary New York spaces into American Italian places. Raymond Williams, in his essay "The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism," asserts that the power of the influence of the metropolis is undeniable, particularly on the state of mind of immigrant newcomers from small settlement origins whose "ordinary modes" of perception are disoriented by "a loss of the ballast of familiar life" when they are transported to bustling, densely populated cities (16). Williams points out that "the most important general element of the innovations" in a wide range of cultural productions is "the fact of immigration to the metropolis, and it cannot too often be emphasized how many of the major innovators were in this precise sense, immigrants" (21). The initial sense of the "strangeness and crowding and thus impenetrability of the city" experienced by most immigrants, and a central theme in their writing, is often transformed and influenced by the growing experience of the "vitality, the variety, the liberating diversity and mobility of the city (19). Williams states that "the power of metropolitan development" for the

cultural producer “is not to be denied” and that creative cultural production within the metropolitan context offers “the excitements, challenges of its intricate processes of liberation and alienation, contact and strangeness, stimulation and standardization” (23). D'Angelo, as a self-fashioned writer, finds in his New York American experience urban spaces inspiring liberating modes of expression and a new range of impressions and opportunities to utilize in his two main modes of expression, poetry and narrative. This process and these elements begin to filter and impact his perceptions of New York which he records in detail. While the initial impressions of the city register on his psyche in the usual, disorienting manner, represented by common tropes of awe, disorientation, and degrees of alienation, D'Angelo traces how the tremendous openness, diversity, possibility, and vibrant daily life of New York begin to transform his consciousness and his writing.

D'Angelo's first impressions and vision of America and New York Harbor are literally shrouded in obscurity, preventing his seeing the Statue of Liberty or the Manhattan cityscape because it is “a foggy day when we finally approached New York harbor” (58). In the deep fog and late afternoon light, he notes that those aboard the ship only “beheld a twilight strip of sand which gradually vanished under a curtain of mist and darkness” (58). In contrast to his ideas about New York and America earlier in his sea voyage, foreshadowed by “golden heaps of clouds and rainbow vistas” on the open seas that he believes are portents of “the portals of America,” D'Angelo sees only obscure, undefined shapes and forms that upon his arrival in New York he terms “strange” and “inconceivable” visions (59, 61). After his processing on Ellis Island, where he says he “did not find any of the bad treatment and manhandling” that many other immigrants

experience, D'Angelo, his father, and a few fellow Abruzzese landed on the island of Manhattan on April 20th, 1910 (58). His immediate impressions of the sounds and sights of Manhattan are represented with images of psychic disorientation and sounds of confusing, urban cacophony. He hears "the terrific crash" and "roar" as he is startled by "the sight of an elevated train dashing around the curve towards South Ferry" (59). D'Angelo describes the experience of seeing and hearing the train as the first moment when the cacophonous resonances of the city impact both his physical and psychic inner being. He is now in New York and New York is inside him! He states, "I felt as if those unseen wheels above were grinding paths through my own body" (59). The experience of initial entry into New York is for D'Angelo like "climbing into a strange vision" and the city sights that flash before him on his first subway ride above the city are an "inconceivable vision" (59). He is optically dazzled and disoriented in the "vast turning crowd" of New York City (59). The cacophonous, complex, strangeness of the city for this young, rural Italian begins to penetrate his consciousness with an unfamiliar intensity that he finds difficult to process. It is almost as though in all his imaginings of New York and America there was nothing to prepare him for the shock of this initial onslaught of urban impressions.

The profound difficulties of his initial New York immigrant experiences and the disorientations of his urban acculturation are dramatized in D'Angelo's first impressions of Americans in New York and other New York street level realities. Williams terms this experience "the loss the of ballast of familiar life" (16). D'Angelo records his observations of a father and son on the subway who are "both glaring at the newspaper which the father held" and "both afflicted with the same nervous disease, for their mouths

were in constant motion, like cows chewing cud” (60). He also witnesses ethnic contempt for the first time in America as the train conductor “looked sneeringly” at a him and fellow Italians when they pay the train fare and when a “matronly lady sitting opposite of me was scanning me with a sort of pitying gaze” (59). Nevertheless, D’Angelo concludes that New York is a “remarkable place” even as he sees an image that disorients him. As he and his fellow travelers race to catch another train to take them to their first work site in Hillsdale, he catches sight of New York street signs:

And now, just before we reached the station, I began to notice that there signs at the corners of the streets with “Ave.! Ave.! Ave!” How religious a place this must be that expresses its devotion at every crossing I mused. Still, they did not put the “Ave.” before the holy word, as in, “Ave Maria,” but rather after. How topsy-turvy! (60)

Fred Gardaphe, in *Italian Signs, American Streets* observes that D’Angelo’s confused observations are the result of his “early attempt to read American signifiers . . . according to Italian religious signified” (41). More than just a case of a mere misreading of American signs, D’Angelo’s humorous anecdote about his disorientation at what he believes is an odd inversion of a familiar image serves to reinforce the difficulty of D’Angelo’s initial experience in urban acculturation. It is D’Angelo’s perceptions that are inverted as he strains to process the confusion, rapid mobility, alien behavior, and strangeness of metropolitan New York. New York is no longer just *immaginario Nuova York* for D’Angelo, but the gateway and literary registry of his acculturation and assimilation into American life and Letters.

The narrative also records the transformative impact of New York on D'Angelo's consciousness and perceptions. New York is depicted as a site that is unknowable to him. D'Angelo re-evaluates his initial impressions of New York that he cited earlier in his narrative in a key chapter (chapter seven) that records his changing, critical perceptions of the city. He states in retrospect that his first impression of New York was of "a vast dream whirling around me," unknowable because "on my first arrival in America I had hurried through New York as through some wild vision" (74). Oddly, despite the vivid prose about his initial New York experiences, he claims later that it seemed more like a surreal figment of his imagination than reality and that "the immense powerful city had made little impression upon me" and that he had "seen more gigantic and wonderful things in my dreams" (74). He claims that he does not believe that he really gets "his first real view of New York" or "the first time I actually realized the city" until almost four years into his American sojourn in the summer of 1914 (74). A friend named Severio informs D'Angelo in an ostentatious boast that "you cannot know the great city –not until I show you what it really is" (74). D'Angelo reflects back on Severio's claim and agrees that despite living in the city in-between his work on the railroads, New York was indeed unknowable to him.

D'Angelo was living in the city near the Mulberry Street Italian urban enclave in "a cheap boarding house on Bayard Street" (74). This was an area of the city (the 14th Ward) that resonated with a vibrant Italian culture and was populated by a strong majority of Italian immigrants. Donna Gabaccia, in her seminal work on housing and social changes among Italian immigrants to New York, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street from 1880-1930*, observes that by 1900, Italians had "completely taken over the [14th]

ward” (67). Historian Philip Cannistraro points out that with the massive influx of Italians to the city during the period of the so-called Great Migration “by 1910 over 340,000 Italian born residents lived in New York” and most were concentrated in Lower Manhattan where D’Angelo resided (5).⁷ D’Angelo’s growing awareness of the dense nexus of Italian culture, commerce, language, and custom in New York, indicates a state of mind unable to process the vastness and complexity of the city (74). He says, “I was green then, and my mind was yet unable to gather any impressions of the city, save that it was big, noisy, and unintelligible” (74). D’Angelo compares this type of unknowability or the impenetrability of New York in his consciousness up to this point, to “A dog whose eyes see a big wonderful sunset” that “feels about as much as I did at that time” (74-75). But as a result of his acculturation, he claims to possess a new “broadened vision” of New York, and New York is transformed from a dense, complex, hostile, disorienting, dark impenetrable mass of vague impressions to “the great illumined city, beyond the river, that I remembered like a vague dream” (77). Unlike his dizzy, disoriented or distant earlier encounters, D’Angelo begins to imagine and write New York with a new found perspective.

As he leaves the Palisades of New Jersey and nears the City he describes a growing excitement and newly enlightened perspective as he is “excited in expectation” to be “gliding towards the city that appeared to be spreading nearer and nearer to us gigantically” (77). It is in a walk through the streets of New York where D’Angelo expresses an intimacy with the City which up until this point has seemed impenetrable.

⁷ For historical studies of Italians settling in New York and the greater metropolitan area in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries see along with Gabaccia, Michael Eula, *Between Peasant and Urban Villager* (1993), and Philip Cannistraro, “The Italians of New York: An Historical Overview” in *The Italians of New York* (1999) pp. 3-20.

City streets are “brilliantly illuminated,” shop windows offer “a display of splendor” and D’Angelo exclaims “I could hardly believe my eyes, it was so wonderful” (77-78). New York becomes a “broad view more wonderful than anything I had ever seen” and a “magic vista” with masses of people “crowded continuously out of that dazzling difference” (79). This registers a radical reconfiguration in D’Angelo’s perceptions of New York spaces. The networks of former urban significations which overwhelmed and oppressed D’Angelo are now sources of identification and illumination. Although the text oddly does not record the reason why D’Angelo’s perception of the city has changed, he now seems confident that he can negotiate and construct an identity within this urban context. D’Angelo’s New York walk demonstrates this transformative process. But he almost immediately learns that his new found identification with the city and inspiration from the city is problematized by his immigrant status. As he, Saverio, and Federico (a friend of Saverio’s) briefly pause to look into a few store windows after they first arrive in downtown Manhattan, they are immediately treated with xenophobic contempt by “some well-dressed ladies” who are “disgusted at our appearance” and they hear “slurring remarks” by other shoppers who contemptuously identify D’Angelo and his fellow Italians as “those foreigners” (78). He registers little shock, however, when other New Yorkers treat him, Saverio, and Federico with more open disgust than a prostitute whom they observe walking near them down the avenue dressed in “silks, plumes, furs, and other portions of slaughtered animals” with “glaring yellow hair, hard irregular features, double chin, gray eyes and blood red lips” (78). He observes that “not one turned in disgust at this dazzling creature as they did from us” (78).

While D'Angelo records a range of both positive and negative attributes of New York life as an Italian immigrant, he balances this with a description of the profound alienation, lack of vitality, and urban stupor that he believes characterizes many native New Yorkers whom he observes crowding the streets of Manhattan. He notes these characteristics registered on their faces and actions. He says,

Where did they all come from? And why their silence? Who had cast the spell over them all? How pale they all were, I thought. Weakly pale they all seemed, like sprouts of seeds washed up by the rain. Cars clanged and rumbled past, filled with rows of statue-like people who sat within, motionless, ignoring one another. Nobody nodded to me or to my companions. (79)

His flurry of rhetorical questions are followed by two similes describing New Yorkers as weak, rootless, and lifeless plants and alienated, de-humanized automatons, powerless, and unwilling or unable to express their humanity.

Like Ventura who dramatized Fortuna's ambivalence toward the New York Italian American experience, D'Angelo concludes this "first real view" of New York with an evaluative statement about the experiences in the "metropolis" that still resonates in his consciousness (74). He ends the chapter with a statement that indicates a new found simultaneous fascination and revulsion towards New York. The experience clearly captivates D'Angelo, but he characterizes it as a highly ambivalent response: "And we three walked on, wanderers in a magic show of forbidden splendor and beauty. And I thought of how lovely and yet repulsive this enchanted city was" (80). D'Angelo reveals in this passage the conflicting and contradictory responses that seem to demonstrate an

ongoing anxiety about his New York and new world experiences. He seems to demonstrate the need to express that he can resist the seductions of New York, yet he finds himself simultaneously powerfully attracted to them. This unsettled response indicates that in his American *percorso* he is not yet comfortable with these contradictory impulses which he believes may be a kind of transgressive enchantment or what he terms “a magic show of forbidden splendor and beauty” (80).

An essential part of many Italian American texts such as Ventura’s novella and D’Angelo’s autobiography is the vivid portrayal of cultural collision and transformation by first generation Italian Americans in urban New York living an unstable and contingent borderlands existence characterized by heterogeneity and flux. And as his narrative proceeds there are still key moments when D’Angelo’s fascination seems to be again overwhelmed by his revulsion. D’Angelo’s enchantment with New York is relatively short lived, as he experiences the difficulties of finding employment (except sporadically as a transient railroad worker). He feels trapped in New York which he now terms “this hell-hole metropolis” and “this too egoistic metropolis” (94, 97). Despite a brief stint during which he leaves New York to work for the Cumberland Railroad in West Virginia, D’Angelo is forced to return to the city, with deep sadness, but with a new found determination to know New York which he equates with knowing America. His sadness is the result of two losses: the death of a friend Teofilo who is crushed to death before D’Angelo’s eyes in an industrial accident, and the decision by his father to leave America and return to Italy. Despite these two profound losses, D’Angelo determines that he will remain in America because he senses the possibility for intimacy and inspiration. He says,

Something had grown in me during my stay in America. Something was keeping me in this wonderful perilous land where I had suffered so much and where I had so much more to suffer. Should I quit America without a chance to really know it? Again I shook my head. (106)

D'Angelo indicates that even without the foundational elements of *la famiglia* and *campanilismo* he believes that he will be able to find intimacy and inspiration in America. He records at this point that not only his father, but also his original transplanted group of fellow immigrant *Abruzzese* workers are leaving. He notes that his father leaves for Italy “much saddened” because he is unable to understand why Pascal was remaining in America, and that his “original gang” returned to Abruzzi or “found jobs near New York, but gradually drifted away” (107). D'Angelo confesses to the reader that “I was left alone” (107). He lives for a while in a box car in the Palisades in New Jersey as he works as a transient laborer on the railroad lines. His living conditions are horrific and he reaches a psychological and emotional low point in his American experience that he denotes as “turbulent” and states that he feels like he is “nothing more than a dog” as he resigns himself to his “fate” that he describes as “a poor laborer—a dago, a wop, or some such creature—in the eyes of America” (126). It is a cathartic moment for D'Angelo because his pain and frustration at the inability to articulate his travails in the face of material, psychological, social and cultural barriers actually inspire him to express them in writing. He proclaims, “Why, I am nothing more than a dog. But a dog is silent and slinks away when whipped, while I am filled with the urge to cry out, to cry out disconnected words, expressions of pain—anything—to cry—out!” (126). At the precise moment when D'Angelo mourns the low status of his own *percorso* in America,

and vividly portrays the deepening desire and frustration in depicting his trauma, even with inarticulate, fragmented verbal and visceral expressions, he claims to experience a reawakened, transcendental inspiration to write. He senses a profound “kinship with the beautiful earth” but oddly describes this experience as one of emotional distance and unrequited desire, as he figures America as “like some lovely hardhearted lady in velvets and gaudy silks—one who we could gaze at in admiration, but never dare approach” (126). When he feels distance, impotency, and mourns the inability for expressive intimacy with America, he senses “a power that was forcing me to cry out at this world that was so fair, so soft and oblivious of our pains and petty sorrows” (126). This is a critical moment in the narrative. D’Angelo decides at this moment that learning English and writing in English will be his mode of creative expression, despite his status in the eyes and minds of Americans as “a dago, a wop, or some such creature” (126). And the very first decision he makes is to return “back to headquarters in New York” and to write about New York (127).

D’Angelo’s earlier image of himself as the lone individual and the xenophobic notions of Italians that he often experiences from outsiders is balanced by his professed belief that somewhere in America’s vast spaces exists the possibility of a place for him as an inspired individual to achieve a kind of enlightenment and ultimate success as a cultural producer of literature. And he finds both his artistic material and opportunity for this in New York, despite the ongoing material oppressions and alienations of urban life and work. As I noted earlier, D’Angelo at this stage in his American New York *percorso* records how he reconciles his Southern Italian past with the problematic urban New York spaces in his American present. And he achieves this by imagining and writing New

York as an Italian American writer and no longer just an unassimilated Southern Italian immigrant outsider. D'Angelo's abstract immigrant ambitions are transformed in New York into concrete realities as his work is finally published and he enters the corpus of American Literature and becomes a compelling representative of the nascent field of Italian American Literature.

After a few pathetic and largely unsuccessful attempts at writing a few jokes in English and a "short farce," he decides to write a "heart stirring tragedy" set in Manhattan that centers around a "poor outcast who had to sleep in the subway"(130, 133). D'Angelo writes from his own liminal space about life on the material margins of a city that he admits still puzzles and challenges him. It is his lack of knowledge of New York that impels him to create his first work of cultural expression in America: "Now, just because I knew so little about the city, I determined to put my scene in the great metropolis" (133). D'Angelo decides that his first cultural production will be the construction of an imaginary New York. Despite planning the work and researching his material first by spending a time in the subway system, D'Angelo's actual writing of the "sad tragedy" set in New York is never completed, because the pressure of his material existence forecloses on his creative endeavors. He writes that "work, continual, hard, fatiguing work, made my attempts at writing few and hard lived. I always was and am a pick and shovel man. That's all I am able to do, and that is what I am forced to do even now. Work with my arms" (133). But this again signals D'Angelo's attempts to refashion himself as a writer in America, writing with distinctive expressions of American *italianita* and situating himself in the corpus of American letters and creative production.

As he continues to live and work menial jobs in New York and New Jersey, D'Angelo is inspired by two other sources to pursue his passion to write: hearing Verdi's opera *Aida* and the discovery of the poetry of Percy Shelley. Hearing *Aida* performed at "the Sheepshead Bay race track" in Brooklyn with its "parts of such overwhelming beauty that they tore my soul apart" deeply inspires D'Angelo to write. He states that during the operatic experience "all at once I felt myself being driven towards a goal" that he claims is "beauty which I had been instinctually following" (137). Reading Shelley at a public library brings to his consciousness the awareness of "an appealing kinship between the climaxes of *Aida* and the luminous flights of that divine poetry" (144). This experience renews D'Angelo's profound desire for personal expression, what he terms the urge "to cry out my hopes and dreams to this lovely unheeding world" (144). Earlier in his autobiography as he portrays his initial experiences with the hard labor of daily American life D'Angelo asserts a belief that his poetic work has the potential of an essential enduring quality:

Who hears the thud of the pick and the jingling of the shovel? Only the stern-eyed foreman sees me. When night comes and we all quit the thuds of the pick and the jingling of the shovel are heard no more. All my works are lost, lost forever. But if I write a good line of poetry—then when the night comes and I cease writing my work is not lost. My line is still there. It can be read by you and by another tomorrow. But my pick and shovel works cannot be read by you today or by anyone else tomorrow. (72)

And after writing a rough draft of a first poem, the direct result of its creation is a decision “to live in the city [New York] and write poetry” and escape “the chains of physical labor around my new born soul” (147).

D’Angelo’s growing sense of his own artistic possibility and newfound inspiration is paralleled in the narrative with a vivid transformation of his perceptions of New York urban spaces and his own altered place within it. New York, formerly described by D’Angelo as “this hell-hole metropolis” becomes in his mind a site for “new life” (94, 148). The former sense of psychic dislocation becomes a place of connection and identity. D’Angelo writes:

When I first arrived in America the city through which I had passed had been a vast dream whirling around me. Gradually it had taken shape and form, but had still remained alien to me in spirit. Now, however, as I walked through its crowded streets, I felt a sort of kinship with it. I felt that I was an integral part of this tremendous, living, bustling metropolis.

(148)

New York City is transformed in his imagination: it is no longer just another in the series of hostile, alien spaces in America where he faces alienation, displacement, disillusionment, and disorientation, but a place that offers an emergent, positive feature to his *America percorso* and artistic identity. The term “kinship” implies that he senses a new type of *campanilismo* in and with New York. Earlier in the narrative as he struggles with disillusionment and “oppressive” work to which he feels “enslaved,” digging railroad ditches and witnessing the tragic death of a fellow Italian immigrant in a horrific industrial accident, D’Angelo had “returned to New York “discouraged and saddened by

our loss” (107). But, he simultaneously proclaims that he still believes in the possibility of success in America. He says, “There was a lingering suspicion that somewhere in this vast country an opening existed, that somewhere I would strike the light. I could not remain in the darkness perpetually” (106-07). And the site where this opening to “know” America occurs is New York City. His renewed sense of self is indicated by the proclamation that he no longer feels he exists on the margins or in the liminal spaces of New York, but that the city is literally incorporated into his creative being. After he arrives back in the “great metropolis” after proclaiming that he “turned my back to the ditches and tracks in order to explore a new life,” D’Angelo’s first poetic production is a poem about New York that he titles “The City” (148-49). The city itself becomes the inspiration for his work that he terms “play” in a place that he oddly describes as “this toy city amid the vigilant realities of this toy universe” (150). And in his poetic imagery of New York, D’Angelo finds his “opening” in “this great metropolis” through which he is able to “strike the light” (107, 149). He writes, “We struggle, blinded by dismal night in a weird shadowy city. / Yet the city itself is lifting street lamps, like a million cups filled with light, / To quench from the upraised eyes their thirst of gloom, / . . . / Only the great soul, denuded to the blasts of reality, / Shiver and groans. / And like two wild ideas lost in a forest of thoughts, / Blind hatred and blinder love run amuck through the city” (149). The speaker in D’Angelo’s poem expresses angst and keen awareness about the psychic dislocation and the emotional, material, and spiritual pressures on poor working class city dwellers: “And from the hecatombs of aching souls / The factory smoke is unfolding in protesting curves / Like phantoms of black unappeased desires, / yearning and struggling and pointing upward; / While through its dark streets pass people, tired

and useless, / Trampling the vague black illusions / That pave their paths like broad streams of water lilies / on twilight streams” (149). In this first poem that he attempts to get published in “a new language in a new world,” D’Angelo expresses his deep ambivalence and constant anxiety about the simultaneous oppression and inspiration of his New York and American experience. This is a poem that also evidences D’Angelo’s growing social consciousness and the potential ways in which this abstraction that he calls “city” impacts the concrete realities of proletarian life.

In the last chapter of his narrative detailing his largely unsuccessful attempts at getting an assortment of publishers to publish his poetry and at earning a living as a writer, after many rejections that he notes were “repeated over and over again with sickening monotony,” D’Angelo recounts his last desperate attempt to get *The Nation* to publish his poetry (163). He describes a letter that he writes begging the editor to publish his work in a poetry contest that *The Nation* was running as a “despairing gesture” and “a desperate move, a clutching at a straw” (164). D’Angelo fills his letter with hyperbolic lines dripping with pathos and strong appeals to give him a “publishing opportunity while it’s not too late” (167). He opens by describing himself as “an ignorant pick and shovel man—who has never studied English” but also “one who is struggling through the blinding flames of ignorance to bring his message before the public” (164). He states that the letter is “the cry of a soul stranded on the shores of darkness looking for light” (164). He also categorizes himself as a representative spokesperson for the working class and that he is “not deserting the legions of toil to refuge myself in the literary world” but rather to find a space “to express the wrath of their mistreatment” and “to express all the sorrows of those who cower under the crushing yoke of an unjust doom” (165). After

offering explicit detail about his oppressive material conditions living in New York which he terms “horrible and indescribable,” he claims that even one poem published in *The Nation* will open a wide range of writing opportunities in which “I will write a novel, two, three, who knows how many” if he only receives “an impulse of encouragement” (166). Getting published, according to D’Angelo who pleads his case to Van Doren in hyperbolic, poetic language, will be liberating and transformative: “Then let my soul break out of the chrysalis of enforced ignorance and fly toward the flower of hope, like a rich butterfly winged with a thousand thoughts of beauty” (167). He literally begs Van Doren to publish even one poem in order to lift him “out of this ignoble doom” and place him “on the pulpit of light where I too can narrate what the Nature-made orator has to say in me” (167). Van Doren does publish a poem which results in D’Angelo getting other works published in “influential weekly publications” and magazines and newspapers (168). D’Angelo abruptly ends his narrative by noting that “the literary world began to take me up as a great curiosity and I was literally feasted, welcomed and stared at” but he writes that his greatest happiness was that he “attained a goal far from the deep worn groove of peasant drudgery” that would have been his only fate if he remained in Abruzzo (168).

D’Angelo and Ventura’s work fits in a category of literary production that Williams in his work *Marxism and Literature* terms “emergent literature” (123). Williams identifies emerging literary productions as expressions that are either “some new phase of the dominant culture or those that are substantially alternative or oppositional to it” (123). Alternative cultural productions are those that define themselves as functioning in opposition to the dominant culture as a part of an ongoing

struggle for dominance. Williams argues that in emergent literature “the fundamental problem of emergence is clearly revealed, since the basis of incorporation in such cases, is the effective predominance of received literary forms—an incorporation, so to say, which already conditions and limits the emergence” (124). This is precisely the dynamic process that D’Angelo undergoes as he fashions a literary Italian American self and voice and generates a literary production in one of the major publishing capitals of the world—New York! D’Angelo creates a literary voice that resonates with American *Italianita* in the context of oppressive material conditions and an American literary corpus of often hostile discourses, but connected to existing literary forms and processes. Williams terms this latter element (evident in D’Angelo’s claim that Verdi and Shelley are his literary muses) a “residual cultural element” (123). Williams states “the residual by definition has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process . . . as an effective element of the present” (122). So D’Angelo positions himself as a writer as both emergent (the new American Italian writer and cultural producer) and residual (a poet in the classic sense) and a New York writer overlaying his life and writing as part of a literary new American Italian, New York palimpsest.

Most Italian immigrants, like Pascal D’Angelo, who come to New York for the first time, discover, as Doreen Massey observes, that “cities are places of particularly intense social interactions, places of myriad juxtapositions” and “prime sites of social mixing” where “new stories, new narratives are born” (21). But this is clearly not described as a benign process by D’Angelo and most Italian American immigration narratives. Doreen Massey argues in “On Space and the City” in *City Worlds* that cities “both individually and in relations between them, are spatial phenomena” and “the spaces

through which we lead our lives, and through which the world—and cities—come to be organized are understood as being social products, and social products formed out of the relations which exist between people, agencies, institutions, and so forth” (159, 171). She stresses that cities are by nature spaces for the intersections of multiple narratives where the complex, dynamic “open intensities” of city life enable distinctive individual trajectories” (160). D'Angelo's autobiographical work records the key moment when he enters the openly intense New York multiplicity of narratives at the beginning of his own Italian American *percorso*. When the landscape of the *Mezzogiorno* (Abruzzo in this case) is replaced in D'Angelo's imagination with the New York cityscape, D'Angelo along with other Italian American New York writers adds another stratum to the New York literary palimpsest. This includes the history of New York, the history of Italians in America, and the cultural productions that are an essential element of American *Italianita* itself. D'Angelo foregrounds his own *Italianita* and his deep literary inspirations in his narrative and affirms that Italian creative, dynamic elements and expressions can find a place within American literary and urban spaces. He writes himself into America by not only resisting the pressure to deny his *Italianita*, but foregrounding its creative, uniquely expressive potential, thus enacting along with all the early Italian American writers through the fictive spaces of *immaginario Nuova York* the beginnings of the dynamic *percorso* of literary American *Italianita*.

D'Angelo's American *percorso*, the circuitous route that D'Angelo represents in his narrative, resists a simple reduction to a mere classic linear immigrant tale of acculturation and assimilation into the dominant American culture. It is not just disorientation (although he certainly does experience degrees of that), it is D'Angelo's

representation of his own re-orientation and adaptation of New York spaces to his fictive forms that provides D'Angelo with a compelling counter discursive force. D'Angelo's narrative has been read as a common representation of immigrant disorientation at arriving in New York. Basile Green describes D'Angelo's work as "probably the most articulate autobiography in its treatment of the immigrant arrival in a new country" (37). Marina Cacioppo cites *Son of Italy* as "an obvious example" of an immigrant "success" tale "in which the protagonist rises from poverty and illiteracy to relative prosperity and education as he/she moves in a linear progression from being ethnic to being American" (73). Michael LaSorte portrays D'Angelo's autobiography as a record of the classic tension between the promise of America and the disappointing reality of American daily life for Italian immigrants. He states that for D'Angelo and fellow Italian immigrants in the narrative "America in the abstract had promised them much; immigrant America had done little but sap their spirit and energy" (79). This type of reading of D'Angelo as merely a representative immigrant Italian narrative portraying the common trope of the disoriented immigrant who gradually re-orientates himself to the strangeness of America and New York urban life and successfully acculturates himself in an upwardly mobile fashion underplays its active discursive power. And, of course, D'Angelo joins the chorus of Italian American writers resisting the Northern Italian ideology that Antonio Gramsci details in *The Southern Question* that suggests that "Southerners are biologically inferior human beings" who have a "nature that has made Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal, and barbaric" (20). It is a narrative that resists the prevalent American cultural image of illiterate, degraded, ignorant, backward, superstitious, intrinsically criminal Southern Italian immigrant hordes.

D'Angelo's narrative, like Ventura's, demonstrates his strong connection and deep rootedness in Italian culture and the interpenetration and cross cultural exchanges and influences of American life that vividly demonstrate the emergent elements of a hybrid Italian American culture and life that I term American *Italianita*. Fred Gardaphe describes D'Angelo's story as representative of "the insertion of Italian contexts into the more traditional American autobiographical form of the conversion and success story" (31). And Boelhower argues that immigrant autobiographical texts such as D'Angelo's in the early twentieth century "appeared precisely when America's traditional narrative panorama was undergoing a radical revision, when its boundaries were too self consciously fixed, its habitat more and more metropolitan" (17). But D'Angelo's narrative, like Ventura's *Peppino* and most all Italian American narratives, were considered marginal forms of literature, or slotted as merely examples of ethnic or immigrant literature. It was not until the work of Garibaldi La Polla's *The Grand Gennaro* and Pietro DiDonato's 1939 novel *Christ in Concrete* that Italian American writers receive much serious critical attention. As Italian American New York writers and as Italian immigrants struggling with the pressures of acculturation and assimilation, Ventura and D'Angelo were part of the nascent field of Italian American literary cultural productions, an emergent literature within American literature, and an emergent, hybrid culture within America itself. The paradox that exists in the minds and the hearts of many immigrants (and often represented in both fiction and non-fiction accounts undergoing the process of acculturation and assimilation in New York) is that the experience and embracing of new world values always carries with it the potential for the weakening or dissolution of old world values. Many found themselves negotiating the gap between

maintenance of the connection to their Italian past and a severance from it. Oddly, while this paradox is occasionally represented in both D'Angelo's narrative (and this is virtually true of many immigrant narratives) and Ventura's novella, it is not a central theme in *Peppino* or *Son of Italy*. D'Angelo's narrative, in particular, functions as an affirmation and a representative connection to a universal literary world that has the potential to transcend the infernal, material conditions that he experiences. Of course, D'Angelo (and Ventura to a degree) never lets the reader forget that his abysmal, concrete, material status radically challenges his belief in the transcendent power of literature and his own creative connection to such an abstraction.

Italian writers, such as Ventura and D'Angelo were creating and dramatically representing Italian American perspectives in the discourses embedded with their fictional spaces, by adding new strata to the literal and literary palimpsest that was New York City. The New York that the waves of Italians entered and that Italian American writers imaginatively rendered in their narrative spaces was already a rich and complex cultural and historical palimpsest created, deconstructed, and recreated by centuries of history that formed layers consisting of ongoing rearrangement of diverse urban spaces. And during the Italian immigrations to New York, other major factors were operative as they settled and lived in the unique American urban milieu. Mario Maffi points out in his article "A Geography of Cultures" that immigrants in New York "came into friction, clashed, influenced each other in a never ending dialectic of forces" under a range of economic and cultural pressures such as "dictates of real estate, industrial developments, labor market needs, immigrant waves, social differentiations" (2). Overall, they were challenging American discursive and literary boundaries and their narratives function in

the founding and articulation of uniquely American Italian cultural and literary spaces. Along with a range of Italian language theater productions, Italian language fiction set in New York, religious *feste*, and Italian language newspapers, early Italian American New York writers in English such as Ventura and D'Angelo created a unique discursive space within New York and American letters. These cultural spaces, along with the literal emerging dynamic spaces of Italian neighborhoods in New York, enabled them to find stability and continuity in what initially was a contingent, unstable borderlands existence in America. The wide range of Italians in New York who wrote in Italian (often in one of the many regional dialect forms of Italian), primarily for an audience within the Italian colony, addresses and dramatically represented the tensions and dialectic taking place every day in the lives of individual Italians in the urban contact zones. American Italians were faced also with extreme pressures, such as the perpetuation of an ethnic insularity within ethnic enclaves which were the outgrowth of a displaced *campanilismo* or the pressure of assimilation into the dominant American culture. Early writers of American Italian narrative like Ventura and D'Angelo create articulate and complex characters and plot tensions enacting a fluid cultural identity that attempts to understand or contest those destabilizing forces in their American New York experience that threaten them with the possibility of being rendered socially impotent and culturally inarticulate in the American cityscape. Becoming the subject of their own discourse as American Italians was an essential first step in the Italian American *percorso*.

Chapter Two: *Fare L’America*: Making America in Manhattan in Garibaldi Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* and Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*

“I am going to make America, and make it quick”—Garibaldi Lapolla, *The Grand Gennaro*

“He felt a searing bitterness and a fathomless consternation at the queer consciousness that inflicted the ever –mounting weight of structures that he had to! had to! raise above his shoulders--Pietro DiDonato, *Christ in Concrete*

“And if I make it there, I’ll make it anywhere / It’s up to you. New York New York”——Frank Sinatra, “Theme from New York, New York”

In the foreword to a 1938 study of Italian American history in New York City titled *The Italians of New York*, East Harlem born Edward Corsi, the Commissioner of Immigration at Ellis Island under President Herbert Hoover, lauds the contribution of Italians who “made America”-- specifically the material development of New York City, and notes “wherever the eye may turn it will alight upon some railroad, subway or elevated line, which [Italian American] hands have built; upon some bridge for which they carried the beams or laid the foundations; upon some highway... upon some park, skyscraper and so on endlessly” (xii). Inscribed in many of New York City’s spaces and history are not only narratives depicting the material constructions of the city, but Italian American narratives that represent the imaginary construction of New York spaces in fictional re-creations of trans-cultural urban spaces, fluid neighborhood boundaries and social interstices. While the historic material constructions of New York City and its discrete ethnic neighborhoods like the East Harlem or the Mulberry Street Little Italy enclave are important features of both the story of America and great American cities like New York, I believe it is also important to include the imaginative constructions of Italian Americans in New York determined to *fare l’america* (to make America). In this chapter I will explore the American Italian *percorso* (route) enacted in two fictional

accounts of first-generation Italian immigrants' lives set in the Italian neighborhoods of Manhattan. I will examine Garibaldi Lapolla's 1935 novel *The Grand Gennaro*, set in East Harlem, the site of one the largest Italian American enclaves in New York City in the early 20th century, and Pietro Di Donato's 1939 proletarian masterwork *Christ in Concrete*, set in a range of public and private spaces in Manhattan. Lapolla focuses on the streets, stoops, shops, religious processions, bars and businesses of the specific Italian urban enclave East Harlem, while Di Donato focuses on a small group of construction workers in an Italian community of lower Manhattan. The imaginary New York urban spaces portrayed in *The Grand Gennaro* and *Christ in Concrete* enable constructions of ethnicity by representing American *Italianita* operating dynamically in a *percorso* of inter-ethnic, inter-racial, inter-class interaction between Italian Americans and other New York dwellers. Both novels reflect the reality of ethnic urban identity formation as a fluid space of constant self-fashioning and social and cultural negotiation that function as important elements in understanding the *percorso* of American *Italianita*. Lapolla and Di Donato's novels record an emerging, adaptive, American Italian consciousness responding to unsettling contemporary urban realities through the development of Italian American characters in the narrative spaces of an imaginary New York—vividly demonstrating the reciprocal influences of urban spaces, cultural pressures and ethnic identity formation. Both novels dramatically represent the desire to “make America” as highly problematic by portraying critical transitional moments in American *Italianita*, as residents of Italian ethnic areas continue their struggle to reformulate old world rural Italian values in the new American urban spaces.

While my first chapter emphasized the narrative positioning of writers in their initial translocation of Italian lives in the new world, this second chapter offers an analysis of fictional accounts of individuals preserving a displaced *campanilismo* and *italianita* through a process of their reinterpretation as American *Italianita*. Lapolla and Di Donato dramatically create unique Italian American narrative spaces that portray trans-culturation in the dense nexus of street-level urban contact zones. Here the cultural practices of the dominant American culture shape and influence marginalized Italian Americans, while Italian Americans influence liminal urban social spaces within the dominant culture. In their representation of imaginary Italian communities both writers depict public spaces of potential ethnic dissolution or dehumanization and highly problematic private spaces where Italians struggle to maintain ethnic cohesion. Both novels represent Italian Americans, in short, who endeavor to “make America” without radically unmaking their own ethnic identities.

Fare L’America: Garibaldi Lapolla’s The Grand Gennaro

“I am going to make America, and make it quick!” (5). This is the declaration of Gennaro Accuci, a newly arrived Italian immigrant and the central character in Garibaldi Lapolla’s 1935 novel *The Grand Gennaro* set in East Harlem in New York City. Lapolla offers the story of the problematic transformation of a Southern Italian peasant immigrant from Calabria into the Rag King of East Harlem—a unique Italian American determined to carve out a space for himself in America at any cost to himself, his family and his *paesans*. But the narrative also functions as an in-depth dramatic analysis of the complex forces that confront immigrants, particularly Southern Italian immigrants in late nineteenth and early twentieth century New York, facing the pressures of acculturation,

assimilation, and the initial profound sense of dislocation as their lives are transplanted from the open spaces of rural Italian villages to dense urban spaces. The central character in the novel is profoundly obsessed with the notion of “*fare L’America*.” Lapolla, however, portrays Gennaro’s desire to “make America” as a problematic re-constitution of old world Italian *mezzogiorno* values onto a new hybridized Italian American site, as he attempts to “make America” without losing his own ethnic identity in East Harlem. Lapolla recreates New York spaces in *The Grand Gennaro* that not only reflect the density and complex nexus of Italian American cultural life and history, but function as sites of problematic spatial and social ethnic transitions and transformations in the on-going re-configuration of *campanilismo* among Italian Americans. He creates a complex textual mental architecture in Gennaro that corresponds with the unstable and contingent urban existence of many Italian Americans in early twentieth century New York. He dramatizes, in his depiction of all the intense proximities, juxtapositions, and densities of Italians of diverse origins the reciprocal influences of urban space and ethnic identity in the *percorso* of American *italianita*.

The imaginative rendering of the physicality of New York City in *The Grand Gennaro* and its attendant networks of classifications and descriptions of objects, people, and places offers a vivid picture of the developing historically important Italian enclave of East Harlem. *Bella Harlem, cara Harlem, nostra Harlem* (beautiful Harlem, dear Harlem, our Harlem) –these are the endearments used by a large population of New York Italian Americans to describe what became known as Italian East Harlem—the setting of the novel and the site of one of the largest concentrations of Italians in New York and the United States. Historian Gerald Meyers calls East Harlem “the most important single site

for an understanding and an appreciation of the Italian American experience” (57).

Historians Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace describe East Harlem as the “pre-eminent Italian enclave in Manhattan” (1123).⁸ They go on to cite the large numbers of resident Italian immigrants, the community’s devotion to the *Madonna del Carmine* (Madonna of Mount Carmel), the eventual construction of the *Congregazione del Monte Carmelo della 115 ma strada* (Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church of 115th Street), and the growing attraction in the twentieth century to the annual festa as a major way in which East Harlem put a major “cultural stamp on a piece of the alien New York world” (1123).

They also stress the insularity of this enclave by noting that residents tended to “resist Americanization” by sticking “close to the cultural center of the colony” (1123). When they traveled to other parts of New York they would say “I have been to America today” (1123-1124). Starting in the late 1870’s, immigrants were drawn from the overcrowded lower Manhattan Mulberry Bend enclave and from regions of Southern Italy to Harlem to build housing and the subway and elevated train networks. Burrows and Wallace point out that as the congested concentrations of Italians in lower Manhattan disperse into “satellite settlements” the “pre-eminent offshoot was up in East Harlem” (1123). As Italians from other sections of Manhattan flood East Harlem and the city experiences the massive influx of Italian immigrants during the late nineteenth and early twentieth

8. See Edwin Burrows and Mike Wallace *Gotham*, pp. 1122-1126. Burrows and Wallace trace the history of New York City from its native American origins to 1898. But in a section titled “Manhattan Colonia” they do a concise job of tracing the history of Italians to New York. The major portion of this section focuses on East Harlem and the history of the relationship between the Irish American Catholic hierarchy and Italian Catholics. For the premier study of Italian East Harlem and its cultural and religious traditions and history is in both the 19th and 20th centuries see Robert Orsi’s *The Madonna of 115th Street* (1985) and his 1992 article in the journal *American Quarterly*, “The Religious Boundaries of an In-between People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990”, pp. 313-47. For a good general overview of the history and culture of Italian East Harlem see Gerald Meyer “Italian Harlem: Portrait of a Community”, 57-67 and Robert Orsi, *The Madonna of 115th Street*, 14-49.

century, East Harlem became a highly congested and potentially dangerous place to live. In a July 4, 1880 article in *The New York Times* titled “The Terrible Death Rate; Some Causes of Mortality in Summer,” the anonymous reporter notes that East Harlem is a neighborhood that “has some of the worst tenements in the city” (12). The article mentions that “besides being overcrowded with Italian rag pickers [Gennaro’s initial job] and scavengers, the miserable populations here are exposed to the noxious exhalations of the Harlem Flats [the gas-works]” (12). An 1893 *New York Times* article titled “The Mafia’s Code in New York” which focuses on mob activity in East Harlem, warns readers about the “disgraceful herding of low Italians in tenement houses” and points out that “the so-called Italian colonies are easily known by their squalor, overcrowding and odors,” asserting that the “shiftlessness and degradation of Little Italy uptown [East Harlem] is a counterpart to the slums of Palermo or any Calabrian town” (9).

Despite the problems of urban living for the hordes of Southern Italians in New York, the East Harlem depicted in *The Grand Gennaro* is a mixture of Southern Italian culture and American urban space that signals a significant moment in the history and communal identity of American *Italianita* in New York City. William Boelhower points out that in Italian urban ethnic enclaves “*tutto parla* (everything speaks); the streets, the signs, the buildings, the market stands, the statues of the saints, the signs in the shop windows, people’s dress, the color of their eyes, and all the rest that comes with a teeming immigrant colony” (vii). To use Boelhower’s language, Lapolla constructs the narrative of Gennaro’s life in East Harlem partly out of his first-hand knowledge of the city of fact where “everything speaks.” Lapolla’s construction of the neighborhoods and characters, the material places of stone, steel, brick, and the sensory overloads and

impressions of inner city life offers a multiform representation of the complexity of Italian American cultural life and history.

Lapolla immigrated to East Harlem with his family in 1890, when he was two years old, from the southern Italian town of Rapolla. He was raised on the streets of East Harlem, educated in the New York City public school system and Columbia University, and spent his career as an English teacher and administrator in the New York City public school system (at De Witt Clinton, Thomas Jefferson and Washington Irving High Schools, along with Hunter College). Lapolla wrote three novels set in East Harlem: *Fire in the Flesh* (1931); *Miss Rollins in Love* (1932) and *The Grand Gennaro* (1935). All three of Lapolla's Italian East Harlem narratives have long been out of print since their original publication in the 20's and 30's (except for a brief resurgence of two of them in the 70's reprints by the Arno Press). It is easier to find multiple copies of Lapolla's *The Mushroom Cookbook* or his recipe for eggplant *parmaggiano* in one of his cookbooks than his fiction about the East Harlem *paesanos*, important imaginative records of Italian East Harlem life in the early twentieth century.

Overall, *The Grand Gennaro* focuses on a wide range of cultural problems concerning intra-ethnic interaction and conflict that reflect the complex, daily realities of Italians. Although the novel is set in the decades before the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, Lapolla wrote his novel during the 1930's when the ongoing effects of the Great Depression, the beginning of suburban flight of many Italians, and the massive influx of Puerto Ricans increased tensions in the Italian American community, challenging and threatening the insularity of long time residents of

East Harlem.⁹ One of the area's premier politicians, Congressman Vito Marc Antonio, was known pejoratively as the "honorable *fritto misto*" (mixed fry). But this image of a heterogeneous populace mixed together in the neighborhoods, streets, and tenements of East Harlem was appropriate—it was a combination of Italian, Latino, East European Jewish, German, Irish, and, according to East Harlem educator Leonard Covello, approximately 50 other ethnic groups.¹⁰ Historian Robert Orsi notes that there was never a time in the history of Italian East Harlem when Italians did not inter-mingle, interact and often enter into conflicts with other ethnic and racial groups. In the early 20th century, however, Italians dominated this area of Manhattan with its contested and fluid boundaries that ranged between 96th and 125th Street from Lexington Avenue to the East River.

Lapolla's novel offers an in-depth, focused imaginary re-construction of a historically sedimented ethnic urban space that emphasizes and navigates the currents of contact and interchange in East Harlem. The re-configured *campanilismo* depicted in *The Grand Gennaro* stresses a type of regionalism of specific neighborhoods and streets that functions as a way of creating memory and identity, despite highly porous boundaries and

⁹ See Orsi *The Madonna of 115th Street*, pp.42-43 for a description of the effects of the Depression on East Harlem and "The Religious Boundaries of an In-between People: Street Feste and the Problem of the Dark-Skinned Other in Italian Harlem, 1920-1990". *American Quarterly* 44 (1992): 313-47 for a detailed analysis of the inter-ethnic tensions among East Harlem Italians and Puerto Ricans in the Twentieth century.

¹⁰ See Leonard Covello and Guido D'Agostino *The Heart is the Teacher*. Covello was a resident of East Harlem and an educator and administrator in the New York Public School system who attended Columbia University with Lapolla. In his autobiography written with Italian American novelist Guido D' Agostino, Covello describes East Harlem as an urban space "always in transition, always on the move" and "one of the most heterogeneous and congested communities in the United States, with poverty and unemployment as its main characteristics and its atmosphere one of tension and struggle" (179-80). For other non-fiction works on life in East Harlem in the early twentieth century, see Anna Ruddy, *The Heart of the Stranger: A Story of Little Italy* (1908) and Edward Corsi, *In the Shadow of Liberty* (1935). "Miss Reddle," a fictional Protestant missionary who appears in *The Grand Gennaro* is based on Anna Ruddy.

contested urban spaces. When Lapolla wrote *The Grand Gennaro*, the Little Italy in Harlem had a population of 89,000 Americans of Italian descent, all from a diverse mix of Italian regions including Sicily, Bari, the Campagna, Piacenza, Avellino, Basilicata, northern Italy and Calabria.¹¹ Historically, Italians have always had a stronger sense of regional loyalty or *campanilismo* than a national identity or an awareness of an “imaginary community” called the Italian nation, because nationhood came relatively late to Italy. The residents of East Harlem, like most Italians, kept those deep regional loyalties and interconnectedness intact, but because of the necessary and inevitable interaction with Italian of other regions, *campanilismo* was re-configured from Italian regional loyalty to the neighborhoods of urban areas. This re-configured *campanilismo* was an odd mix of narrow parochialism, intra-regional, inter-ethnic urban experience and wider ranging urban and global awareness as the century advanced. Loyalties based on life within earshot of the local bell tower (the *campanile*) are replaced by loyalties based on life within the sound of the elevated trains, East River tugs, or the cacophony of street sounds.

The demographic patterns of immigrant influx into New York urban spaces are imaginatively represented by Lapolla early in the novel as locations of transitions and transformations. Lapolla offers street level perspectives of East Harlem that resonate through the entire novel and that vividly portray the intersections of class, New York City history, the radical disruption of Italian immigrants, and re-imagined Italian values. The urban enclave that Gennaro enters in late nineteenth century New York as part of what

¹¹ For the specific street locations of the regional settlements in East Harlem see Meyer “Italian Harlem: Portrait of a Community.”

Lapolla describes as the “stream of [Italian] immigrants” that begin “to pour into New York City” from southern Italy, who “braved the terrors of slow weather-beaten steamers, and once landed in New York, pooled into scattered communities throughout Manhattan,” is an already changing East Harlem (3-4). As one newly arrived Italian immigrant thinks, “America, the far-off land of wonder and glitter and happy ways, was a place of ill-smelling streets, whirring noises” (159). The tenements formerly occupied by Irish and German immigrants are replaced by southern Italians--“the peasants who had left their impoverished farms in Calabria or Sicily, in the Apulia, or in Basilicata” (4).

Italian East Harlem in *The Grand Gennaro* is a place that offers in its neighborhoods, homes, cafes, household shrines to saints, marketplaces, cultural values, and its religious festivals a series of interstitial spaces that enable the uprooted old world immigrants to find stability in the midst of the experience of radical dislocation in the highly contested and threatening cultural spaces of New York City. The imaginary East Harlem that Gennaro initially settles in is a place of congested impoverished urban spaces occupied by “the Calabresi already settled in Harlem” (4). East Harlem resident and Italian immigrant Leonard Covello, in his autobiography *The Heart is the Teacher*, describes his first impressions of East Harlem after he emigrates from Italy in 1896 (three years after Gennaro’s arrival) as a place where “it seemed that humanity from all corners of the world had congregated in this section of New York known as East Harlem” (21). Covello offers street level sensory impressions of his first encounter:

The cobbled streets. The endless, monotonous rows of tenement buildings that shut out the sky. The traffic of wagons and carts and carriages and the clopping of horses’ hoofs which struck sparks in

the night. The smell of the river at ebb tide. The moaning of fog horns. The clanging of bells and the screeching of sirens as a fire broke out somewhere in the neighborhood. Dank hallways. (21)

Thomas Ferraro, in *Feeling Italian*, echoes Corsi's narrative as he describes this experience of initial contact by Southern Italian immigrants in New York City: "The principal response of each and every one must have been mind-bending, body-wracking shock, of being utterly overwhelmed not only by the arduousness of the journey and the rough uncertainties ahead, but also by changes of movement and sound, dimensions of time and space that did not, by any known measure, compute" (32). Covello's description of East Harlem underscores this type of sensory overload that many Italians experienced immigrating from sparsely populated rural areas to alien, overcrowded and overwhelming urban spaces.

The impoverished spaces that Gennaro and his fellow Calabresi occupy are described in realistic, non-picturesque terms that Jacob Riis might use: "They lived like gypsies—in the basements of tenement houses disgracefully overcrowded... in shacks in the backyards, some in improvised shanties knocked together out of old lumber and tar paper and erected against the walls of houses adjacent to empty lots" (7). Orsi observes that the "housing stock of Italian Harlem was deteriorating from the moment it was built" (29). Lapolla describes the cacophony and stultifying living conditions of the Italians by noting that "Where one family had lived, now five or six struggled for a bit of space for a bed and a chance at the only sink or water closet" and "in the streets swarmed tribes of children, bare-footed and scantily clad, forever unwashed but always screeching with glee" (4). The streets of East Harlem, however, are "filled with crowds" where "All the

stores were opened, the bakeries filled with their multitudinous loaves, the groceries with their strings of garlic and salami hanging outside and their windows crowded with boxes of macaroni of various shapes and colors” (41). It is an American Italian space where “the cafes were doing a thriving business” and “men sat out on the sidewalks playing cards, and white aproned owners stood up at their freezers crying out in gay sing-song, “Have your gelati , have your ices. . .” with “the elevated locomotives rumbling by, sparks flying from their stacks” (41). Despite the crowds and poverty, East Harlem is a thriving, colorful Italian enclave in which Gennaro dramatically makes his mark.

The social relations created and necessitated by daily interactions among a range of regionally diverse Italians living in concentrated spaces underscores both the history of East Harlem and Lapolla’s story of Gennaro Accuci. Gennaro is described for the first time in the novel as an immigrant who “found a place in this [East Harlem] confusion, who arrives determined to “make America” (achieve material success) after an early life history of deprivation in Italy (4). In this vibrant space and through the urban networking system of inter- *paesani* patronage, Gennaro is hired by a childhood friend Rocco Pagliamini who has a “flourishing junk business” in Harlem. The concentration of Italians in East Harlem facilitates Gennaro’s entry into the labor market with co-ethnic Rocco. But Gennaro quickly learns that it is “slow work” making it in America as an employee in Rocco’s rag business and soon learns to surreptitiously accumulate his own collection of rags and scrap from Rocco’s pile to sell on the side to Jewish dealers in lower Manhattan. The inevitable personal clash between Rocco and Gennaro becomes one of the central problems for Gennaro. Rocco discovers Gennaro’s side business and confronts him by calling him “*porcu diavolu*” (devilish pig). Gennaro responds with the

force, violent appropriation, and bravado that becomes the source of his ultimate undoing in the community. Gennaro beats Rocco unconscious and then forces him to sign over half of the rag business. Rocco castigates Gennaro by telling him “Well, you have made America and made it quick. You were born an American” (12). Rocco’s description of Gennaro is pejorative, since many Italians referred to Americans as *merdicane*-- street slang for the Italian *merde di cane* (dog shit). The term describes those who acculturate too willingly into the American dominant culture by rejecting or transgressing *la via vecchia* (the old way)—traditional Southern Italian values such as *rispetto* (respect), *lealta* (loyalty) and *onore* (honor). This is both Rocco’s way of insulting Gennaro and a narrative signal that Gennaro’s relationship with Rocco (and the rest of the Italian community) has been disrupted.

Gennaro’s immersion in the city’s life after an early life of rural poverty, his occasional overt resistance to Americanization, and his reformulation of himself as an American version of a *galantuomini* (literally gallant men, gentlemen or Italian landed gentry) become sinister. Gennaro intends to re-fashion himself in American spaces strictly on his own terms, subverting the transposed sub-national identities that underscore the consciousness of many newly arrived Italian immigrants. In Italy (specifically the region of Calabria), Gennaro, like every Calabrian, existed in an agricultural region that functioned within a strict socio-economic class system ranging from the large state owners (*galantuomini*), to the oppressive estate manager/ lease holders (*gabellotti*), to the peasant farm workers and small land owners (*contadini*—Gennaro’s class), to the lowest ranked individual, the landless agricultural day laborers (*bracciante*). Gennaro was of the *contadini* class in Calabria. Making it in American

urban spaces for Gennaro “means that a nobody, a mere clodhopper, a good-for-nothing on the other side had contrived by hook or crook in this new, strange country, with its queer ways and its lack of distinctions, to amass enough money to strut about and proclaim himself the equal of those who had been his superiors in the old country” (4-5). Gennaro’s version of “making America” in East Harlem functions as an ambivalent self-created performance that masks or openly subverts the hierarchical structures that once stultified Gennaro (and millions of other *contadini*) in Italy. He arrives in New York with the strong, bitter memory of his class stigmatization as a poor farmer in Calabria. Gennaro emigrates from one of the regions of Southern Italy that Carlo Levi describes as “that land without comfort or solace, where the peasant lives out his motionless civilization on barren ground in remote poverty and in the presence of death” (3).¹² Nevertheless, Gennaro openly displays his Calabrese *terrone* (peasant) origins in the earrings he wears and in his initial associations with paesanos from his region. But he insists on re-fashioning himself as an individual who has moved beyond Italian social strictures in a new “American” manner of social performance. Gennaro’s self-fashioning is accomplished with *braggadocio* and he is “not the type to soft pedal the expression” (5). This attitude immediately alienates him from members of the Italian enclave because his proclamation about making America is emphasized “with an air of rough boasting” and the full knowledge that “his spectators would be inclined to despise him (5).

A major element of Gennaro’s *braggadocio* in East Harlem spaces is informed by the fact that rejects nostalgic re-constructions of his former life in Italian spaces. He openly

¹² See Carlo Levi, *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (1947). Levi, a Jewish doctor and painter was exiled for his opposition to Mussolini in 1935 to the province of Basilicata, just north of Gennaro’s region of Calabria.

laments the impotence of his Italian *contadino* past and the traumatic history of deprivations and degradations in his daily existence in *la miseria del mezzogiorno*. In the village of Capomonte in the Calabria region of Italy the thirty two year old Gennaro Accuci was an illiterate small land owner “over burdened with mortgages and taxes” who despised the notion of having to acquiesce to the demands and oppressive subjugation by the *galantuomini* and *gabellotti* --exploitive estate managers (5). Gennaro’s American experience alters his self-perception as he discovers the potential in the American power structures of Little Italy for a “new strength that [can] cut down the halters that bound him to the life of a peasant slave” in Italy (24). It becomes, however, highly problematic for him to escape being categorized as a *contadino* even in Harlem where Italian social consciousness is still deeply entrenched and Gennaro’s very actions, dress and attitudes reinforce his *contadino* past.

Throughout the novel Gennaro is always conscious of the economic, cultural and social distance he has traversed between the social space he left behind in Italy and the re-defined self that he creates in East Harlem as he “makes America.” Early in the novel, Gennaro seduces and then rapes his landlady Nuora and considers his sexual dominance of her a “conquest” (23). After this first encounter, in which Gennaro “had his way with her,” the narrator describes Gennaro’s stroking Nuora’s hair with “something brutally conquering in the gesture that seemed to justify the preceding violence” (23). Gennaro considers his sexual aggression, which follows his brutal appropriation of Rocco’s rag trade as reward for “making America.” He says, “They’ll take their hats off to me yet . . . I’ll be boss here . . . peasant once, but no more . . . I know now . . . take what you want when you want it. That’s the trick!” (22). Making America for Gennaro involves re-

making himself by mimicking the type of imperialist aggression that has its roots deep both in the colonial activities of the Old World and the history of America. Gennaro brings to his American experience a range of behaviors and modes of thinking deeply rooted in both traumatic and positive memories of life in Italy. These function as filters through which he experiences and views his life in the new world and the psychic foundations on which he build his life in East Harlem.

Gennaro's new world proto-imperialistic mode of making America also functions as a type of ambivalent palimpsest. He covers his Italian past with a new American narrative as the self-described "rag-men's king" of East Harlem, and transforms himself within the enclave from Italian greenhorn *contadino* into Italian American *prominente*. This evolution is marked by ambivalence because he never seems to be able to escape Italian old world values and social categories. Nevertheless, Gennaro wants to be known as a New World *galantuomini* (the landed gentry in Italy)—a social place denied to him there, but available in Little Italy. Gennaro, like many Italian immigrants, operates with a kind of double-vision. Gennaro's main focus is on *fare l'America*, but as the novel unfolds and he achieves a degree of success in Little Italy, he seems increasingly haunted and burdened with the memories of his past life. Gennaro, however, never lets his past limit his present designs to carve out a place for himself by any means necessary in New York. Within the highly porous boundaries of heterogenous East Harlem, Gennaro constantly redefines himself in the Italian enclave—on the streets, in cultural rituals, in his growing rag business, and particularly in the tenement building he buys and lives in.

Overall, Gennaro resists the *cultura negata* (denied or negated culture) that he believes threatens to stifle the social mobility of many Italians in America.¹³ He works hard at resisting the notion of *destino* (fate or destiny). He overcomes the deeply rooted sense of fatalism common to the culture of poverty in the *mezzogiorno* in American spaces by becoming *padrone* (boss). He postures himself as an *uomo di rispetto* (man of respect). His actions early in the novel in which he violently forces Rocco out of the rag business and becomes a sexual predator with his landlady earn him the community epithet of *vergogna* (a shame) and by the novel's end, his early actions are the reason for his untimely death. Gennaro's life is a *percorso*; he is on a road that inevitably leads to his destruction. No matter how hard he tries to make America he cannot unmake his *contadino* past, the power of *vendetta*, and the central importance of the structure of the family in the Italian enclave.

Gennaro's American experience is one of continuous change and movement and psychic dissonance in the social and cultural spaces of the Italian community of East Harlem and by extension in America. Gennaro experiences internal division whenever he re-constructs his Italian life in his memory. Bartolomeo, the Northern Italian husband of Nuora, the landlady of the boarding house where Gennaro resides when he first enters New York, offers an antithetical perspective from Gennaro on the comparison between life in Italy and America. Bartolomeo plans to return to Northern Italy with his wife because of his bitterness towards his American experience. He emphatically states to

¹³ *Cultura negata* (negated or denied culture) is a term articulated by Antonio Gramsci to explain the Southern Italian subaltern peasant (*contadino*) culture. Gennaro always seems to have a bitter awareness of this notion in his consciousness and memory, but actively tries to resist it in his American experience. See D'Acerno, "Cultural Lexicon" in *The Italian American Heritage*, pp. 720-721 for a detailed description of *cultura negata* and a brief summary of Gramsci's views on the subject that underscores the Southern Italian *contadino* culture.

Gennaro, "I hate this country" (37). In a speech that directly critiques Gennaro and the "America" that Gennaro is intent on "making," Bartolomeo states:

It turns us all into different sorts of what we are. The clodhopper apes the man of education and good family; the man of good family and education becomes timid, or he's too well brought up to break the law and he loses out. The last are first and the first are last and the whole world seems upside down and crazy. I'm going back to where everyone knows his place and things are orderly and decent. (37)

Gennaro responds to this speech that valorizes the oppressive Italian class structures which he endured in Italy by literally enacting the dynamics of Italian space by clearing "a space for himself" and dramatizing his life in Italy by "bowing low in servile pantomime, looking appropriately abashed, scraping his feet, humbly rubbing his hands together" pounding his fist on his chest" and asserting "Bah, that's ended here" (38).

Gennaro states that in Italy he was "a nobody, dirt off the sidewalks, a *caffone*" but in America "only the strong man is bound to win" (38). Gennaro responds to Bartolomeo by asserting:

Here I am Gennaro Accuci and proud of it. I bow to no one, and though I wear earrings in my ears there are those that know they cannot pull my nose and they dare not tell me to get out of their way. Go back [to Italy] all of you, where they know you are ninnies and fools and the stuff of dunghills. Grovel at the feet of your betters . . . What I have seized and made my own [in

America] I hate to give it up. (39)

Gennaro's response to his northern Italian landlord and his bitterness at his subjugation in southern Italy reflects the experiences that were a central element in the history of southern Italian immigrants to America. Historian Pasquale Verdicchio notes that most southern Italian immigrants "left Italy due to an incompatibility with a nation that was not of their making" (100).¹⁴ Southern Italians were considered to be subalterns who differed "in racial origins" from the rest of Italy and who were "unforgivably distant and dissonant in customs and culture" from the hegemonic North since the Risorgimento (100). Verdicchio points out that the millions of Southern Italians who immigrated to the United States "are among those groups that straddle the borders of nationalism, ethnicity, and race in a continuous identity flux" (98). As I note earlier in this chapter and in my introduction, it is *campanilismo*, regional loyalty and territorial identity rather than Italian nationalist sentiment that was a central element of individual Italian identity, particularly for the millions of immigrants who arrived in America from the *mezzogiorno* regions of Italy (like Gennaro). Southern Italians like Gennaro were considered (to use Verdicchio's term) "dissonant subjects" in the imagined Italian nation and in general many were not concerned or even aware of how they fit into the imaginary community called Italy or demonstrated the attributes of *Italianita* (100).¹⁵

¹⁴. See Verdicchio for a detailed historical discussion of the North /South Italian relationship.

¹⁵. *Italianita* (Italian-ness) was not a pre-occupation of most lower class Southern Italians in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Their primary pre-occupation was material survival in the land of *la miseria*. Imagining Southern Italians into the unified nation of Italy has been and remains problematic in today's Italy. My term American *italianita* describes the post immigration fluid ethnic self-fashionings of Americans of Italian descent in the U.S. in the late 19th, 20th and early 21st centuries.

Gennaro's obsession with the theatrical performance of what he perceives as an Americanized *bella figura* (a good manner of public performance, to look impressive) marked by old world Italian bravado is figured by his insistence on wearing the two gold hoop earrings given to him by his father as a child in Italy. Gennaro's public persona in East Harlem is one that many in the community consider to be self aggrandizing or *divismo*, a form of public performance that undermines community cohesion as well as evidences Gennaro's entrenchment in the *mezzogiorno* values of a *terrone* (person of the earth—a peasant). But Gennaro considers his earrings both as a symbol of his resistance to total assimilation as well as an arrogant assertion of his new found success in America despite his peasant past. Early in the novel he asserts "I, I made America and I made it quick . . . and what's more without kow-towing to anybody, . . . I kept my earrings in my ears where my father pierced them and I'll keep them unless the President in Washington sends me a telegram" (5). The narrator notes "the fantastic symbolism Gennaro attached to the gold hoops dangling proudly at the side of his head" (87). Many sociologists point out that one early lesson many immigrant groups learn in America as they deal with the everyday socioeconomic and cultural realities of "making it" is the process of acculturation that often involves the unmaking of elements of their old world identity, behavior, and unique cultural customs. Gennaro refuses to unmake this visible element of his *terrone* roots, which he considers a "subtle symbol of destiny" (271). The wearing of his earrings are not merely a sideshow or even evidence of the necessary maintenance of traditions, but they function as a signal to the *paesani* and outsiders that he will defiantly make American on his own unique terms. Gennaro is constantly referred to by many other Italians with the pejorative term *cafone* or one of the *cafonacci*, a peasant

with boorish manners. Though many in the East Harlem Italian community as well as outsiders consider Gennaro's earrings as evidence he is acting like a *mezzogiorno* peasant, Gennaro displays the earrings as a form of resistance, an arrogant assertion of his *terrone* roots.

Lapolla portrays Gennaro's ability to alter American urban spaces and his own cultural space as symbolic evidence of his ability to *fare l'America*. Throughout *The Grand Gennaro*, Gennaro both transforms and defends his space in East Harlem. The narrator describes how the nexus of power, ethnic identity, and contested urban spaces are enacted in Gennaro's very public social ascension in East Harlem:

The rag business was prospering. His methods had already succeeded in gaining the bulk of the trade in Harlem. He wheedled better prices from the paper manufacturers the more he extended his hold on the rag-pickers. Money was coming in fast. He was a power in the community. They had elected him president of the society of Saint Jerome. He walked at the head of processions on feast days and paid for having the lamps of red and green and white strung across the streets and for huge detonators that climaxed the march of the bands and the society on the day of the feast of Saint Elena. Padre Anselmo consulted him and had even broached to him the problem of building a church for the Italians themselves instead of continuing hiring the basement of the church belonging to the *Inglesi*. (23)

In partnership with the local undertaker Struzzo he buys and amasses a wide range of residential properties. It is part of Gennaro's social and cultural capital that marks his rise as a *prominente* in the crowded urban village. Gennaro points out that he "owned a fistful

of dirt in Italy—Capomonte, Provinci di Calabria, Citta Comunale, Reggio—to be exact” and was “a nobody,” while in America “I own lots of houses and businesses” and “even the politicians, the priests, the police, they all know me and come to me” (137). Gennaro becomes obsessed with the desire to transform the profits from the conspicuous waste of New York into Italian American spaces. The narrator points out that Gennaro “divided his time between the creation of the Italian millinery center and the erection of the church of Saint Elena the Blessed” (225-6). He boasts to his tenant Monterano in language that emphasizes his virtual colonizing of East Harlem spaces in the three big “L’s” of colonization -- Lord, land and loot. Gennaro proclaims:

See this corner house . . . I’m buying it. See that corner over there. Struzzo and I have bought that. Guess what’s going to happen in that corner. A bank—a big bank is going to open in that corner. By Saint Jerome and the Holy calendar the Italians in this part of New York will be showing the Americans a thing or two . . . With my church up soon, a bank here . . . We’ll have a showplace And now what do you think I brought you here for? Take this corner. I’m going to break that wall open, see, and make a store out of it a wide gorgeous store. (223)

As he amasses a small fortune from his rag trade and begins to purchase property including the Parterre, Gennaro boasts as his “teeth flashed and his earrings gleamed”:

These bills . . . see I found them on the streets, rags that were once fine dresses on the backs of American ladies . . . I piled them up, I tied them up, I put them on my back. I carried them like a donkey way downtown. I sold them . . . See there they are, two thousand rags [referring to \$2,000],

each one a *scuto*. (91)

A predecessor to the “waste management’ activities of Tony Soprano in the HBO series *The Sopranos*, Gennaro turns garbage into money. He builds his material acquisitions and social power from urban settings choked and polluted by the wide ranging wastes of its material productions. He accomplishes this in a context of urban squalor punctuated by colorful ethnic particularities, the complex rhythms, energies, and the sonority of an urban city-scape.

In *The Grand Gennaro* it is in the polyvalent spatial configurations of a singular East Harlem tenement known as the Parterre where Lapolla links a wide range of old world Italian and new world American values imaginatively transformed into the site of Gennaro’s success and ultimate doom. The opening passages of the novel demonstrate Lapolla’s overall emphasis on the dynamics of spatialized ethnic identity—specifically the importance of a radical reconfiguration of Italian class structures in this singular site in East Harlem where Gennaro creates a highly personalized living space. The Parterre is described in the opening sentence of the novel as a “singularly narrow house, three stories high” built by “a solid German butcher with dubious notions of architecture” (3). The urban spaces that surround the Parterre are characterized as haunted spaces of depredation, disruption and displacement. It is a site that contains “an intricate maze of phantoms” surrounded by “dingy tenement houses, tumble-down frame houses, loft-buildings with broken window panes, long rows of shacks that house the accumulations of hundreds of [Italian] rag-pickers”(3). All of these descriptive features “combine in a dismal demonstration of poverty” (3). The nomenclature for Gennaro’s tenement “Parterre” (that is carved into the façade of the house by the former German owner)

derives from the term for the first tier of boxes in the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.¹⁶ For Gennaro, his socio-spatial living arrangements for the residents of the Parterre are central to his own emerging identity in new world New York.

The spatial configuration of the Parterre emphasizes both the stratified Italian social hierarchy and the inversion of that hierarchy in the new American urban realities of East Harlem. The Parterre is a building “in which the destinies of the Accuci, the Dauri, and the Monterano families become hopelessly entangled” (3). In this building the narrator asserts “three Italian families, all from different sections of Italy, were to meet, mingle, and separate, each bearing in charred burdens of memory, the shock of their encounter” (3). The two other families that inhabit the Parterre that eventually factor into Gennaro’s life are the families Monterano and Dauri. The living arrangements of the apartment building itself are configured according to Italian social stratifications. This space symbolizes the old world class system with the pseudo-aristocratic Monteranos on the top floor, the former *galantuomini* Dauris on the second and former *contadino* Gennaro and his family occupying the bottom floor. The narrator points out that Gennaro “despite the fanfare of his boasting about his prowess” and his material success in America “retained much of the admiration of the European peasant for the classes superior to his own” (141). Ironically, Gennaro agrees to let the Monteranos live in the Parterre, because of their Italian pseudo-aristocratic background and the hope that their presence in his building will help him maintain the façade of respectability in East Harlem. But, in spite

¹⁶ See Robert Viscusi, “Stories of Houses in Italian America” in *The Italian American Heritage*, 126-7. Viscusi argues that if there is an “Italian America,” it is primarily to be found in *la Casa italo-american--* Italian houses in America, where families enact enshrine, challenge and promote distinctive Italian American cultural values.

of these lingering psychic remnants of Italian class consciousness, Gennaro's Parterre living arrangement is actually an inversion of these individual families' Italian social status and a reflection of their new American social reality. Gennaro constantly asserts his presence in the new American spaces.

Gennaro owns the building and asserts his new *prominente* presence by barging into any of the doors unannounced and insisting on demonstrations of respect. Tomas Dauri, an Italian middle class businessman who was forced to immigrate to America after his business fails in Italy understands the living arrangements as a necessary evil of American acculturation. Dauri, referring to life in East Harlem with people like Gennaro, tells the local priest Don Anselmo that he does "not look altogether with horror at the rise of our peasantry in this country to positions of power and trust" despite the fact that it "goes against my grain to be compelled to be respectful to a flock of cafonacci, clodhoppers, and cabbage pullers with no manners" (140). Nevertheless Dauri is a pragmatist who claims that he "Sees the justice of a society that allows them the right to advance" (140). Davido Monterano, however, insists on creating a space for himself in which he can perform his notions of class and intellectual superiority in East Harlem. Monterano endlessly quotes and misquotes Dante and Petarch, and his hairstyle, his clothes, his way of walking are calculated modes of performing what he believes is his cultural superiority among the masses in Harlem.

The Monteranos are types of immigrants whose tactic for determining their identity in the new world is to create embellished narratives of their Italian past. In the midst of the hard realities of their dismal East Harlem existence, they construct imaginary narratives of an inflated social and class status in the intellectual and social spaces of their former

Italian existence. The family of six Monteranos actually emigrate to New York because Davido Monterano was court-marshaled and discharged from the Italian army for inefficiency and ineptitude in his position as an army engineer. Despite this, Davido and his wife create what the narrator terms “the fiction of their superiority among the crowds among whom they lived” which they consider the “pack of low born peasants” in East Harlem (110-11). Davido’s fiction of superiority in New York is symbolized by his constant use of decorative canes whenever he walks in the streets. Monterano believes that the cane (especially an ebony one “rich in inlays of precious gold and a ferule of gold”) evidences his own cultural significance that sets him apart from “the morass of common *contadini* and *caffoni*” in Harlem (109).

Identification with their Italian past for the Monteranos involves imagining Italy as a space of civilization and culture with a stable system of values and social structures. His wife Maria likewise believes that “She and hers were of superior origin to the peasant and mountaineer population that crowded into Harlem with every incoming steamship” (112). Davido and Maria Monterano represent immigrants who have a profound need to express an imaginary sense of self outside of the New York Italian enclave. They imagine themselves in a mythical Italian past and invent a history that stresses the importance of the centuries old oppressive strict class structures that Gennaro despises and endeavors to resist in America. Both the Monteranos and Dauris consider Gennaro’s Calabrian peasant roots and insistence on wearing gold earrings as evidence of his intrinsic inferiority. Dauri’s perception of the gold-earring-wearing Gennaro is that he’s a “true peasant” and a “thorough boor lifted to prominence by the crazy customs of America” (134). Monterano also consider Gennaro’s earrings to be symbols of his on-going lower-

class status in America. But unlike Dauri, Monterano's class consciousness and imagined aristocratic superiority results in a violent, traumatic confrontation with Gennaro late in the novel when Monterano beats Gennaro and tears his earrings out of his ears after Gennaro refuses to support an abortive business venture Monterano undertakes with a former Italian military compatriot. Monterano viciously beats Gennaro with his cane, breaks his jaw and slashes his ear where one of the earrings becomes "imbedded in a mass of spongy gore" after he says "in the old country, this is how we treat low-down curs who dare question a gentleman" (268). Monterano eventually dies as a pauper after a business venture fails and Gennaro offers a concise evaluation of the reasons why Monterano's life in America was doomed to fail: "He could never be an American. He could never make America. His life was in Italy, and to that could he go back?" (277).

The beating at the hands of Monterano has not only physical, but profound psychic implications for Gennaro who decides to take off the earrings and devote the rest of his life to the construction of a place that would signify his conquest of American space--the enclave church. In a key moment in the novel, as Gennaro evaluates his past and considers his future in a conversation with his future second wife Carmela, he describes his life in terms of relationship to New York spaces. As he decides no longer to wear the earrings, the visible symbols of familial continuity and arrogant proclamation of his *terrone* roots in his American acquisitions, the narrator notes that Gennaro "looked far out across the spaces where the old filthy tenements had been, old hovels that had made him a fortune" and realizes

Like the New York he had known on his first arrival, he, too, had changed. The old had been cut away. No matter how much he kept

improving his business, he kept reverting in his mind to the early years of his coming. It was an echo in his words that would not be muffled, a far-flung memory that lay its shadow over the present.
(276)

In this key passage near the end of the novel shortly before Gennaro pours his energies into constructing the Church, he connects himself with his own imaginary New York. He sees social, economic and cultural changes in the spaces he has engaged and transformed in East Harlem New York as emblematic of the changes within his own psyche.

But the ultimate evidence to Gennaro that he has made America is his obsession with turning the rags and scraps of American society into concrete righteousness through the funding of the construction of a cathedral in East Harlem. In the construction of the grand granite edifice of the new church, Gennaro's sense of spatialized identity reaches its apex. The money to build the church, however, is raised by the profits from the corrupted detritus of American society based on Gennaro's ruthless ambitions, violent colonizing behavior, and problematic ambivalent attitudes towards the *ordine d'famiglia* (order of the family). But the Church, as a visible, spatial symbol of Gennaro's imagined re-constituted status in America, seems to fulfill both Gennaro's growing moral and spiritual sensibilities. In Gennaro's psyche the finished church project "succeeded in re-establishing his individuality in his own sight, affirming as if in perpetual stone what he asserted to be the fundamental goodness of his aspirations" (305). Despite his sordid history in East Harlem as a domineering self-created new world *galantuomini*, the church becomes the means whereby Gennaro believes he has "squared himself with the world" (305).

In the imaginary narrative spaces of *The Grand Gennaro*, Gennaro's new world proto-imperialistic mode of making America functions as a type of ambivalent palimpsest, as he overwrites his Italian past with a new American narrative as the self-described "rag-men's king" of East Harlem and transforms himself from Italian greenhorn *contadino* into Italian American *prominente*. It is marked by ambivalence because he never escapes his Italian old world values and social constrictions. His obsession to become king of the rag trade in East Harlem by any means necessary, his sexual domination of his landlady, his amassing of a wide range of residential and commercial properties, and his pushing his way into other people's private spaces at will are efforts at effacing his *contadino* past that ultimately fails. Gennaro, however, seems forever trapped in a liminal space between the old/new world, and his presence is violently eliminated from the novel through the distinctly old world act of *vendetta* by his old *paesano* and former business partner Rocco. After achieving new world success in East Harlem as a Harlem *prominente*, amassing large numbers of properties, helping his new wife Carmela start a successful hat business, and finding a degree of personal redemption after his money builds the neighborhood cathedral, he is brutally murdered in his new rag warehouse by Rocco in retribution for Gennaro's appropriation and monopoly of the rag trade. He literally dies in a space of in-between-ness, as Rocco impales him in the neck with the spiked hook used to move the bales of rags, throwing his body in a bin of rags, and tamping down his body into a rag bale that he suspends "soaked with blood hanging against the blue sky over the East River" (364). Gennaro, literally transformed into a pile of bloody waste hangs in the spaces above East Harlem—a symbol of both the source of his new found success in *L'America a Nuova York*, old

world Calabrese *vendetta*, and the psychic borderland existence between old /new world that he never reconciles. It demonstrates his problematic American life and how he could never fully escape *la miseria del mezzogiorno*. His sudden reversal of fate in East Harlem results from Gennaro's own violent usurpation of power relations in new world Little Italy.

Even in death, however, Gennaro asserts his presence in New York urban space. Gennaro's corpse parades through the streets of East Harlem in "the most elaborate funeral in the history of Little Italy" (364). Lapolla describes the funeral parade as fit for a "president or a king" (364). The narrator says:

No mean fellow was being escorted to his narrow resting place in the distant Brooklyn hills. This was no peasant, wrapped in a cheap cloth, boxed in a pine Wood oblong, to be lowered into a hole below scraggy fig-trees on a Calabrian Slope. Bands with their bass drums hung with black crepe ribbons, musicians with black bands on their sleeves, flags at their head furled and cased in black, passing slowly between canyoned tenements with their black fire escapes crowded with onlookers and festooned in black like the stores, like the doors of the tenements themselves—such were not intended for an ordinary unforgettable figure, a man who had merely been born, and had eaten day by day, and worked in the ditches alongside railways or carried bricks in hods to wind swept rooftops, and then fallen sick and dies with no money left to bury him!" (364)

Although Gennaro maintains a type of *bella figura* with a funeral procession fit for a *prominente*, and the narration of the details of the funeral valorize him, many in the Italian community offer a final evaluation of his life that indicates he could not escape his Italian past. As East Harlem residents watch the funeral parade pass by “the church, the fine granite pile that Gennaro worked so hard to have erected” they offer commentary that suggests an ongoing judgment of Gennaro as merely a *contadino*. They say, “A backwoods country lout he was! Not even [King] Umberto himself had such a turn-out!” (364). And mocking his favorite expression, they suggest, “You know what he’d say? By Saint Jerome and the thousand saints, but I, I made America!” (364-65). The community’s final judgment, however, emphasizes Gennaro’s status in the community as *vergogna* as they note that the only thing that Gennaro’s attempts to *fare l’america* achieves is “A young wife and a murder” (365). The novel ends with Gennaro’s young wife Carmela giving Gennaro’s son Emilio the gold hoop earrings that “Gennaro prized” which Emilio accepts “for luck”(369). In the end, Gennaro’s version of making a new world America becomes his own unmaking as he becomes the object of a very old, inescapable Italian value --*vendetta*.

Inscribed in the imaginative city spaces of novels like *The Grand Gennaro* are the contradictions, tensions, ambivalence, and problematics of the Italian experience in America. *The Grand Gennaro* imaginatively records and reflects an entire community’s memory of the uncertainty and anxiety about the encounter of Italians in the new world and the emergent hybrid sense of American *Italianita* in later generations. *The Grand Gennaro* is remarkable because of its vivid representation of an Italian world that has largely disappeared in the latter part of the 20th and early 21st century. Lapolla’s narrative

re-creates the interpenetrations of dynamic daily street level urban existence and the spatio-social ethnic transitions and transformations of Italian Americans in early twentieth century New York. Most of the Italian presence in East Harlem in the late 20th century has disappeared. It exists now in historical or fictional narratives (like Lapolla's), cultural artifacts, memory, a small group of long time Italian residents, the annual re-enactment of religious rituals, and a scattering of Italian bakeries or restaurants like Rao's and Patsy's Pizza. Lapolla, in *The Grand Gennaro*, reconstructs this vital hybrid, diverse urban community and the "real" New York experience of Italian East Harlem emerges once again through this complex convergence of historical context, and literary re-constructions of street level language, sights, and sounds.

"The painful geography of New Babylon": New York in *Christ in Concrete*

In 1939, five years after Lapolla published *The Grand Gennaro*, another Italian American writer from the New York area made his mark on the literary world with a novel about Italian Americans living and working in New York City. Pietro Di Donato's first novel *Christ in Concrete* received wide ranging critical praise and cultural attention when it was published in the late 1930's, including being the 1939 Book of the Month Club choice over John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*. It offers a vibrant, complex fictional representation of urban American *Italianita* and New York spaces in the early twentieth century. Di Donato's novel records an adaptive, American Italian consciousness responding to unsettling and threatening urban realities through the development of Italian American characters in the narrative spaces of an imaginary New York. The novel represents a New York city-scape in a style and with a thematic content that portrays socio-spatial urban sites and their problematic resonance in working class

ethnic consciousness. Like Lapolla, Di Donato vividly demonstrates the reciprocal influences of urban space and ethnic identity formation in a milieu of wide ranging cultural and social pressures. Also, like Lapolla, Di Donato creates private spaces of ethnic cohesion and public spaces of potential ethnic dissolution. Both novels are Italian American cultural productions that represent the re-constitution of old world Italian values in the American urban experience of Italian immigrants, although I would assert that Di Donato offers a more pointed, focused critical interrogation of oppressive American social structures. Unlike Lapolla's Italian New York cautionary tale of one individual's highly problematic re-formulation of old world Italian values in a new American urban, ethnic enclave, Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* portrays an entire Italian proletarian family in profound crisis, threatened with destruction and disintegration through the potential catastrophic failure of crushing, hegemonic material and social structures in a largely hostile New York City. Di Donato shows Italian Americans endeavoring to make America, as they face a range of material and cultural forces that threaten to radically unmake them and also offers a representation of ethnic proletarian resistance to hegemonic social forces. Working class Italians face an ongoing threat of disintegration through the potential catastrophic failure of material and social structures in New York urban spaces.

I cannot examine Italian American Literature or New York Italian American narratives without a brief discussion of Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*. This text (along, of course, with Mario Puzo's *The Godfather*) has been unofficially canonized as one of the pre-eminent fictional representations of American *Italianita* in the 20th century by a range of Italian American scholars such as Basile Green, Fred Gardaphe and Louise

Napolitano.¹⁷ Basile Green calls *Christ in Concrete* a “significant documentation of America’s social history” and asserts that Di Donato “was the first Italian American writer to stir the American reading public to recognize fully the Italian-American experience” (151). Gardaphe terms *Christ in Concrete* “the most mythical text of Italian American literature” (68) as well as “prototypical Italian American novel: in which “the signs of *Italianita* are foregrounded . . . as in no other writing yet produced by an Italian American” (70). Warren French notes that Di Donato “somehow succeeded in transmuting the nervously energetic language of sensitive man suspended between two cultures into a literary prose unduplicated in American letters” (182). Di Donato in *Christ in Concrete* offers a narrative filled with constructions and de-constructions of a range of public New York spaces, private ethnic enclaves, and Italian American characters that resonates with visceral and discursive power. This novel deserves all the effusive praise that critics accord it and offers an important element in understanding the history of the *percorso* of American *italianita*.

Di Donato based *Christ in Concrete* on a short story published in the March 1937 issue of *Esquire* magazine. Di Donato had first hand, solid knowledge of the streets and skylines of Manhattan and the Italian working families of New York. Born in Hoboken, New Jersey, he worked as a brick-layer on New York construction sites starting in 1923 at age twelve, after his father died in a construction accident that is fictionally re-created in *Christ in Concrete*. The novel presents a fictionalized account of this early part of Di

¹⁸ *Christ in Concrete* has been extensively analyzed in a range of works by Italian American scholars. I recommend Rose Basile Green, *The Italian American Novel*, Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*, and Fred Gardaphé, *Italian Signs, American Streets: The Evolution of Italian American Narrative*. Michael Denning in *The Cultural Front* offers a fascinating reading of *Christ in Concrete* as an example of a “ghetto pastoral” along with Mike Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (1930), Daniel Fuchs’s *Summer in Williamsburg* (1934), Tillie Olsen’s *Yonnondio* (1939) and a diverse range of proletarian works written in the 1930’s.

Donato's life, telling the story of Paul, a young second generation Italian American, who, like Di Donato, is forced to leave school to do bricklaying work in Manhattan to support his family after his immigrant father Geremio dies in a building collapse. Di Donato does a powerful job in the rest of the novel imagining Paul and a small community of Italian Americans facing a wide range of oppressive social structures, specifically "Job," the Catholic Church, and State Bureaucracy, while literally raising material structures (buildings and skyscrapers) in the city skyline spaces of New York.

Di Donato represents the interpenetration of imaginary New York and Italian Americans through a highly stylized and naturalized depiction of work sites, the inner life of tenements, and Italian American interactions within a range of social and bureaucratic structures. As I noted earlier in this chapter, specific streets, landmarks, neighborhoods, and urban characteristics are realistically represented in Lapolla's imaginary East Harlem, providing identifiable sites in the "real" East Harlem to the reader. While Lapolla incorporates verifiable elements of the "real" East Harlem, Di Donato mainly constructs a visceral, impressionistic representation of imaginary New York city-scapes. Di Donato's *immaginario Nuova York* emphasizes the ferocity and physicality of construction work-days, the oppressive alienation, exploitation and dislocation of institutions and bureaucracies for the working poor, the dense congestion and diversity of tenement life and the sensual vitality and earthiness of urban Italians.

Di Donato's creative expressions of New York urban spaces in *Christ in Concrete* pulse with all the energy, wonder, danger and diversity of "real" city life for Italian Americans. The New York of the novel is a world of tenements, elevated trains, skyscrapers, waterfronts, uptown, and downtown "Big steel," faceless, heartless

bureaucrats, exploitive bosses, apathetic clergy, building booms, and stock market collapses. All of these features add up to what the narrator calls “the painful geometry of New Babylon” (216). New York moves in a continual and dynamic state of formation and construction, a process that Di Donato links with the identity and culture of its Italian proletarian inhabitants. While the Manhattan settings are understood by inference or generic designation as the uptown, mid-town, downtown or the congested Lower East Side worlds of Manhattan, Di Donato’s depiction of specific sites in New York where the bricklayers work and the Italian families live are not always readily identifiable with direct textual references to specific historical urban sites. He makes only one specific urban reference to the Mulberry Street Little Italy enclave in Lower Manhattan. Early in the novel the Italian laborers, day-dreaming about purchasing food for the Good Friday feast, hear Paul’s father Geremio exclaim that before going home to their families “we must stop at Mulberry Street to buy their biggest eels and the other finger-licking stuff” (12). Although Di Donato describes the outer world of urban work sites, he also portrays the inner lives and psychic traumas and challenges of the Italian American characters who face “the mad day’s brutal conflict” with “the cold, ghastly beast, the Job” (6). Di Donato’s prose emphasizes the exhaustion, the tedium, and the psycho-social ramifications of blue collar life in urban spaces, portraying the psychological, emotional, spiritual, social and political responses to the challenges of working life and the hierarchical power structures that oppress the ethnic proletariat.

Di Donato describes the power of New York spaces and their impact on Italian Americans in passages that cover the range of bewildering emotional, physical, and mental tensions and energies of dangerous construction work. The Italians work in New

York sites where Di Donato imagines threatening urban spaces like “Big Steel . . . downtown” that “straddled the city block” and “its metal skeleton shot up fifty floors to the sky” (176). Di Donato describes the cacophony of sounds and dissonant energies of “the painful geometry of New Babylon” in wide ranging narrative descriptions of skyscraper construction sites and city street life that resonate in Italian American consciousness. Di Donato records the overwhelming sensory overloads, textures, pressures, ferocity and alienation of urban work sites in a city where “within minutes reach out in the street world passed thousands who never set foot on building Job who never touched a brick nor smelled mortar who never thought of Job and her men” (180-81).

Di Donato presents New York construction sites as unstable, threatening, dangerous, and potentially destructive to the Italian workers, and as places where “America beautiful will eat you and spit you into the earth’s hole”(3). In the dominant American culture the skyscraper had come to symbolize what architect Harvey Wiley Corbett called in 1932 “America’s outstanding contribution to the architecture of the world” and external evidence of “industrial civilization evolving in a new land” (46).¹⁸ In Di Donato’s world, skyscraper sites are where “blood and stone would go on creating world” (143). Di Donato’s frenzied, staccato narrative techniques register the characters’

¹⁸ Harvey Wiley Corbett was one of the premier architects in New York in the early twentieth century. Corbett’s short essay “America Builds Skyward” is included in an anthology *America as Americans See It* (1932) alongside works by writers such as Clarence Darrow, James Weldon Johnson, Mark Van Doren, W. E. B. Dubois, Sherwood Anderson, Malcolm Cowley, Edward Steichen, Upton Sinclair and others. I include Corbett’s brief commentary on skyscrapers to give a brief abstract perspective on skyscrapers from one of the creators, contemporaneous to Di Donato’s first hand concrete experience as a bricklayer on many New York skyscrapers, several of which are represented in the novel. Hundreds of thousands of Italian laborers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries worked on skyscrapers, as well as subways, tunnels, streets sewer systems and bridges, many with specialized skills such as masonry tile setting, and the bricklaying vividly portrayed in *Christ in Concrete*.

responses to the complexities, tensions, and discontinuities of New York urban ethnic working life experience in the early twentieth century. For example, on one construction site “racing up floor cubed on floor into the uncertain April sky, leaning toward sight a many-windowed constrained solid of sharp sheer expanding angles, towered a building” in which workers labor in “an inferno of sense-pounding cacophony” (45-6). Di Donato describes the psychic implications of this penetration of urban space on Paul’s and other Italian American workers’ consciousness:

With the beginning of each job men, though knowing one another and having raised job for years, wed themselves to Job with the same new ceremony, the same new energy and fear, the same fierce silence and loss of consciousness, and the perpetual sense of their wrongness . . . struggling to fulfill a destiny of never ending debt . . . Job would be a brick labyrinth that would suck him deeper and deeper and there would be no going back. Life would never be a dear music, a festival, a gift of nature. Life would be the torque of Wall’s battle that distorted straight limbs beneath weight in heat and rain and cold.(142-43)

In this world of perpetual debt “no composer [is] attuned to the screaming movement of Job and voiceless cry in overalls” (142). Overall, in his depictions of the daily working life of these Italians, Di Donato’s narrative captures the pulse of “the meter of souls’ sentence to stone” and “the vinegary sweat of Christian correspondence with brick and grey mortar” (142).

From the novel’s opening (set in a construction site in mid-town Manhattan), Di Donato sets the tone for the entire novel by underscoring the instability, threat, intensity

and underlying fragility of New York work-sites for Italians. The narrator begins by describing the work world as a place where, “March whistled stinging snow against the brick walls and up the gaunt girders” as the foreman Geremio “swung his arms about and gaffed the men on” (3). This space reduces Geremio (and the rest of the sonorous, expressive, passionate, verbose Italians) into “a machine-like entity” and the rest of the workers are “transformed into a single silent beast” (9). In occasional moments workers positively interact and find warmth, solidarity, and meaning in the more private spaces they create in the workplace with their camaraderie and mental images of home. For example, when the Italians break for a lunch of “foot-long sandwiches” that are “toasted at the end of wire over flames,” then their humanity returns and “Shadows were once again personalities” and “laughter added warmth” (9). The only comfort for these men who leave the “mad days; brutal conflict” of the job site with “calloused and bruised bodies” and shuffle “towards shabby railroad flats” that Geremio terms “*bella casa mio* [my beautiful house] where my little freshets of blood and my good woman await me” (4) remains their memory of home. This image of a private, stable Italian domestic space in a Lower East side tenement, stands in contrast to the work site that the workers leave, described as “the cold ghastly beast, the Job” that “stood stark, the eerie March wind wrapping it in shadows of falling dusk” (4). This scene is followed by the Good Friday work site accident and cataclysmic collapse of the building, the horrific death of these Italian workers including the literal crucifixion of Geremio in concrete as he is impaled on steel re-inforcing rods and drowned in concrete gushing from a broken concrete hopper. Di Donato spends six pages vividly re-creating in grotesque detail the ways the

Italian workers die. The rest of the novel expansively portrays the traumatic economic, emotional, and spiritual effect of this work site accident on their families.

The opening of the novel previews and underscores the resonating central theme of the novel, that working class Italians face an ongoing threat of disintegration in New York urban spaces through the potential catastrophic failure of material and social structures. In key moments in the novel the images of marginalized ethnics are juxtaposed with urban New York public sites that impart a profound sense of the dramatic material and psychic struggles to maintain both *Italiantia* and their humanity. These individuals feel keenly aware that even when they depart a job site they leave “the bigger part of their lives” with “Job” (5-6). For example, on the Good Friday when the building collapses and kills many of the Italian workers, including Paul’s father Geremio, one character nicknamed “Nick the Lean” has a sense of impending doom he is unable to articulate verbally as the daily work traumas render him and most of the workers mute and transform them into “machinelike” entities (9). The narrator describes Nick’s thoughts:

The Lean as he fought his burden on looked forward to the only goal, the end. The barrow he pushed, he did not love. The stones that brutalized his palms he did not love. The great God Job, he did not love. He felt a searing bitterness and a fathomless consternation at the queer consciousness that inflicted the ever mounting weight of structures that he *had to! had to!* raise above his shoulders! When, when and where would the last stone be? Never . . . did he bear his toil with the rhythm of song! Never . . . did his gasping heart knead the heavy mortar with lifting

melody! A voice within him spoke in wordless language. The language of worn oppression and the despair of realizing that his life had been left on brick piles. And always, there had been hunger and her bastard, the fear of hunger. (8)

This “mounting weight of structures” resonates in Nick’s consciousness as a bitter sense of alienation, danger, and despair; they indicate an interpenetration of both the literal, concrete urban structures he must face in his work, as well as a more abstract sense of social and economic structural oppression he cannot articulate, only profoundly feel. This is accompanied by the overwhelming sense of impending doom and fear of the collapse of all of those structure, which actually occurs only minutes later as “the bottom of their world gave way,” the building collapses and “Walls, floors, beams became whirling, solid splintering waves crashing with detonation that ground man and material in bonds of death,” killing the Italian workers Nick, Tomas, Julio, Giacomo, Lazarene and Geremio (14).

Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* functions not only as a powerful critique of power structures in public urban spaces that threaten to disable any notion of fare *L’America* by Italian American workers, but also as a creative recreation of the positive, enabling spaces of American *Italianita* in the language and life of an Italian American community. Di Donato demonstrates that Italian family and community structures, though threatened by potential fragmentation by the institutional power structures that perpetuate the exploitation of Italian American construction workers, remain spaces where continuity, psychic survival and positive ethnic identity formation exist. Di Donato, in the imaginary New York of *Christ in Concrete*, particularly in his vivid portrayals of American

Italianita in New York private spaces, depicts the inter-actions among the “paesanos” in “Tenement world,” (53) as distinct from the public spaces of the New York “street world” (102). These passages function as sites of positive ethnic memories and identity formation. In the brief narrative shift to private, human social spaces, Di Donato portrays the possibility of ethnic cohesion and cultural continuity in the imaginary Italian American community.

Di Donato’s principal spatial representation celebrating the enabling interactions of the Italian American community lies in the sections of the novel that take place in the *palazzo communal* (communal palace) of the tenement. Di Donato’s unidentified tenement world (although most likely an ethnic enclave on the Lower East Side—never specifically identified as such) comes through in sensory laden detail as a dense, hybrid, ethnically diverse American world. Paul finds stability and emotional warmth in the private world of the tenement on the “third floor right in the center of the block” where he finds “their little tunnel of refuge, their privacy, their home,” with its “six-story discolored brick face” that was “a cliff with sightless windows and crumbling fire – escapes” on a “narrow cobbled street with cement sidewalks” (102). The diverse tenement residents in the building “gaseous in its internationality of latrines, dank with walls that never knew day” include families named Donovan, Farabutti, Loban, Olsen, Hooper, as well as Paul’s unnamed Italian family, the Russian Jewish family Molov and other Italian families (104). Di Donato describes this congested space with a mix of concrete and metaphoric language:

Tenement was a twelve-family house. There were two families on each floor with the flats running in box-car fashion from front to rear with one

toilet between them. Each flat had its distinctive powerful odor. There was the particular individual bouquet that aroused repulsion followed by sympathetic human kinship; the great organ of Tenement fuguing forth its rhapsody with pounding identification to each sense. (104)

In the private Italian spaces of the tenement, however, Di Donato shifts his emphasis from threatening public urban spaces to a celebration of American *italianita*, as the *paesanos* passionately and sensuously commingle with food, dance, drink, sex and stories in the “delicious chaos of activity” of an Italian wedding celebration (191). The narrator contrasts the inner and outer urban world of the *paesanos* and says,

Out in the streets it was cold January, but in the house of Geremio his family and kind sat knee to knee at table under gaslight and smiled to the loving goodness of food. The table were blooded with wine and soiled with oil and salt and peppers, and plates crowded spoons and platters and flagons. . . . Their senses spoke through contented eyes and pleasant flesh – swell and words kept extolling the wonderfulness of food and drink.
(191)

The narrator notes that the *paesanos* think “this is the life—cuddingly arranged close to flesh and smell and joy of them who are your own people” (193). The *paesanos* also dance the Tarantella and re-imagine their Italian lives in stories that reconstruct “the beautiful terrain of Abruzzi and tenderly restored their youths and the times of Fiesta and Carnival” as well as the immigrant tales of “why each one of them took steamboat for the New World, the America” (194-95). In an unstable urban street world where the specter

of hunger haunts workers unsure of the next day's work and pay, the Italian community joins together in this private space to celebrate life and communal solidarity and ensure cultural continuity. It represents the only space in the novel that provides the comforting reinforcement of ethnic cohesion in the constant face of potential fragmentation. One character Farabutti proclaims in the midst of their celebrations:

We are Italians! Know you what that means? It means the regal blood of terrestrial man! Richer than the richest, purer than the finest, more capable than an-y! an-y! race breathing under the stellar rays of night or the lucent beams of day! . . . We are the glory of Rome, *the* culture! By us the rest are scum! (198)

But, after the *festa* ceases, Farabutti's romanticized narrative re-creations of the glories of Italian culture in the private spaces of the tenement among fellow Italians are quickly replaced with a narrative of public cataclysm as Di Donato describes the traumatic effects of the great Depression on the Italian community.

After the passionate celebrations in "tenement world," the concrete urban realities of "street world" New York intrude powerfully on them once again, as the Italian workers again face deep trauma from the "cataclysm of unemployment" because of the economic impact of the Great Depression (208). The narrator depicts the deep psychic traumatic ramifications to the *paesanos* who "in their bewildered minds hunger and the fear of hunger set in as quick disease flesh and pounding sanity" and the "sudden and real want that beset the *paesanos* stupefied them and they had no way to turn" (208). In this urban milieu one *paesano* expresses his profound despair at life in America and New

York, a sense that underscores the feeling of many Italian immigrants: “Discovered by an Italian—named from Italian—But oh, that I may leave this land of disillusion” (212).

Di Donato ends *Christ in Concrete* with an image of the main character Paul trapped between the perennial rock and hard place—between the strong pull of cultural continuity in the private spaces of his family’s religious faith and the potential fragmentation in the hard urban work spaces of New York. Paul seems close to psychic dissolution as a result of the material and cultural forces that threaten to radically unmake him. He is particularly traumatized by the tragic work related death of his godfather Nazone at the end of the novel. For Paul, the public urban work spaces of the New York “street world” are profoundly imbued with threat of death and destruction and the private spaces of the Italian “tenement world” offer no consolation. Di Donato describes Paul as having a “consciousness groping painfully in resurging maelstrom” as he considers his life in the Manhattan “street world” of work. He seems trapped in a traumatized psychic borderland existence that affects his every thought. He thinks:

The scaffolds are not safe, for the rich must ever profit more. The men are driven. And they prefer death or injury to loss of work. Work and die. Today I did not die . . . Somewhere in the countless bendings and twistings he would lose his balance, a derrick would collapse and blot him out, a sledge would hurl from above and crumple him, a brick would smash through his skull. Ah, no, today’s Job had choked him, but let him live. Tomorrow he would die. He will have died without having raised his head and shouted defiance! (228)

This constant fear of dissolution on the work site resonates deeply in Paul's consciousness and causes him to reject one of the most powerful symbols of Italian American cultural continuity—his family's Catholic faith.

The novel ends with a dramatic notion that underscores Paul's need to reject passive old world Italian fatalism and embrace a new world of agency and solidarity as he openly rejects his mother's Christianity as an antidote for the family's material traumas. In one of the most dramatic scenes in the novel, Paul crushes a plaster crucifix in his brick layer's hand and tells his mother "do not kiss the plaster man and wooden cross" (230). Paul punctuates his action by proclaiming "We have only one life! One life! . . . I want justice here! I want happiness here! I want life, here! . . . I want salvation now!" (230). This overwhelming fear of being totally crushed by "the ever mounting weight of structures" sears Paul's consciousness with an indelible trauma (8). He ends by asserting a final determination to "go on to a world of our own" and utters a call for worker solidarity by saying "We need each other more than ever-- before we die crushed like papa!" (231). In this critical moment Paul rejects the abstract blind faith that underlies the structure complicit with capitalism and faceless government bureaucracy in the exploitation and potential destruction of the Italian workers and their families--the American Catholic Church. Paul cannot articulate exactly what he and his family (and by extension the community of Italian workers and all workers) can do to prevent being sacrificed to Job as "Christ in concrete" (226). But he concludes at the novel's end that life in New York urban spaces for him and his family is "Unfair! Unfair!—Our Lives! Unfair!" (226). Overall, *Christ in Concrete* is a powerful and provocative representation of the language, culture, and struggles of working class Italian Americans, a work that

offers a complex celebration of working class Italian American culture, vivid imaginary recreations of New York urban work sites and private ethnic spaces, as well as a poignant critique of oppressive social, religious and political structures that exploited and threatened Italian American workers and their families in New York urban spaces.

Making America in Imaginary Manhattan

Lapolla and Di Donato's novels represent distinct, individual Italian Americans influenced in their choices and responses in New York by a dynamic interplay between their ethnic heritage, the socio-economic cultural realities of urban New York, and their own individual personalities, abilities, and loyalties. Both novels portray the convergence of urban space and Italian American identity in the creation of sites of social contestation and lived cultural forms, and offer complex, realistic representations of Italians in New York that resist categorization or reduction to simplistic stereotypical renderings of the urban ethnic particularities of New York Italians. Both Di Donato and Lapolla represent the inner meanings of urban landscapes, the city and its penetration into the lives of Italian Americans very differently in their fictive reconstructions. Lapolla and Di Donato also held differing political agendas that resonated in their respective novels. Lapolla, though raised in the mean streets of East Harlem alongside both distinguished residents such as Leonard Covello, Edward Corsi, Vito Marcantonio and Fiorello La Guardia, as well as notorious New York mob bosses such as Joe Masseria, Frank Costello, Thomas Lucchese, and Carmine Galante, was a college educated, politically conservative, career-oriented long time educator and administrator in the New York Public School System. Lapolla left the fiction writing world after lack of commercial success and critical attention. Di Donato, a bricklayer, life-long writer and radical

political activist, on the other hand, was briefly a member of the Communist Party and the League of American Writers in the 1930's and was nicknamed "Pete the Red."¹⁹ Despite any political difference, both Lapolla's *The Grand Gennaro* and Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* dramatically represent the wide ranging street level daily realities of immigrant Italian Americans in urban enclaves in New York (although *Christ in Concrete* has received a wider range of critical and scholarly attention than Lapolla's often ignored, underrated and out of print novel of imaginary East Harlem). Neither novel could be considered strictly fictionalized treatment of ethnographical statistics or sociological documents of Italian immigrant enclave life in Manhattan. Both novels, however, offer elements in their narratives of the problematic processes of Americanization for Italian Americans and the struggles associated with "making America," as well as representations of changing forms linked to the *percorso* of American *Italianita* that include both old world traditional and modern American elements. Lapolla's novel emphasizes the palimpsestic nature of urban American Italian life—the layers of marginalized and dominant cultures, the dramatic and the often problematic ethnic, class and racial interactions in urban spaces and how they impact an individual member of the ethnic enclave of East Harlem. Di Donato's novel emphasizes the struggles of an Italian American family facing potential fragmentation in the hard urban work spaces of New York and struggling to maintain material existence and cultural continuity in the private spaces of an inter-ethnic tenement in lower Manhattan. But both novelists focus on the dynamic processes of urban interactions and ethnic identity formations in relationship to New York urban spaces that resonate with a wide

¹⁹. See Denning for a description of Di Donato's association with "left cultural initiatives" (237).

range of cultural meanings in the *dinamico spazi* (dynamic spaces) of Italian American New York narratives. Lapolla and Di Donato in *The Grand Gennaro* and *Christ in Concrete* imaginatively reconstruct vital hybrid, diverse urban Italian American communities in their literary representations of New York Italian American life and create vivid cityscapes that both explore and expand the dimensions of the *percorso* of Italian American life and cultural production.

Chapter Three: Moving out to *Immaginario Nuova Jersey* (?!): The American Italian *Percorso* in HBO's *The Sopranos*

New York has brought forth, and continues to generate today, a constant stream of those who seek to capture and portray its rhythms, speech, images—in sum, the soul of their city. . . Who sings the songs of the suburbs? —Philip Nicolson, “The Elusive Soul of the Suburbs”

“When America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? . . . They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make 'em richer . . . We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us. Honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action..” --Tony Soprano, “From Where to Eternity,” HBO *The Sopranos*

“Jersey? C'mon, huh?—Phil Leotardo (New York crime family boss), “In Camelot,” HBO *The Sopranos*

What if in the solitude of the Garden State / all you can smell is the aroma of death / and the only guests at your party / are the old Italians dancing /a tarantella inside your heart? —Edvidge Giunta, “Gardener”

“Who needs a house out in Hackensack? Is that all you get for your money? /It seems such a waste of time/ If that's what it's all about/ If that's movin' up then I'm movin' out —Billy Joel, “Movin” Out

One of my most vivid memories as a Pennsylvania- born Italian American child visiting New York, where the majority of my Italian American relatives lived (until, of course, most of them moved on to the regional suburbs) was driving through the Lincoln or Holland Tunnel and watching the thousands of tunnel tiles (that I learned from my father Guido had been hand set by Italian tile workers) flash by. I was particularly fascinated by the tiled sign in the middle of the tunnels marking and naming the border lines of New Jersey and New York somewhere in the middle of the Hudson River. It seemed like a kind of magical boundary marker to me as I left New Jersey for New York and when I returned, leaving New York for New Jersey. My destinations were always to New York to visit Italian relatives or Pennsylvania on the return trip home. And New Jersey was always just the smelly, ugly industrial wastelands and network of busy highways we had to pass through to our real destinations. But crossing that invisible contact zone/ boundary line between two states always made an impact on my imagination, and I always considered New York and New Jersey as more than just

geographic states. The exit from the darkness of the tunnels into the brightness of New York City or, on the return trip, the harsh industrial light of New Jersey, always signaled to me a distinctive transition into specific spaces and states of mind. And the last momentary glimpse of the Oz-like New York skyline on the Lincoln Tunnel helix or the last glimpse of the Empire State Building through the rear car window on the New Jersey turnpike always signaled in my mind the end of the distinctive Italian American world of New York and the transitional world of New Jersey until my return to my own ethnic enclave, the three-family Italian American home I lived in with my parents and sister, aunt and uncle, three cousins and two grandparents, in Pennsylvania.

Every episode of the HBO series *The Sopranos* begins with a montage of an Italian American man named Tony Soprano traveling from New York to New Jersey, out of the Lincoln Tunnel and over the highways and bridges connecting two states. *The Sopranos* is a series that dramatizes the activities and personal lives of a fictional group of New Jersey-based Italian Americans, many of them members of the North New Jersey branch of *Cosa Nostra*. *The Sopranos* is a popular culture phenomenon that has been lauded in critical reviews as a top quality series and lambasted in public discourse by a wide array of Italian American organizations and individuals as a show that perpetuates negative stereotypes of Italian Americans. And despite the *agita* (stomach-ache) of the many Italian Americans who have over the years claimed that the show perpetuates the old Italian /mobster stereotype, the show also portrayed Italian Americans in a wide range of urban and suburban places and professions including priests, politicians, professors, psychiatrists, doctors, art dealers, plumbers, contractors, restaurant owners, hospital administrators, small business owners, housewives, college students, writers, interior

decorators and many other non-mob positions. While many ethnicities and nationalities are represented in the show, Italian Americans are the majority population in the tele-visual New Jersey and New York world of *The Sopranos*. The show specifically represents the psychic and personal crises in the daily life of Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano (James Gandolfini) and the entire series is a result of the vision and hands-on creation and production of one man, New Jersey born David Chase (Di Cesare) who was involved in virtually every one of the eighty six episodes. It is a television series that was lauded by *New York Times* critic Stephen Holden as “the greatest work of American popular culture of the last quarter century” (xi). *The Sopranos* debuted on HBO in January of 1999 and ended in June of 2007, and transpired over six seasons on HBO with over eighty-four hours of narrative in its eighty-six episodes. It is still available on television in ongoing repeats on HBO and The USA Network and on the online site HBO Go. The show portrayed hundreds of Italian Americans in New Jersey and New York and was filmed entirely on location in those states.²⁰ In short, it is an Italian American cultural production that remains a powerful force in American popular culture. Although many tele-visual and cultural critics have lauded the importance of the series content and the excellence of its production, it is also a vivid study of contemporary America’s vision of Italian American culture and life in the Greater Metropolitan New York and New Jersey area. Fred Gardaphe asserts in *Italian Signs, American Streets* that Mario Puzo's novel *The Godfather* is the definitive “mythic filter through which Italian American culture would henceforth be read” (89). But in the twenty-first century the Italian American “mythic filter” whereby Italian American culture will also be perceived is

20. For a detailed account of the history, production, locations, actors, and all personnel involved in the show see Brett Martin, *The Sopranos: The Complete Book*.

Chase's *The Sopranos*. Indeed, because of its breadth of Italian American characterization and massive narrative length, *The Sopranos* stands as one of the most complex, sustained representations of the greater New York and New Jersey Metropolitan area Italian American culture in recent history, and the opening montage foreshadows the complexity of life in that world.

In the opening montage of HBO's *The Sopranos*, North Jersey mob boss Tony Soprano also emerges from the flashing tiles and half light of the Lincoln Tunnel into the New Jersey brightness as he drives on a North Westward journey through urban and suburban New Jersey from urban New York City in his Chevrolet "Suburban" to his upper middle class suburban mansion in North Caldwell. The show's opening montage of westward suburban travel away from New York offers a vivid set of urban and suburban images of a circuit or route (*percorso*) of travel that the main character Tony takes at the beginning of every episode. The overall impact of the montage dramatizes a central problematic that the series represents over the course of its six seasons. While mobster Tony may be moving in the montage *away* from a literal urban setting as he steers a course from New York through tunnels, bridges, industrial areas, and urban Jersey streets in a *percorso* to a cul-de-sac suburban setting, the series also chronicles another problematic "course" that Tony finds himself navigating: his on-going negotiations between his identity as an urban-based ethnic Italian American mobster and his assimilated suburban American world. The opening credit montage of *The Sopranos*, which depicts the rambling, circuitous, *percorso* of Tony Soprano, offers a vivid, problematic image of the state of American *Italianita* in the late twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries. The entire series, following the montage, demonstrates that this is

not an image of a linear, upwardly mobile assimilation for American Italians, but a fragmented, problematic *percorso*, in conflict with New York, leading to a cul-de-sac and an uncertain future in America. The series functions as a complex representation that dramatically portrays an Italian American man (who happens to be a mobster) in the public and private arena struggling to maintain what he believes are threatened ethnic values facing powerful cultural and psychic forces that threaten to disrupt or diminish their very existence.

My older son, who lives in Connecticut, loves to point out that when people from out-of state ask for directions to sites in New England, a common answer of residents is “I can tell you where it is, but you can’t get there from here.” The point is, there is such a dense network of highways, city streets, inter-county bypasses, country roads, turnpikes, and rotaries that they would have to travel, it’s virtually impossible to supply a simple, linear narrative of how to get from here to there. The circuitous drive in the opening montage is very much in the same vein. When Peter Bogdonovich interviewed series creator Chase about the idea for the montage in the DVD release of the show’s first season, Chase noted that it was important to have Tony leaving New York and traveling to suburban New Jersey because “That was the journey for the wise guys” (HBO Season 1 DVD). Chase says, “The idea was just to do a thing where he’s coming from New York back to Jersey, starts out in the Lincoln Tunnel just when the sunlight opens up, out of the tunnel and then taking him all the way back to his neighborhood to his home” (HBO Video). Chase’s description highlights the simple function of creating a set of images that underscore the spaces and places through which Tony travels, works and lives. But like his drive to North Caldwell from New York City, Tony’s narration of his Italian

American *percorso* is not a linear *viaggio* and is not easy to map. It is a convoluted *percorso* through a social and cultural geography that seems fragmented and discontinuous. And it is a world in which New York seems omnipresent and an ongoing source of tension, not merely as a flickering set of fragmented images flashing by a window, but as a troublesome origin, a kind of dark womb that Tony emerges from as he leaves the darkness of the New York side of the Lincoln Tunnel for the psychic wastelands of New Jersey and the not-so-mean streets of suburbia.

The opening montage is a fragmented set of images depicting Tony's drive from New York City out of the darkness of the Lincoln Tunnel into the morning New Jersey sunshine (the digital clock on his dashboard reads 10: 22 AM). The montage is filmed from the perspective of Tony in the driver's seat moving from the urban center (New York) to the periphery (New Jersey). He exits the Tunnel onto the curving Helix in Weehawken with the western Hudson shoreline and New York City skyline shining vividly to the East through his passenger side window. Tony is emblematic of the group of residents from the greater New York metropolitan area known popularly and pejoratively (by New Yorkers) as "the bridge and tunnel crowd." Many of these residents of the outer boroughs are descendants of Italians who literally built the bridges and tunnels that connect New York with the rest of the continental United States and who set every tile on the walls and ceilings of the Lincoln Tunnel that flash by Tony. It is unclear to the viewer (and it is never explained in the series) why Tony is leaving New York, but it is possible that he has finished another early morning (or late night) meeting with a member of the New York Carmine Lupertazzi crime family (known simply in the series as "New York"), one of the so called Mafia "Five families" that run the New York

metropolitan area *Cosa Nostra* activities. The views of New York from Tony's mobile perspective are the quick, fragmented flashes of the Hudson River, Midtown and Lower Manhattan skyline, and The Statue of Liberty, reflected through Tony's windshield, passenger side, or rear-view mirrors. His route, his *percorso* through New Jersey takes him past landmarks such as The Grand Pulaski Highway, Newark Airport, The Meadowlands, New Jersey Turnpike, the abandoned Hydro-Pur plant and distinctive New Jersey sites and objects such as a carpet warehouse, New Jersey transit trains, power lines, water towers, the Pulaski Savings Bank, Pizzaland, and Satriales Pork Store This is followed by very quick flashes of close set modest urban and semi-suburban houses on narrow streets, larger houses with more trees, wider spaces between homes, and semi-rural wooded areas. Tony's destination is through a gated entry to his large mansion house in a cul-de-sac in prestigious North Caldwell as he departs his SUV and slams the door with a scowl on his face. As Tony drives from New York through New Jersey to his suburban cul-de-sac "McMansion" he looks and acts troubled, ferociously snatching his New Jersey Turnpike fare ticket from the toll-booth dispenser and slamming the door when he arrives at his house. New York is behind him and his trip through urban, suburban and rural New Jersey has been a meandering, circuitous detour-filled route that ends up in a dead end in a both literal and metaphorical sense.

Donald Tricarico, in his essay "In a New Light: Italian American Ethnicity in the Mainstream," terms the linear American acculturation process of many Italian immigrants "straight line assimilation" (25-26). This process is marked by Italian American "increasing integration" within the dominant American culture and society (25). It is evidenced by the fact that "the old [Italian American urban] enclaves have

either disappeared or are left with only a sprinkling of long time residents” while most other Italian Americans “have abandoned the tenement neighborhoods for home ownership or the suburbs” (24). The opening montage also dramatically symbolizes a type of symbolic westward migration of Italian immigrants and later generations of Italian Americans through the American social and economic strata from immigrants to urban ethnics and acculturated Americans. Many critics suggest that the montage is a representation of this traditional type of *viaggio*. Fred Gardaphe, in his essay “Fresh Garbage” describes the montage as “the stereotypical journey taken by those who chase the American dream” (92). Likewise, Wallace Katz calls the montage sequence “ a story about generational change and social mobility, the American dream” and suggests that in watching this drive “many of us relive the mythological but also real American journey—from immigrant poverty to wealth and position via professional and business achievement” (96). But, the trajectory portrayed in the opening montage does not symbolize a classic, traditional, linear immigrant narrative. The twists and turns of Tony’s New Jersey / New York commute portrays a complex problematic cultural trajectory that New Jersey Italian American Tony Soprano must constantly negotiate in his *percorso* through the American social landscape. While I would suggest that the montage does visualize the *viaggio* (voyage) that many Italians took, including my own family, the overall idea of *The Sopranos* credit montage does not represent, in narrative form a simple linear assimilation narrative any more than someone could simply map out Tony’s drive from New York to North Caldwell in a travel itinerary. To again quote those New Englanders—“you can’t get there from here!!”

While I agree that the opening montage images evoke specific urban and suburban spaces (from New York urban enclave ethnics, then moving out to sites in other cities and suburbs in New Jersey) that Tony's family or many Italian Americans would have passed through in their American journey of upward mobility, the series portrays a very complex *percorso* of American *Italianita* that cannot be simply reduced to the classic straight line immigrant assimilation story. The entire series portrays a man and a culture in transition, concerned with the continuity of their ethnic identity, operating within a complex system of ethnic signs, symbolic overpasses, literal and metaphorical bridges and tunnels and the twists and turns of American social structures and cultural byways week in and week out. And Tony Soprano is not just a former Newark Italian ethnic enclave dweller and third generation upper middle class suburbanite American of Italian descent who moved from urban front stoop to gated community who shops at "Fountains of Wayne" and the Paramus Mall. He is (as one non mobster character Charmaine Bucco tells her husband restaurant owner Artie in season one, episode one) the "Don of North Jersey" who acquires things by "Someone's donated kneecaps" (S1, E1).²¹ Tony's *percorso* was a forced penetration into the golden suburban lands of North Caldwell as a direct result of criminal practices and profits. Tony does not (for the most part) narrate or imagine his own life as a rambling *percorso* ending in a dead end, but rather an upwardly mobile, linear movement towards spaces and places filled with the detritus of his accomplishments, largely paid for by the literal trash of a culture (he is in "waste management—his mob family controls the garbage and industrial waste pick up in North. Jersey). Tony locates himself on a collision course between three constantly

²¹ When I quote or refer to specific seasons and episodes of the series I will cite them in the following manner: For example a quote or reference to Season one, episode one will be cited as S1, E1.

disrupted and disintegrating kinship structures of “*la famiglia*”— his family business (North Jersey *Cosa Nostra*), the business of his actual family, and a New York crime family.

New Jersey / New York States of Mind, State of conflict

Chase admits in an interview on the season one DVD that the New Jersey setting is essential to the story about a troubled Italian American in a post modern world. Chase suggests this not only because New Jersey is his origin state (he was raised in Newark and near North Caldwell) and he understands Italian American suburban Jersey life, but because it makes a strong contrast to the image of Italian Americans in general and Italian American mobsters in particular as New Yorkers. Chase says,

The *Godfather* and *Goodfellas* . . . were neighborhood movies about the old neighborhood. This is a suburban story. This is about [Italian American] mobsters in suburbia. And for me that’s not farfetched because I grew up in the suburbs in New Jersey and that’s where the mobsters are. They had begun, where I lived, to move out of the city of Newark, New Jersey into the surrounding, sort of leafy suburbs . . . I mean it doesn’t take place in Little Italy. You have sit downs in New York . . . [but] he’s [Tony Soprano] in the suburbs, he goes to the garden store and has a house with a lawn and all that. His kids go to a suburban school. He drives a Suburban, as a matter of fact. (HBO Video)

The relocation of Italian American gangsters from New York urban enclaves to affluent homogenous New Jersey suburbia reflects the historic mobility of Italian Americans, the complexities of the American Italian experience, and the potential diminishment of

Italian American ethnicity as later generations replace the reconfigured *campanilismo* of the old Italian neighborhoods with the displaced *campanilismo* of early twentieth century American life in New Jersey. And the suburban New Jersey location and its proximity to New York in the series are essential for underscoring that reality. Chase wanted a wide ranging realistic representation of his native State and also had a very specific story to frame and inspire *The Sopranos*. Chase states in an interview with Strum that *The Sopranos* is mainly a story “about a place” [New Jersey] and its proximity to New York. He describes his childhood in New Jersey suburbia as “important and magical” partly because of its primal connection to New York. Chase says “if you’d climb a tree, [in North Jersey] you could see the New York City skyline. I lived so close to the actual throbbing center of the entire world, yet out here there were fireflies and truck farms” (Strum). The great Italian suburban *percorso* from the City to the suburbs was an essential element in Chase’s own life that he wanted to replicate visually and viscerally on screen set in his own version of an *immaginario* New Jersey.

Brett Martin, in his introduction to the HBO-sanctioned book on the series *The Sopranos: The Complete Book*, points out that “New Jersey maybe a state, but Jersey is also a state of mind” (25). And although Martin never explains what he means, the series clearly dramatizes a very specific state of mind that is not just some abstract world view called “Jersey,” but a set of distinctive American Italian urban and suburban perspectives and practices. Setting the series in a range of New Jersey and New York sites from lower Manhattan to Jersey industrial wastelands, inner city urban enclaves, and the small towns and suburbs of North Jersey, was vital to creator Chase’s vision for the series. A strong sense of place was an essential element for Chase to capture in the series. The series

reflects the reality that Americans of Italian descent have been and continue to be a presence in the greater metropolitan New York and New Jersey areas. Historian Dennis Starr, in *The Italians of New Jersey*, notes that since 1960 New Jersey has “the second largest Italian population” in the United States and “Italians continue to be the largest immigrant or racial group in New Jersey” (7). And the large majority of them arrived or moved to New Jersey from (or through) New York. The historic links between Italians of New York and New Jersey has been very strong since the late nineteenth century. And *The Sopranos* throughout its eighty six episodes and six seasons portrays a very Italian American centered Northern New Jersey world.

Starr notes that post WW II era New Jersey signaled not only the beginning of the diminution of the Italian American populations of New York’s Italian enclaves (with many moving to New Jersey suburbs), but also the mobility of Italians from New Jersey “Little Italys” (like Newark’s First Ward) to suburban sites. Starr ends his “Historical introduction” to his history of Italians of New Jersey by pointing out that “the suburbanization of the Italian Americans of New Jersey and its consequences for [Italian American] ethnic identity is potentially problematic” (57). It is only reconnection to the older enclaves in both New York and New Jersey that can assure ethnic continuity among Italian Americans who have migrated to the suburbs, because “the perpetuation of a specifically Italian identity is fastened by ties to the old urban enclaves, to which the out migrants periodically return to visit family or friends” (57). Starr hints that without this kind of *ricorso* (recovery) and *percorso* back to the historic links of the urban ethnic enclave past, the possibility of loss of distinctive Italian American cultural values and practices is highly probable in the nebulous suburban wastelands. The periodic return of

suburban American Italians to the urban Italian enclaves of New Jersey and New York may promote what Starr terms “the emotional security of an ethnic identity (57). But Starr is troubled by “the urban enclave and its relation to suburbia” because he offers the classic sociological argument that suburbanization may deepen assimilation that will diminish Italian “ethnic consciousness” and “may be a declining force in the lives of New Jersey’s Italian Americans” (57). Almost twenty years after Starr provided these observations Italian American New Jersey-born Chase in *The Sopranos* vividly dramatized (and verified) the problematic relationship between Italian Americans, suburbanization, and the tenuous relationship with former ethnic enclaves on a regular basis in *The Sopranos*.

Donna Gabaccia, in the study “Little Italy’s Decline,” points out that Italian American New Yorkers experienced an overall “sense of loss” as Italian populations began to disperse from classic enclaves like Mulberry Street for sites in the greater metropolitan New York area, like North Jersey, and for “new homes in the outer boroughs” and outlying states (237). While some resettled in other enclaves like Newark’s North Ward, for the many who dispersed in a *percorso* to the suburbs, the “sense of loss” was further problematized. For many there was no region, neighborhood, and territory, just a cultural Little Italy of the mind, memory, or practice or what I term, displaced *campanilismo*. As New York Italian Americans dispersed into the suburbs, the continuity of reconfigured *campanilismo* was disrupted. Gabaccia notes that American Italians were transformed “from builders of tunnels and bridges” to “becoming what Manhattan sophisticates today disparage as bridge and tunnel people” (253). For example, in the season two, episode seven “D-Girl,” Christopher Moltisanti takes his

girlfriend Adriana to a New York nightclub and tries to tell a group of noisy “Morgan Stanley types” at the next table to be quiet, one of them tell him, “Hey bridge and tunnel boy, cool it!” (S2, E7). The spatial relocation of Italian Americans to new neighborhoods and the changes of perspective from city streets and tenement kitchen windows to suburbs and the view of tunnels, highways, or bridges signaled more than just a geographic change, but an exchange of an older, traditional American Italian ethnic identity for a new one. Tradition was exchanged for transition, and a bridge, a tunnel, a turnpike, a festival, a story, a plate of “*pasta fazool*” was a necessary part of the *percorso* back to these cultural sites.

For Tony Soprano and all Italian Americans who migrated from New York or New Jersey urban areas to the suburbs, life in Italy or even Little Italy exists mainly in memory, or the stories and histories of earlier generations. Many of the elements, cultural constructs, or practices of American *Italianita* have been enacted in the rituals, traditions, culinary and religious customs, language (both standard and dialect Italians) of former generations and in the spaces of Italian ethnic enclaves. Martin points out that Chase’s own family started their “American journey” in New York and then “to the section of Newark then known as the First Ward” like thousands of other Italian families (25). He notes that Chase’s family history is “the story of immigration in America—and in New Jersey in particular.” In a classic straight line assimilation narrative “the dream is to always be moving toward the next bigger house, the next town up the road. The route for First Warders was clear: if you didn’t head [back] across the river to New York, you moved west along Bloomfield Avenue” (Martin 25). Bloomfield Avenue is the street that

provides the setting that is central to both the literal and the cultural the geography of *The Sopranos*.

As a third generation New Jersey Italian American whose family also took the *percorso* from New York, to Bloomfield Avenue, to the suburbs, Tony has experienced only minimal direct influence on his ethnic formation from both the immigrant experience of his ancestors, or the initial acculturation of his ancestors in the urban spaces they settled in. Richard Alba, in *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*, observes:

The third generation [Italian American] is the first not raised under the direct influence of the Old World, which it sees only through its grandparents. Consequently, its adherence to ethnic culture is likely to be thinner, shallower than that of its predecessors, although paradoxically, because it feels more secure in its place in American society, it may be more confident in asserting its ethnic identity. (115)

Apart from stories he has heard from his youth, Tony's connection to the Italian old world, or even the old world of Italians first settling in New York and New Jersey, is exemplified by his nostalgic connection to the Newark First Ward (North Ward) Italian enclave. For Tony, it is not *immaginario* Nuova York that inspires him to celebrate his ethnic roots, but *immaginario* Newark! As Alba notes, Italian American "ethnic communities tend to preserve distinctiveness, and they have an important function" as a visible reminder of "a recent ethnic past" (116-117). But when the enclaves diminish or disappear, or Italian Americans move out of them for suburban or rural spaces, it is often either by a literal, narratival, or metaphorical *ritorno* (return) as part of the *percorso*, a

route to roots, that American Italian like Tony claim to preserve or reenact their American *Italianita*. For Tony and his family the suburban existence in the gated, massive mansion in North Caldwell is evidence of his escape from the ethnic ghettos of his father and grandfather. In season six, episode eight he explains this *percorso* to a real estate agent trying to buy property in the North Ward that Tony owns. Tony tells her, “Yeah, my family made the trek up ‘guinea gulch’ --Bloomfield Avenue. But my roots go way back here. My grandfather came from Avellino like most of the people around here and I grew up right over there” (S6, E8). According to Robert Fishman in *Bourgeois Utopias*, suburbia’s power “is derived ultimately from the capacity of suburban design to express a complex and compelling vision of the modern family freed from the corruption of the city, restored to harmony with nature, endowed with wealth and independence” (x). But *The Sopranos* also deconstructs the notion that Italian Americans are members of a homogenous community occupying a singular urban space. There is no singular Italian American community anywhere in the series and the existing ones like Mulberry Street in Manhattan or the Newark North Ward are diminishing as actual Italian American spaces by being sold off or being transformed into symbolic ethnic sites.

In *The Sopranos* the imaginary Little Italy of New York and Newark both exert an influence on how Tony Soprano and other Italian Americans in the series categorize and evaluate their own American *Italianita*. Tony’s *percorso* often brings him to two major ethnic Italian American urban spaces in New York and New Jersey that function as symbolic evidence of the decline of the presence of American *Italianita*. The two urban Italian American enclave sites dramatized in *The Sopranos*, the lower Manhattan “Little Italy” on Mulberry Street and Newark’s Old First Ward, are diminished Italian American

spaces. Most of *The Sopranos* episodes that portray the daily business activities or meeting sites of the Carmine Lupertazzi crime family (later led by Johnny Sack and Phil Leotardo) take place in the social clubs, restaurants, or the streets of the Mulberry Street Little Italy. It is a site that is itself threatened with the radical diminution of the Italian American presence. In one pivotal scene in the very final episode “Made in America,” a double decker New York sightseeing bus is cruising slowly down the Mulberry Street Little Italy, while the tour bus guide intones, “This is New York’s famous Little Italy. It once covered over forty square blocks, but has now been reduced to one row of shops and cafes” (S6, E 21). Even though the New York characters position themselves as representative of more authentic Italians or *cosa nostra* members, the reality is that their world, like the North Ward, is radically diminished. In a scene in the same episode that underscores the diminution and ongoing displacement of the Manhattan Italian enclave, a member of the Lupertazzi crime family leaves the Mulberry Street social club with its backdrop of Italian restaurants, souvenir stores, and pastry shops to get better reception on a cell phone as he talks to crime boss Phil Leotardo. He stops when he finds himself completely surrounded by the Chinese speaking residents and businesses of Chinatown that have swallowed Little Italy. He looks around with a surprised and disoriented look on his face at the Chinese language signs as he realizes he has left the familiar, imaginary boundaries of Little Italy that have been transformed into Chinatown. But the main setting for exploring the fragmenting nexus between American *Italianita* and urban space in *The Sopranos* is not Mulberry Street, but the diminishing Italian enclave of Newark’s North Ward (or First Ward).

But just narrating gangster relocation or simply offering a fictionalized anthropological study of suburban ethnics is not the main focus of the series, but rather to represent (in an entertaining form) the psychic disruptions and deeply rooted ambivalences of a suburban ethnic third generation Italian American. Tony and most of the Italian American characters in *The Sopranos* identify themselves as sons and daughters of Italy dealing with the threat of ethnic diminishment and what Tony terms “dysfunction *vaffancul*” (S1, E1). Chase dramatizes the disruption and potential fragmentation of the *percorso* of American *Italianita* and the problematic diminution of the older Italian urban enclaves in *The Sopranos*. Leaving the old Italian urban enclaves involves more than just geographic relocation, but changing older modes of ethnic self-perception and practice reinforced by daily interaction with ethnic spaces and symbols. The deep identification in daily life with the city neighborhood maximizes an ethnic self-fashioning that is contingent upon regular interaction with the Italian American spaces, people, places and practices of these neighborhoods. The lost or disappearing certainties of Tony’s American Italian past--whether it is Mafia members who faithfully practice *omerta* or hardworking Italian immigrants building their own churches when they were excluded from worshipping there by the American Catholic Irish dominated Church hierarchy-- clearly perplex him at times. One element of his American *Italianita* that he keeps returning to is directly linked to his memories of the North Ward. The series portrays Tony on many occasions trying to reinforce the values of American *Italianita* in his daughter Meadow and son Anthony Jr. (AJ), while obsessing that it is threatened or fading or losing its potency of identity in suburbia, far removed from the challenges of immigration, arrival, settlement and relocation. Tony tries to articulate these

uncertainties in a range of episodes that evoke a tenuous nostalgia or what he believes are Italian values, memories and heritage that need to be shared with later generations, specifically Meadow and AJ. He tries to raise his two children to be proud of their heritage as Italians, but they only reflect a superficial ethnicity that Tony tries to correct, by reconnecting them to a space that reflects their Italian roots. In the Pilot episode in season one, Tony takes his daughter Meadow into a church near her high school and recounts with pride the story of his Italian ancestors, who helped build the church. Tony sits her down in a pew and tells her, “Your great grandfather and his brother, Frank, they built this place. Stone and marble workers. They came over here from Italy and they built this place. They were two guys and a crew of laborers. They didn't design it. But they knew how to build it. Go out now and find me two guys that could put decent grout around your bathtub” (S1, E1). In the season four episode “Watching too much television” a nostalgic conversation about Tony’s immigrant grandfather’s mason trade is revisited, as Tony and AJ visit the site of a Catholic Church now in the middle of a deteriorating urban area in Newark with a primarily Black and Latino population. Tony echoes this theme with AJ, with the same sort of a nostalgic invocation of family and Italian American history, pride, and lamentation over the present loss of values that he had cited to Meadow. Tony lectures AJ:

See that church? Your great grandfather helped build that over eighty years ago. He was a stone mason who came from Avellino with four dollars in his pocket. I’m talking about history here AJ, your family’s history, Newark’s history. (AJ): “Who gives a shit about Newark?”

(Tony): I’m making a point here. This neighborhood used to be beautiful.

A hundred percent Italian. In the 1920's most of them right off the boat. Most Italians couldn't even find a Church that wanted them. So what did they do? Did they cry? Did they go to the government with their hand out? No. They took care of their own problems. They said fine—you don't want us in your church—we'll build our own—a better one! Look at these buildings around here. Most of them are falling down but that church is still standing. You know why? (AJ) The Bricks? (Tony) Cause our people give a shit—that's why! Every Sunday Italians from the old neighborhood—they drive miles to come here to pray. To keep this place alive. (AJ): So how come we never do? (S4, E7)

Tony's evocation of Italian nostalgia and memory here is often not about an imaginary Italian New York, but an imaginary Italian Newark! Tony is involved with the leader of the Urban Housing League and corrupt New Jersey Assemblyman Zellman in an illegal scheme to defraud HUD money from the Federal government, by buying up and re-selling blighted properties in Newark. So his motives for visiting the "old neighborhood" are more economic than ethnic inspired nostalgia. But it is not the hardworking, blue collar skills of his stone mason ancestors that enables Tony's upward social mobility away from the enclave to his McMansion in North Caldwell, but mob earnings from violence, murder, extortion, gambling, loan sharking and robbery. He seems genuinely sincere, however, as he evokes Italian pride and history. Like much of Tony's selective interpretation of Italian American history, despite his ostensible sincerity, it functions as a kind of screen history --and as AJ points out—he has no concrete interest in actually participating in the Italian American community drawn to this inner city Italian church,

but uses his nostalgic “history” and mini economic lesson to AJ (“buy land”) to screen his illegal interests in the urban properties. He’s more interested in scam at this point than *scamorza* (Southern Italian traditional soft cheese) and sacraments. But he believes that you need both to be Italian-- “to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us” as he tells his psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi. His ethnic pride and desire for illegal profits in the HUD scam are infused into his unique personal sense of American *Italianita*. The safe, imaginary ethnic Newark cityscape of Tony’s golden memory that he described to Zellman as a source of “Italian pride” and reconstructed for AJ and Meadow as the foundation of his *Italianita* is revealed to be the site for literal deconstruction and exploitation.

The North Ward is also the prime target of his direct exploitation as he sends Soprano family mobsters to regularly “shake down” small business owners for protection, or charge exorbitant fees to vendors at an annual Italian American Church festival at the very Church Tony proudly evoked to his children as a symbol of *Italianita*. While Tony often ostensibly laments the loss of the deeply rooted Italian ethnic past in urban spaces, he actively involves himself in the economic exploitation and radical uprooting of Newark’s North Ward enclave. In the season six episode “Johnny Cakes” two Soprano family mobsters, Patsy Parisi (Dan Grimaldi) and Burt Gervasi (Artie Pasquale) collect shakedown protection money from local business owners in the North Ward as representatives of “The North Ward Merchants Protective Cooperative.” One of the mobsters describes the neighborhood as “transitional” still populated demographically by “a lot of marginal types” but also many remnants of the old Italian enclave. This includes Mrs. Conti, an old Italian lady who sits on the street corner and an Italian poultry market,

“Caputo’s Live Poultry,” that caters to Italians whose owner hands Soprano family mobsters an envelope filled with cash as part of their “round the clock security” work as a result of “weekly dues to us” that provides the business with “all the supplemental safety net you’ll ever need” (S6, E8). Tony, who also owns the building that houses the market is approached by a real estate agent Julianna Skiff (Julianna Margulies) looking to purchase the property for the juice franchise Jamba Juice, while he is visiting the “old neighborhood” after doing his daily business “around the corner” at Satriales Pork Store. While Skiff makes an offer to Tony to buy the property that does not meet Tony’s price, Tony tells her “It’d be a real loss to the neighborhood.” She replies, “Don’t you live in North Caldwell?” Tony replies that he does not want to sell because “you drive around America today and everything looks the same, Old Navy, Bed, Bath and whatever. The North Ward is the North Ward” (S6, E8).

While lamenting the homogenization of American culture and spaces and the potential “loss” of an ethnic urban space that he claims is an essential element in maintaining the “authentic” Italian character of New Jersey, Tony is forced to defend his own escape from the enclave. So, Tony launches into an explanation to Skiff of his family route of upward mobility from Italy to New York to Newark and onto North Caldwell or what he terms “the trek up guinea gulch, Bloomfield Avenue” (S6, E8). Tony refuses to sell, because he believes it would diminish the Italian presence in Newark and tarnish his golden memories of his Italian “roots” that he claims “go way back here” (S6, E8). Tony follows this by a little nostalgia tour of the neighborhood that concludes with a conversation with a long time Italian American resident sitting on Bloomfield Avenue, Mrs. Conti. Tony greets her in Italian “Oh, Mrs. Conti. *Como esta?*” She replies by

telling him “Oh Andy! Hey I need your help. Those nigger fucking whores, they play music so loud . . . I ask them nice to turn it down but they tell me to go fuck myself.” Tony ends the conversation by telling her, “I’ll see what I can do” (S6, E8). Of course Tony’s interest in the bottom line, as well as his interest in an affair with Skiff, pre-empts his claim of a strong desire for ethnic continuity in the diminishing Italian enclave. For Tony, capitalism trumps *campanilismo*. And after watching Mrs. Conti walk down the street, he decides to sell the property to Jamba Juice. The episode ends with Caputo complaining to Patsy Parisi that “the building’s been sold to a fucking juice company” as Patsy (unaware that it is his boss Tony who sold it) declaims, “What’s happening to the neighborhood?” (S6, E8).

While Tony may have ongoing inner and outer tensions about the continuity of American *Italianita* in his own home state, the show also vividly portrays a wide array of tensions between New York and New Jersey that often underscore the idea of ethnic authenticity. The New Jersey of *The Sopranos* is regularly portrayed in the series as a state of American Italian being that seems to exist in eternal comparison and contrast to New York. It is represented as periphery to New York’s center. Drea De Matteo, who portrayed Adriana La Cerva, the doomed girlfriend of Christopher Moltisanti, (she is murdered at the end of season five by Silvio Dante when it’s discovered she is an FBI informant) states in her audio commentary on the episode “Long Term Parking” in the fifth season DVD of the show that the New Jersey, New York tension was an essential element of the series. De Matteo comments on a scene where Tony meets Johnny Sack under The Brooklyn Bridge with the Lower Manhattan skyline behind them and says to him “The King of New York!” (S5, E7). She says

New York City. I mean Jersey is like a main character in the show, the main backdrop. But New York always represents like the elite on the show. You know like they [the New Jersey Sopranos] never quite make it into Manhattan. Johnny Sack is a boss like Tony, but New York is always bigger, always better [than New Jersey]. You can't recreate this anywhere. (HBO DVD commentary S5, E7)

New Jersey is also portrayed in the series as a place that is contemptuously dismissed as “Jersey” by members of the New York Lupertazzi crime family. And in many ways New Jersey is portrayed throughout *The Sopranos* as a kind of second rate “not New York” (my term). Most of the scenes that feature New York in the series take place in either brilliant nightclubs, fine restaurants with the majestic Brooklyn Bridge and illuminated Manhattan skyline prominently featured as the backdrop, or the dark, backrooms of a “social club” on Mulberry Street in Little Italy where Tony regularly meets with one of the Lupertazzi crime bosses. New York is the big time center where (according to Lupertazzi crime boss Phil Leotardo) the authentic major players in the mob operate. New Jersey is the peripheral frontier occupied by second class mobsters, and only a site for the New York mob's imperial encroachment and plunder. The New Jersey of *The Sopranos* is portrayed as not New York—that grand shimmering place across the river beyond the bridge and tunnels. Charles Strum, in a *New York Times* article on the use of New Jersey as a location in *The Sopranos*, points out that in the series “New Jersey is more than just the way to someplace else, but also very much about place—with roads and textures hard and soft, inviting and repellent, silly and sophisticated (Strum). Chase vividly uses not only the bridges, roads, and turnpikes of New Jersey, but a wide range

of specific locations like restaurants, sporting goods stores, office supplies, strip clubs, houses, churches, small businesses, main streets, airports in cities and towns like Lodi, Newark, Belleville, Montclair, Boonton, Wayne, Bloomfield, Verona, Asbury Park, North Caldwell, Paterson, West Orange, Liberty Island State Park and many others. Chase understood that the images usually conjured up in the American popular imagination about New Jersey are of a state filled with industrial wastelands, bad taste (now demonstrated by the television series *Jersey Shore* or *The Housewives of New Jersey*) and highways, bridges and Bruce Springsteen who perpetually sings of escape from Jersey. In an interview about the series on the season one DVD release, Chase recounted an early production conversation with an HBO director of programming who informed Chase that he “needs to get New Jersey right” to which Chase replied “Absolutely, you bet” (HBO DVD, S1). Chase not only got the realism of the New Jersey setting “right” but also the way in which Tony’s *percorso* as an Italian American from New York to New Jersey is a route fraught with tension and danger and an ongoing and growing crisis between New Jersey and New York.

New York, in the series, is symbolized by the powerful and diabolical Lupertazzi crime family— led by (in order of succession in the series) Carmine Lupertazzi, John Sacrimoni (Johnny Sack) and Phil Leotardo. One of the more troubling moments in the series (and the moment that begins direct conflict between New York and New Jersey) occurs in season three when Tony discovers that the Lupertazzi crime family under boss Johnny Sack has relocated from New York to a suburban New Jersey mansion enclave near Tony’s own house in North Caldwell. When Tony visits Sack at his new home to discuss the move, Sack underplays the significance of it. Tony says, “I didn’t know you

were moving to New Jersey” and Sack responds by informing him that it is “strictly a place to live” even though the idea is not boss Carmine’s “favorite subject, me moving to New Jersey” even though “It’s what? A Half hour, forty five minutes over the Bridge” (S3, E4). Sack reassures Tony “I have no intention of sticking my beak in. I mean there’s New York and there’s the Soprano family” (S3, E4). Johnny ends the scene by telling Tony that as a New Yorker living in Jersey he is “a stranger in a strange land” (S3, E4). While earlier in the episode Carmine tells Tony, “Our [New York] family’s been doing our Jersey business with the Sopranos for a long time in a peaceful and profitable way and I wanna keep it like that,” it becomes more and more evident that Sack’s relocation has the very purpose in mind of consolidating more power and making more money by direct involvement in New Jersey. Even though at the end of a meeting with Ralphie Cifaretto, an unhappy capo in the Soprano family, Johnny Sack informs him that “New York and New Jersey have long standing ties and that’s not gonna change,” the presence of “New York” in New Jersey becomes more and more problematic, as it is evident that “New York” wants to infiltrate New Jersey and exert and consolidate its power and influence and sow seeds of discontent in “The Garden State” (S3, E4). This becomes a growing source of tension and eventual outright violence and warfare between New York and New Jersey as the series continues.

In the season five episode “In Camelot,” Tony goes to New York’s Little Italy to negotiate a percentage of a land deal with Johnny Sack and under boss Phil Leotardo. Tony has good reason to believe that Phil, an older New York mobster, does not respect his leadership. After Tony leaves, Sack tells Leotardo that he needs to respect Tony because, “Philly, he’s a boss.” Phil replies with a roll of his eyes and a contemptuous tone

to his voice as he says, “Jersey? C’mon, huh?” (S6, E 7). Leotardo’s response indicates not only his lack of respect for Tony, but the State he represents. And after mob boss Carmine Lupertazzi dies from a stroke and Johnny Sack dies from lung cancer, Phil is elevated to the position of boss and the tension between New York and New Jersey reaches an all time high pitch and eventually open war. In the season six episode “Remember When” at a party that celebrates Leotardo’s elevation to Lupertazzi family boss, he remarks to Tony who leaves the party early, “You leaving already?” Tony replies “It’s a long hike to New Jersey” to which Phil responds “Sure, I used to drive it myself. No more though” (S6, E 15). Leotardo, in the sixth season episode “The Blue Comet,” refers to the Soprano family status by pointing to what he believes is the link between their geographic location and their status within *Cosa Nostra*. He decides to kill Tony because, “Historically, Carmine always said that the Sopranos are nothing more than a glorified crew” and that while New York has “five fucking [crime] families we’ve got this pygmy thing over in Jersey” (S6, E 20). This sets in motion the murder of Tony’s brother in law, the attempted assassination of Tony’s *consigliere* Silvio Dante, and the plot to kill Tony. From the series’ opening image New York is ever present, on the opposite shoreline, always in the rear view mirror, back over the bridges and turnpike, back through the tunnels, back into the memories and lives of Italian Americans, but in *The Sopranos*, it is a problematic source of tension, a site that considers New Jersey to be inferior and filled with bridge and tunnel interlopers, and in the end a direct threat to Tony’s livelihoods and possibly his life. Ironically, the first word that Tony’s hears on the last day of the last episode “Made in America” is “New York” as he is shocked awake at his hiding place in Belleville, by the sound of a radio alarm announcing, “New York’s

classic rock station Q104” as he hides from “New York” ominously aware of the potential reach of New York into his New Jersey space.

Tony’s Italian American *Percorso*

The tensions with New York are not the only threat to Tony Soprano’s existence. Throughout all six seasons of the series, Tony experiences the threat of psychic fragmentation as a result of ongoing tensions between his perceptions of values associated with what he believes are indicators of authentic Italian American ethnicity and the stresses of his dysfunctional personal and mob family situation. The fragmented images of the opening montage are emblematic of not only the outer *percorso* of Tony Soprano, but an inner one he experiences as an Italian American. This makes for one dangerous *percorso*. And it results in him experiencing panic attacks and the necessity of seeing an Italian American psychiatrist Dr. Jennifer Melfi. Many of his sessions with Melfi offer the opportunity for discussion of this convoluted *percorso* of Tony’s American *Italianita*. He often explains to her how he translates and transforms (often unsuccessfully) old world Italian values into new world American life and social realities. In the opening scene of the very first episode of the series, Tony tells Melfi that he feels that “it’s good to be in something from the ground floor” but that “lately I’m getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over” (S1, E1). It is not only vague existential, post modern American angst that Tony is describing to Dr. Melfi, but an expression of very specific anxieties about Italian American life and mob life in a post modern world.

The *Cosa Nostra* of the late twentieth, early twenty-first century is portrayed in the series as a troubling and troubled enterprise for Tony. It is supposed to be one of the

last bastions of Italian American ethnic insularity with values that are distinctly Old World transplants rooted in fraternity, loyalty, respect, honor and profit with bonds tighter than even the traditional Italian family. But mob reality for Tony is a world of greed, self-indulgence, brutality, hypocrisy and instability where *omerta* (the vow of silence), *rispetto* (respect), and *onore* (honor) are only given lip service. Along with anxiety about the decline of *Cosa Nostra*, Tony deals with the usual litany of American life such as economic uncertainty, caring for elderly parents, personal health issues, marital conflicts, problematic child rearing, and the pressures of maintaining an upwardly mobile suburban lifestyle. Melfi simply responds by suggesting “many Americans feel that way.” Tony says that he thinks “about my father. He never reached the heights like me, but in a lot of ways he had it better; he had his people; they had their standards, they had their pride.” Tony is referencing an idealized Italian American and “golden days of the mob” past which valued connections to “people,” “standards,” and ethnic “pride” that he believes is disappearing. But these ideas still function in his mind as an essential element in his understanding of his own Italian-ness – a source of nostalgic foundational ethnicity. For most of the series, Tony portrays the symbolic artifacts of American *Italianita* that seem to verify his ethnic identity. Gardaphe, in *Wise Guys to Wise Men*, suggests that Tony’s “heritage” is never defined by Chase (157). That claim wildly underplays the complex array of direct American Italian references, use of dialect, discussions, and enactments that fill the eighty four hours of narrative. There is no doubt for the viewer that this is an Italian American world with a wide array of ethnic signs and symbols vividly portrayed. Tony wears the gold religious medallion, eats *sfogliatelle*, *mortedella*, *prosciutto*, pounds of ziti, bushels of mussels, drinks gallons of *regaliali*, and

grappa, says, “*Va napoli,*” or “*vaffanculo,*” calls people *stunods* and situates his origins as “Napolitan.” Early in the series first episode Tony evokes *campanilismo* by asking Melfi (as he looks at her diploma from Tufts University and sees her name Melfi): “What part of the boot you from?” Melfi responds, “My father’s people were from Casserta”. Tony points to himself and says “Avellino. My mother would have loved it if you and I got together” (S1, E1). While he laments the loss of what he considers Italian values and more specifically mob values –his evocation of what he considers Italianness is not just lip service. Tony never doubts or questions his Italian-ness. *Ce’lho nel sangue*--It’s in his blood—it is his life. His American *Italianita* is not considered by him to be a roadblock in his *percorso*. It’s an essential part of his daily commute through the psychic wastelands and borderlands of his existence.

Tony’s anxieties about the potential deterioration of mob "Family" loyalties and his complicity in the dissolution of his personal family results in the invocation of his Italian “roots” and values as a site of stability through the selective interpretation of Italian American history and culture. While any viewer of the series who is not a *testa di rapa* (blockhead) knows that Tony is not an exemplary Italian American third generation immigrant descendent, he is represented as a person who valorizes and cites history (particularly as portrayed on The History Channel) and specifically Italian American history. In the season two episode “From Where to Eternity” Tony offers an exposition of Italian American history and the place of the Mafia in it. In the episode, Tony is quick to evoke Italian American history to justify himself and his mob activities by a careful selection of a usable Italian America past in Melfi’s presence. Tony says,

When America opened the floodgates and let all us Italians in, what do you think they were doing it for? Because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us. They needed us to build their cities and dig their subways and to make 'em richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers, they needed worker bees and there we were. But some of us didn't want to swarm around their hive and lose who we were. We wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us. Honor, and family, and loyalty. And some of us wanted a piece of the action. We weren't educated like the Americans. But we had the balls to take what we wanted. Those other fucks, those other... The J.P. Morgans, they were crooks and killers too, but that was a business, right? The American way. (Melfi): That might all be true. But what do poor Italian immigrants have to do with you and what happens every morning you step out of bed? (Tony): What the fuck is this all of a sudden? I'm just asking a question. Oh, so you're taking a stand here now. Huh? You pick here to make a stand? After all this time, telling me that nothing's my fault because of poor parenting. You pick now to act like Betsy-fucking-Ross!

(S2, E8)

Here Tony actively narrates himself into a connection with the Italian *Diaspora*, even though his vision of himself is interrogated and foreclosed by Dr. Melfi near the end with the pointed question-- “What do poor Italian immigrants have to do with you?” A troubling element of Tony’s interpretive, selective commentary on Italian American heritage includes a recognition that at the heart of the American experience (certainly for

Tony) exists a heart of darkness. At the center of his own route into the heartlands of the American landscape is an enterprise built and perpetuated on violence, domination, greed, lies, subordination, and exploitation that enable his upward mobility. This movement, like the erratic *percorso* into his upper middle class gated community is a route that involves facing socio-economic barriers and (in his case) overcoming them by force. Tony, however, narrates the history of Italians in America as a negotiation between the values of *la via vecchia* -- “*onore, e famiglia, e lealta*--honor and family and loyalty-- and the marketplace—an identity fraught with conflicts between American aspirations and Italian tradition. And Melfi calls Tony to account for conflating these things in his litany of Italian pride and history. Her question is: How does the experience of first generation immigrants in the early twentieth century in America impact this guy’s American *Italianita*, in the late twentieth century? What does the conflation of “honor” and the quest for “a piece of the action” mean for third generation Italian American Tony as he drives the highways and byways of Jersey and New York everyday as a member of *la Cosa Nostra*? And by extension Melfi poses this question with all modern Italian Americans in mind.

Chase, in *The Sopranos*, also offers a wide ranging interrogation of issues linked to ethnic self fashioning in the circuitous *percorso* of American *Italianita* in the suburbs. One major issue is a deep sense of displaced *campanilismo*. Since the Italian Americans in the suburbs of *The Sopranos* no longer maintain either a strong sense of Italian regional loyalty (*campanilismo*) or even American Italian regional loyalty (the reconfigured *campanilismo* of the urban ethnic enclaves) they often demonstrate a displaced *campanilismo*. This idea of ethnic self fashioning involves individual Italian

Americans selecting or valorizing regional elements of *Italianita* that they believe are foundational to their American *Italianita*. For example, since most American Italians are of southern Italian descent, it is common for them to evoke and valorize distinctive Northern Italian history, people and places as elements of their identity. With this as a background, the series underscores the persistent problems of later generation Italian Americans who continue the Italian North /South and inter-regional negative cultural attitudes, prejudices and practices. In the season five episode “Marco Polo” Chase underscores how spatial and geo-cultural identity still haunts Italian Americans like Carmela’s mother Mary DeAngelis, and old Italian regional prejudices still affect their self fashioning and attitudes towards fellow Italian Americans. At the seventy-fifth birthday party for Carmela’s father Hugh DeAngelis, Carmela’s mother Mary invites a retired college professor and former State Department employee named “Dr. Fegoli” and his wife. She tries to persuade Carmela not to invite Tony (they are temporarily separated) because she fears that his coarse Southern Italian ways will offend her friends who she claims are “cultured” Italians. Tony is invited at Carmela’s father’s insistence and arrives with a necklace of sausages from a local Italian butcher, “Colombo’s, the birthday boy’s favorite” (S5, E8) Later, Carmela’s mother expresses her disgust at Tony and the style of Italian cooking of Tony’s mother (Southern), by telling the Fegolis “you know Carmela’s mother- in- law detested Northern [Italian] cooking. She skeeved the butter. The father was like that too. The whole Soprano bunch over there” (S5, E8). The local priest, Father Intintola chimes in to say “So many Napolitanos and Sicilianos feel that way.” Mary replies, “Well you really have to go to Italy to know and so many of them don’t. But those recipes you sent me from Tuscany. My God! They were a

revelation” (S5, E8). The episode ends with a confrontation between Mary and Carmela who overhears Mary apologizing to the Fegolis for the party. Carmela asks Mary what she is sorry for, and she replies, “Oh please Carmela! The off colored jokes, the sausage twirling. He’s a cultured Italian. Russ [Fegoli] is a success, a diplomat. This was a shock to him” (S5, E8). Carmela responds with a litany of invectives towards her mother about her attitude towards Tony, her own heritage, and by extension all Southern Italians.

Carmela says,

(Carmela) That’s why you didn’t want Tony here. . . All along it was so that your cultured Italian friends who were born and raised on Arthur Avenue [Italian American enclave in the Bronx], I might add, wouldn’t meet your “*gavone*” [Neapolitan dialect for *cafone* or boor) son-in-law.

(Mary) He made us all look like *gavones*. (Carmela) Whatever we are I am proud of it unlike you obviously. (Mary) I have always been proud of my heritage. (Carmela) Bullshit! I remember you telling Aunt Rose that you were glad DeAngelis didn’t end in a vowel! And when Meadow came out you said “Oh, my God! She’s so dark! No, there are Italians all around with their closet self loathing. I just never wanted to believe my mother was one of them. What the fuck are you crying about? The secret is out!
(S5, E8)

As this scene vividly demonstrates, the American Italian *percorso* is still informed by traces of the historical tensions of Italian *campanilismo*. This is a dramatization of the importance of place for Italian identity and the pattern of *recorsi Della storia* (history repeating itself) in the *percorso* of American *Italianita*. Chase also exposes the remnants

of the Northern Italian negative attitudes towards Southern Italians that still exists in the lives of Italian Americans and the issue of ethnic self hatred or what Carmela terms Italian American “closet self loathing” (S5, E8).

“Made In America”

Antonio Gramsci, in “Continuation of life” in the periodical *Avanti!* states, “Entering and exiting. These two words must be abolished. One does not enter or exit: one continues” (66). Chase portrays that Tony will continue on this circuitous *percorso* and his trip will always be problematic. Tony enters this world from New York in darkness and exits the series eighty six hours later in suburban New Jersey in darkness. Tony exits the Lincoln Tunnel and enters Jersey, but at the end of the series, Tony is trapped in New Jersey and only enters a startling blackness. It is unclear how Tony will continue, but the series’ controversial ending leaves both the characters and the viewers in a problematic liminal space. The scene is simply depicting a dinner with the entire Soprano family in Holstens, a restaurant in suburban Bloomfield. Tony waits in a booth for Carmela, AJ, and Meadow, and plays the song “Don’t Stop Believing” by Journey on the jukebox, while an array of people come and go in the restaurant. Earlier in the episode Tony negotiated a peace settlement with “New York” that involved the assassination of Phil Leotardo. He is also informed by his attorney that he will face a Federal indictment, as a result of the testimony of a member of the Soprano crime family who has “flipped.” As Carmela and AJ arrives, Meadow is delayed as she tries to find a parking space, and the final scene shows Tony looking up as the entry bell to the restaurant rings and the screen goes black and silent for ten seconds until the final credits roll ending the series. The trajectory of the entire series moves from a starting image of darkness(as Tony

emerges from the New York side of the Lincoln Tunnel) to a startling image of blackness in the final ten seconds of the final scene in the final episode in season six. Tony begins in a transitional space in darkness on a *percorso* to a cul-de-sac and the entire series ends in a ten second black screen as Tony sits in Holsten's Restaurant in Bloomfield in suburban New Jersey looking at an uncertain future—either arrest by the FBI, death by a mob hit, quite possibly from New York, or simply a reunion with his daughter before one of the above outcomes.

The whole eighty four episode series portrays a narrative of a dark, problematic interstitial space of not only the American *Cosa Nostra* at the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first centuries, but also the transitional realities of Italian American post urban culture. New Jersey residents who live on the peripheries of New York City (as I noted early in this chapter) are cast by New Yorkers as the “bridge and tunnel crowd.” And the transitional, interstitial nature of both of those structures is indicative of the ongoing attitude of New Yorkers to their Western neighbors. They are always mobile, usually returning to New York as consumers or to crowd out or carve out the already congested New York spaces with their outlander attitudes and actions. Some New Jersey residents like academic Edvige Guinta highlight the unique contributions of New Jersey Italians, but are forced to admit to the necessary link they have to New York. In her introduction to the anthology *Italian Writers on New Jersey* Guinta suggests that New Jersey's Italian American communities “embody the complexities of American identity as it is rooted in geography, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality” while ironically no entries in the entire anthology ever highlight the complex representations of all those resonant American issues in *The Sopranos* (4). But Guinta, along with

valorizing the unique contributions of New Jersey to the creative perpetuation of Italian American culture and life, stresses the essential connections between New Jersey and New York, or what she terms “the productive crossings between people, places, and creative work of New York and New Jersey” and “as well as the exchange of people and ideas between New Jersey and The City which much of its coastline faces” (11-12). And while writing on *The Sopranos* is not represented in the anthology, two of the represented works underscore a major, distinctive New Jersey Italian American theme that the series profoundly represents, particularly in the life and mind of Tony. Susanne Antonetta’s short narrative “Nevertheless, it Moves” offers an image of the type of Italian American suburban displacement and disorientation that is dramatized at the beginning of every episode of *The Sopranos* in Tony’s circuitous *percorso* from New York to a New Jersey cul-de-sac in the opening credit montage. Antonetta writes as a suburban Italian American, and in her narrative she links the trajectory of her Italian American life and identity to the convolutions of a brain. She writes, “The brain looks as if it ought to be a map. Cul-de-sacs and straight-aways. All that mazy motion. It’s a misleading map, because if you followed its spongiform surface it would circle you randomly around, not even ending where you began” (151). And Guinta ends her own poem “Gardener” (an elegiac poem that mourns the loss of Italian family members living and lost in New Jersey) with verses that highlight a singular element portrayed throughout *The Sopranos*—a lamentation of the passing away or imminent disappearance of Italian values and those traditions and memories embodied in people and places. Guinta writes, “What if in the solitude of the Garden State / all you can smell is the aroma of death / and the only guests at your party / are the old Italians dancing / a tarantella inside your heart?”

(54). Chase portrays Tony in a perpetual struggle with the post modern world and the place of his imagined Italian heritage within that world and its potential loss. Throughout the series he not only laments the death of a wide range of friends, mistresses, and mob associates (some from his own hand) but also constantly faces the possibility of his own death (he survives two mob related assassination attempts and at the very end of the series he is the target of a possible hit by the New York Lupertazzi crime family) as well as the loss of distinctive Italian values.

Sociologist Jerome Kruse, in his essay “New Approaches to the Study of Italians in Metropolitan New York,” speculates that “though there is considerable unfinished work on Italian American neighborhoods in New York City itself, it is the suburbs that may provide the greatest opportunity for research” (48). Kruse ends his study by raising the question of how the lifestyles and values of “upwardly mobile suburbanized Italian Americans” will impact Italian American ethnic identity and possibly “remove the last vestiges of the ethnic socio-spatial culture” resident in the older urban New York enclaves (49). Kruse could not have foreseen that a television show about a New Jersey Italian American mobster would address this question directly in its highly ambivalent depiction of Italian American life and culture set outside of New York. Chase demonstrates a complex dedication in *The Sopranos* to exploring how culture is fluid and ethnic identity is negotiable by portraying the generational disturbances, assimilation, and geographic dispersion of Italian Americans and their consequences for cultural continuity. Since places like the Little Italys of New York and Newark are a diminishing factor in the daily lives of the suburban Sopranos, the series dramatizes the problems of a displaced *campanilismo* in the *percorso* of American *Italianita* in the late twentieth and

early twenty first centuries. The series is not only a cultural production about Italian Americans in a location, however, but locating American *Italianita* in a particular time. The *immaginario Nuova Jersey* world of *The Sopranos* portrays how a post immigrant, post urban culture engages in daily life the problematic maintenance of a distinctive cultural identity and how that identity is affected by translocations out of the ethnic urban enclaves into the suburbs and beyond. Chase, in the vivid opening montage and over the course of eighty four hours of narrative in *The Sopranos*, inventories and dramatizes the remaining and eroding traces of American *Italianita* in sites where place becomes less and less a factor in the continuity of Italian American identity as Americans of Italian descent move generationally and spatially further from the initial immigration and settlement experiences of their *paesi* ancestors in a circuitous *percorso*. I still regularly travel through the Lincoln Tunnel to New York and I still marvel at that tile boundary marker designating the move from the State of New Jersey to the State of New York. But my own American *Italianita percorso* does not lead me back to my relatives in New York. Most have dispersed to the suburbs, some even in New Jersey. It is in my return trip from New York, like Tony Soprano, from the darkness of the tunnel, into the harsh light of New Jersey that I now vividly think of the transitional, future *percorso* of American *Italianita* and the significance of both *immaginario Nuova York* and *immaginario Nuova Jersey* in the ongoing narrative of the Italian American experience.

Epilogue

A tricky business, that of understanding New York. The City is always on the move, forever shifting. You leave it one day and you come back the next to find that it has changed mood and countenance.—Mario Maffi, *New York City: An Outsider's Inside View*

The story of Italians in New York is one of the great human dramas of history, and all New Yorkers can take pride in and derive inspiration from its telling. ---Philip Cannistraro

Policemen inside their booths flashed by us like paint strokes on the tiled walls of the Lincoln Tunnel. We were going to New Jersey . . . Across the river on our left the New York skyline was a dull gray primer, an unfinished cityscape some painter left for later on. Less than an hour before we had walked Manhattan's skyscraped streets, but now the big city seemed so distant. Soon we would leave it behind . . . Thoughts of living in God's country filled my head. —Salvatore A.M. Buttaci, "Lincoln Tunnel: Jersey Bound"

"What does an Italian look like?"—Guido Galante

E.B. White, in his essay "Here is New York," describes New York City as "without any doubt the greatest human concentrate on earth, the poem whose magic is comprehensible to millions of permanent residents but whose full meaning will always remain elusive" (153-54). As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, Italian American writers also faced the complex challenge of understanding and representing the occasionally "elusive" meaning of their New York experience in the unique context of an emergent American *Italianita*. Edward Corsi, in the foreword to the 1938 *The Italians of New York* written by the Workers of the Federal Writers' Project (FWP) that I noted in chapter two, notes "the ferment of Italian cultural activity in New York," as the result of the creative production of Italian Americans who "have given unsparingly of their genius and courage in exchange for the freedom and opportunity that the new land offered" (x). The anonymous writers of the book devote a short section titled "Italian Writers in New York" in the chapter highlighting New York Italian American "Creative Work and Intellectual Influence." They briefly note the work of first-generation immigrant writers, such as poets Arturo Giovanniti and Luigi Carnovali, as well as novelists Ettore Moffa and Francesca Vinciguerra, and journalist Luigi Forgione. The writers of this chapter

notes that these authors “whose roots have struck deep into the intellectual and artistic soil of Italian culture” have “attempted, with a considerable measure of success, to transplant Italian intellectual and cultural life among their fellow countrymen here, with, however, an alert attention to the peculiar needs and influence of the American scene” (161). The anonymous FWP writers of this chapter are describing early examples of Italian American writing (in this case, by first-generation immigrants who settled in New York City), ostensibly valorizing the Italian side of the term, but noting that the writers re-configured and “transplant[ed]” Italian “intellectual and cultural” values in American sites—especially the site where their American experience began--New York City (161). This brief mention of the accomplishments of America writers of Italian descent in New York City by the FWP underscores what I have emphasized in this dissertation. The narrative and an understanding of American *Italianita* must be deeply linked to New York City and its environs like New Jersey where Italians settled and transformed not only their lives, but the spaces and places they inhabited. This is the legacy that I have explored in this dissertation. But their unique contributions have not always been as valued as I have argued they should be.

My focus in this dissertation has been on a select group of cultural artifacts produced by a few New York and New Jersey Italian Americans. Using an Italian culinary metaphor, I was only able to provide an *antipasto*, a sampling of writing intended to whet the appetite. But the work of Italian American writers and cultural producers from New York and New Jersey is *un grande feste*, a grand feast. Therefore, I necessarily omitted the broad range of cultural productions by Italian Americans in fields such as theater, cinema, poetry, music, the visual arts, religion, politics, food, and

journalism that provide a multi-dimensional view of Italian Americans in New York and New Jersey. Research in Italian American culture in relation to urban New York City and New Jersey has largely been the purview of sociologists and historians, such as Donna Gabaccia, Jerome Kruse, Philip Cannistraro, Richard Alba and many others I have cited throughout this dissertation. But I have argued that it is also a necessary element in an intellectual inquiry into literary (and tele-visual) representations of Italian American culture that are core elements in American *Italianita*. This is not always reflected in anthologies or literary surveys of New York writers. In *Writing New York*, a recent anthology of writing about New York in American letters through the last two centuries, editor Phillip Lopate notes that “Few cities have inspired as much great writing as New York, or indeed as much writing: the literature of the city is extraordinary for its variety and sheer volume” (xvii). But in the one hundred and thirty representative texts ranging from historical fiction to autobiographical writing on New York, Italian Americans rate two representative works—an excerpt of Mario Puzo’s novel *The Fortunate Pilgrim* and a journalistic piece about the construction of the Verrazano Bridge by Gay Talese. Ironically, it was Talese writing in a venerable New York literary institution, *The New York Times Book Review* on 14 March 1993, who posed the question to the literary community in general-- “Where Are the Italian American Novelists?” The token inclusion of Puzo’s novel (which Lopate terms “the single best novel about Italian American life”) in an anthology about New York writing begs a version of Talese’s question: where are the other Italian American writers? (862). Furthermore, Shaun O’Connell’s recent literary history of New York City, *Remarkable Unspeakable New York*, analyzes the work of over one hundred New York writers, but offers only three

cursory mentions of Italian American writers. While O'Connell suggests that ethnic writers were part of a generation of writers that "developed new plots, new voices, and new artistic designs" in their representations of New York, he never acknowledges the contributions of Italian American writers, painters, playwrights, and poets in his description of the emerging "New York literary style" (86). His only mention at any length of an Italian American writer is in a chapter on New York in the 1930's when he describes Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* as an "overwrought novel of Italian American alienation in the City" (208). Italian American cultural production itself is largely excluded from O'Connell's "literary history" of New York. And two recent works on the literature and poetry of New York almost totally exclude Italian American writers. *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of New York*, edited by Cyrus Patell and Bryan Waterman and published in 2010, includes essays that point out the contributions of ethnic writers to the literary world of New York City, but even the one essay on immigrant literature only references Jewish and Irish writers and works, without one mention of Italian writers! Patell and Waterman, in their introductory essay stress the important contribution of immigrant cultures to the life and history of the city and point out that "New York's cosmopolitanism arises from points of contact among its different neighborhoods and among the cultures and subcultures they represent" (4). But they offer no mention of Italians, nor do they include any essay or study that details the vivid contributions of Italian American New York cultural productions. The 2007 poetry anthology *I Speak of the City: Poems of New York*, edited by Stephen Wolf includes poems about New York from 1616 to 2005 by a wide range of poets. Out of the one hundred and forty two poets, only the poems of three Italian American poets are offered

including two Beat poets, Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Gregory Corso and modern poet Kim Addonizio. None of the representative poems by Ferlinghetti or Corso mention Italian American life. Addonizio offers one stanza about an “old Italian leaning over a child somewhere in New York City” that she later terms “the city / of grandparents, immigrants, arrivals” (262-263). Apart from that there is very little poetic representation of the vivid Italian presence in the literary palimpsest of New York City in this anthology. I admit that the above survey is not exhaustive, but it is a significant representative sampling. In part, to redress such omissions, my dissertation recovers the important ways in which New York City and environs like Northern New Jersey function as both the setting and the subject of a wide range of fictional and non-fiction Italian American narratives throughout the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty first centuries in the *percorso* of American *Italianita*.

Important sources for explorations of individual works by or about New York Italian Americans are found in the many literary anthologies, histories, and ethnographic studies by Italian American scholars. But, apart from a short overview chapter of Italian American New York writers by Fred Gardaphe in the New-York Historical Society sponsored work *The Italians of New York* and the brief chapter in the FWP work noted earlier, the definitive, exhaustive study of New York Italian American writers is one that is yet to be written. This dissertation joins the chorus of voices celebrating the accomplishments of Italian American New York writers but also underscores the importance of the nexus of place and ethnic identity portrayed by these cultural producers. New Jersey Italian American writers, on the other hand, are well represented in the 2002 anthology *Italian American Writers on New Jersey* edited by Jennifer Gillan,

Maria Mazziotti Gillan, and Edvige Giunta. But a critical essay, or even a critical nod to David Chase's *The Sopranos*, the work that I consider to be the most complex representation of Italian American culture and New Jersey Italian Americans in recent history, is totally and conspicuously absent from that volume. But it may be that the editors did not wish the series to represent New Jersey Italian Americans through the vivid lens of Chase's *The Sopranos*, despite its powerful representations of Italians from New Jersey. The alleged type of depiction of Italian Americans in the show (*Mafioso*) was at the heart of a cultural storm by many Italian American individuals and groups since its inception. Ironically, the almost mythic status of the notion of gangster connected or related Italian Americans in popular culture has been the result of the productions of Italian Americans, such as filmmakers Francis Coppola and his *Godfather* series, and Martin Scorsese with *Mean Streets*, *Casino*, and *Goodfellas*. Italian American groups who are still highly critical of the show suggest that *The Sopranos* is a show that is part of a discursive practice in many popular cultural productions that forecloses on Italian American identity by privileging negative portrayals, (usually Mafia or lower class). That invective is currently poured on another New Jersey based production portraying Italian American "guidos and guidettes," the MTV series *Jersey Shore*. As I argued in chapter three, excluding *The Sopranos* from the critical analysis and scholarly inquiry of the body of work by or about Italian Americans of New York or New Jersey strictly on the basis of its purported ethnic stereotyping is a denial of some of the main claims that many Italian American scholars have offered as the foci of their intellectual inquiry. Chase, in an interview on the DVD of the first season of *The Sopranos*, states:

The Italian American experience is an advertisement for America, for the

Democratic experiment. It's so hard for me to think of a group who have come from so little, who've done so well. If you have so little self esteem at this point, that these gangster movies bother you, I have to wonder why. Also, because the Italian mob thing has become, for whatever reason, a national myth. In the end, if your self esteem is that shallow and you have a problem with the fact that this tiny majority called gangsters make it tough for the rest of you, I think you should take your case to them. (HBO Season 1 DVD)

In this quote, Chase directly addressed what he believes is an over exaggerated sensitivity on the part of some Italian Americans about their cultural image. He, of course was addressing the attempts on the part of some Italian American organizations to censor the series because they claimed it perpetuated the mafia stereotype and denigrated Italian Americans.

Josephine Hendin argues "Italian American studies participates in a growing movement of scholars, poets, and writers toward a more inclusive and flexible ethnic discourse" (142). Hendin suggests that Italian American identity, like all ethnic identity "is not fixed and immutable but an open, unfolding social process of exploration and self-fashioning" (142). This dissertation underscored the importance of the interpenetration of place and ethnic identity as a means of negotiating what Hendin terms the "open" processes of ethnic self-fashioning by Americans of Italian descent (142). The nexus of place, American *Italiania*, and Italian American cultural production is a field of inquiry area that will provide ongoing exploration by Italian American scholars. Although my focus in this dissertation has been on works set in the borough of Manhattan in New York

City and North Jersey, there is a significant Italian American presence in a range of other New York and New Jersey sites. The other New York City boroughs, for example, still contain Italian American populations, particularly Bensonhurst in Brooklyn, Arthur Avenue in The Bronx, Howard Beach in Queens, and many areas of Staten Island. Although this dissertation did not examine Italian American writing set in those other New York City boroughs, I would highlight the need for Italian American scholars in the future to engage in the study of works by Italian Americans set in those sites, particularly works such as Joseph Papaleo's *Italian Stories* (Bronx), Anthony Valerio's *The Mediterranean Runs Through Brooklyn*, and *Conversation with Johnny* (Brooklyn), Salvatore La Puma's *The Boys of Bensonhurst* and *A Time for Wedding Cake* (Brooklyn), Josephine Gattuso Hendin's *The Right Thing to Do* (Queens), and Robert Viscusi's *Astoria* (Queens).

William Egelman, in his extensive 2008 study "Italian Americans in New York City: Population Decline and Cultural Change," asserts that the population of Italian Americans in New York City declined between 1980 and 2000. Egelman compared data from a 2005 Census Bureau American Community Survey and the 2000 U.S. census and concludes "The total Italian ancestry population declined by 7.1 percent between 2000 and 2005" (126). Egelman attributes this decline to "the aging population and out-migration [of Italian Americans] from the city" (126). He concludes his research by suggesting "the most significant finding from the research is the continued decline in the Italian American population in New York City" and "the need for more research on this group in other locales" (131). While there has been a decline in the numerical presence of Italian Americans in New York, their impact on the history, culture, complexity, and

richness of city life is still vivid and resonant. This is what I have explored in the sampling of Italian American New York writers in this dissertation. And my analysis of Northern New Jersey as represented in *The Sopranos*, one of those out-migration sites that Egelman terms “other locales,” emphasizes the fluidity and creative expansion of the boundaries of American *Italianita* (131). Fred Gardaphe, in *Leaving Little Italy*, asserts that since most Italian Americans no longer live in ethnic enclaves “it will be the job of culture, and not place, to help maintain and transmit a cultural identity that we can call Italian American” (152). While geographic dispersion, assimilation, inter-group contact and conflict and generational adaptivity are all factors that have influenced Italian American culture, place is still a significant factor in the continuity of American *Italianita*. Many Italians and Italian Americans have in the past and in the present categorize and evaluate their *Italianita* with place as a central element. As I demonstrated in the three chapters of this dissertation, it was Italian *campanilismo*, and, in America, reconfigured, re-imagined, or displaced, *campanilismo* that was a significant element in the complex of factors that are part of the creation and continuity, or the *percorso* of American *Italianita*. I chose to use the Italian word *percorso*, which means “route” throughout this dissertation for both its link as an image to the classic journey trope in literature and, of course, the literal term for a site of movement and mobility by Italian immigrants, and Italian American city dwellers and suburbanites. Like the route that I emphasized in chapter three that Tony Soprano takes from New York to North Caldwell, the overall *percorso* of American Italians has been a circuitous journey, not easily mapped or explained in a simple linear narrative. The Italian American writers and cultural producers that I selected, of course, all trace their ancestry to a literal journey

either they (Ventura, D'Angelo, Lapolla) or their ancestors (Di Donato, Chase) took from Italy to America. And the contact, settlement, and movement to, in, or from New York City are all important features of their personal and literary *storia* (history). I traced this *percorso* through an early immigrant narrative and a fictional representation of Italian American experience in New York, Luigi Donato Ventura's 1886 *Peppino* and Pascal D'Angelo's 1924 *Son of Italy*. These works were crucial elements in the formation of American *Italianita* and both texts register the initial impressions and urban experiences of the Italian *percorso* in the new world by Southern Italian immigrants in New York.

I explored the American Italian *percorso* enacted in two fictional accounts of first-generation Italian immigrant lives set in the Italian enclaves of Manhattan, Garibaldi Lapolla's 1935 *The Grand Gennaro* and Pietro Di Donato's 1939 *Christ in Concrete*. I noted how both novels reflect the reality of ethnic urban identity formation as a fluid space of constant self-fashioning and social and cultural negotiation. I underscored how Lapolla and Di Donato's novels record an emerging, adaptive, American Italian consciousness responding to unsettling contemporary urban realities, while vividly demonstrating the reciprocal influences of urban spaces, cultural pressures and ethnic identity formation. While my first chapter emphasized this *percorso* by noting the narrative positioning of writers in their initial translocation of Italian lives in the new world, the *percorso* of the Italian Americans in the second chapter involves individuals struggling to preserve *Italianita* through a process of reinterpretation as reconfigured *campanilismo* and American *Italianita*. And as I asserted in chapter three, *The Sopranos* is a post-modern, post-millennial cultural production informed by the notion that class mobility and suburbanization by Italian Americans signifies a potential loss of cultural

and ethnic power. The series portrays that ethnic identity for the Italian American becomes a problematic and circuitous *percorso* where an individual works to negotiate or maintain an ethnicity that is imperiled, diminished, or has become a hybrid, ethnic space largely perpetuated by memory and nostalgia.

Tutti Finiti

When my father Guido passed away, many of my Italian American relatives from New York and New Jersey sent condolences or came to the funeral and exchanged stories and memories. I had the privilege of delivering the eulogy and I stated that along with his love for his family, my father loved being both Italian and American. But as I noted in my introduction, my father was challenged throughout out his life by questions about what Italians look like and act like. To paraphrase one of the questions that dogged my father for his whole life: What does an Italian American look like in the twenty-first century United States? Or to use the central metaphor of this dissertation, what will be the remaining ethnic elements in the *percorso* of American *Italianita*? And, what readily identifiable characteristics and values will Americans of Italian descent maintain and perpetuate in future generations? That remains to be seen. As I explored in detail in this dissertation, an in depth understanding Italian American life, must include an exploration of its cultural and literary links to New York City and New Jersey.

I recently returned to New York City, driving a kind of reverse Tony Soprano-like *percorso* on New Jersey highways and bridges and through the Lincoln Tunnel into the vibrant sunlight of Mid-town Manhattan. My purpose for the trip was to visit the Lower East Side Tenement Museum. The tour included a visit to the tiny, three room apartment of the Baldizzi family, an Italian American family of four who lived there in

the early twentieth-century. The Baldizzi family was just one of the thousands of Italian American families that form colorful, vivid strands in the cultural panoply of New York City and the greater New York Metropolitan area. The Tenement Museum, located in a real former tenement on 97 Orchard Street, is just a few blocks south of Crosby Street where Ventura's *Peppino* takes place, and the fading Mulberry Street enclave of Little Italy where D'Angelo lived and socialized for a period represented in *Son of Italy* and the fictional characters of Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* struggled to survive. It is also a short walk to the Lexington Avenue subway line (built by Italian American laborers) that would take me north to the East Harlem, where Garibaldi Lapolla set his novel *The Grand Gennaro*. Most importantly for me, the Museum is near the Mott Street tenement that was the first living space for my grandfather Giovanni when he immigrated to America from Italy in 1923. A master shoemaker, he worked in a Long Island City ballerina shoe factory, before being encouraged by my Uncle Silvestre to move to Allentown, Pennsylvania and set up his own shoemaking business before bringing my father, Grandmother, and Uncle Angelo from Abruzzi to America. But my grandfather's and father's New York experience deeply resonated in their memories and the stories they told about their own *percorso* in America and my own understanding and appreciation of American *Italianita*.

Within American *Italianita*, there has been an on-going and hauntingly persistent range of tensions that *informs* all the works in this dissertation. These tensions resonate in the initial counter-discursive responses (Ventura, D'Angelo) to ethnic stereotyping during the height of Italian immigration to the United States between 1880 and 1924, to the ongoing cultural challenges in the later generations of maintaining, defending, or

preserving elements and values distinctive to Italian American culture (Lapolla, Di Donato, Chase). These writers struggled with the challenge of negotiating the often traumatic or puzzling gap between their ideals of America and the often bitter American realities of xenophobia, poverty, or the brutal, exploitative nature of American capitalism. The expressive, passionate culture known as American *Italianita* arose and has been perpetuated in the challenging, resonant tensions of those in-between spaces. All of the cultural productions that I examined in this dissertation offered a vivid representation of the problems, ambiguities, sorrows and joys of Italian American life that emerged out of the complex social and cultural nexus of ethnic urban and suburban American life and individual experience. Those factors converged in these narratives, forming a vibrant, vital representation of an ethnic group in American culture that is often stereotyped or fetishized in popular perceptions as an insular, white, oversexed, boisterous, family centered, gluttonous, potentially violent ethnic culture with good food, operatic singing voices and mob connections. Italian Americans are no longer the sub-altern Southern Italian masses that flooded America in the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries, imagined as a potential threat to American progress and stability, but part of a heterogeneous group struggling at times with the continuation of traditional cultural practices and beliefs. Many Americans of Italian descent today in the early twenty first century may be virtually indistinguishable from their working, middle, and upper class counterparts in the U.S. And many Italian scholars and sociologists either point out or lament the potential for the diminishment and possible disappearance of *Italianita* altogether with generational distance from the initial immigrant experience or early urban enclave world. Fortunately, for future generations of Americans of Italian descent who

seek to examine the “inventory of traces” (to use Gramsci’s term), much of Italian New York and New Jersey still lives in the writing, the sociological documents, the imaginative literature, personal stories, and a wide range of cultural artifacts of Italian Americans whose lives in *L’America* began with a New York City encounter. New York is a city that symbolizes the collective challenges, hopes, abstract dreams and concrete nightmares of Italian and other immigrants. Italian Americans created vital hybrid communities and cultural productions that explored, represented, interrogated, celebrated, and expanded the boundaries of Italian American life in New York and its environs. Understanding Italian American life without an exploration of its literary links to New York City or New Jersey is to erase or neglect an element of life and culture that is not only inscribed on the streets, buildings, bridges, alleys, churches of the City and its suburbs, but in the lives and personal narratives of millions of later generations of Italian Americans. Like the dynamic city or suburban settings in which the fictional Italian American characters live and move, the complex realities and intersections of city and suburban life and ethnic identity are engaged and enacted in the New York City narratives and *The Sopranos*. The creative, imaginative reconstructions of lived urban and suburban environments through the reassertion of the importance of place are essential parts of the horizon of the *percorso* of American *Italianita*.

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- Verdicchio, Pasquale. *Bound by Distance*. Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson UP, 1997. Print.

- Viscusi, Robert. *Astoria*. Toronto: Guernica, 1996. Print.
- - -. *Buried Caesars, and Other Secrets of Italian American Writing*. Albany: State U of New York P, 2006. Print.
- - -. "Stories of Houses in Italian America." *The Italian American Heritage: A Companion to Literature and Art*. Ed. Pellegrino_Acierno. New York: Garland, 1999. 121-129. Print.
- Watson, Patrick. *Fasanella's City*. New York: Ballantine, 1973. Print.
- White, E.B. "Here is New York." *Essays of E. B. White*. New York: Harper, 1977. 148-168. Print.
- Williams, Raymond. *Marxism and Literature*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1977. Print.
- - -. *The Long Revolution*. London: Chatto and Windus, 1961. Print.
- - -. "The Metropolis and the Emergence of Modernism." *Unreal City*. Eds. Edward Timms and David Kelley. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. 13-24. Print.
- Wirth-Nesher, Hana. *City Codes*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996. Print.
- Workers of the Federal Writer's Project, Work Progress Administration in the City of New York. *The Italians of New York*. New York: Random House, 1938. Print.

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Curriculum Vitae

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Education

Ph.D., English, January 2012. Dissertation: *Immaginario Nuova York*: New York City (and New Jersey) in Italian American Narratives and Cultural Production. Advisor: Dawn Keetley

M.A. English, Lehigh University, Spring 2001. Thesis Paper: Cabeza de Vaca: The Rider on the Psychic Borderlands in Nicolas Echevarria's *Cabeza de Vaca*. Advisor: Edward Gallagher. Thesis Paper: "Yet cannot hold this visible shape": Antony's Identity Crisis in William Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*. Advisor: Scott Gordon.

B.A. English, DeSales University, January 1999. Senior Seminar Thesis: Gerard Manley Hopkins and Self-Transcendence. Advisor: Christopher Jones.

Honors and Awards

Lehigh-Lafayette Fellow 2006-2008.

Passed Ph.D. comprehensive exams (May 2003). 20th Century American Literature (major), American Studies *distinction* (minor), Post Colonial Literature (minor).

Lucy C. Moses Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship (Fall 2002)
Teaching Fellowship, Lehigh University (1999-2004).

Lehigh University English Department Senior Teaching Fellow (2004-2006).

Summa Cum Laude, DeSales University (1999).

DeSales University 1999 Samuel Nock Memorial Award for Excellence in English Studies.

Alpha Sigma Lambda National Honors Society.

Dean's List (all semesters at DeSales University).

Publications

"We don't make meatballs here anymore: Reel Italian American Foodways in *Dinner Rush*." *You Are What You Eat: Literary Probes into the Palate*. Ed. Annette Magid. Cambridge Scholars Press, April 2008: 115-136.

The "Problematic" Fictions of Historical Narrative in Alice Munro's "A Wilderness Station" *Eureka Studies in Teaching Short Fiction*. 6.2 (2006): 62-73.

Web Project Publication: *Cabeza de Vaca*. Reel American History. Lehigh University URL: <http://www.lehigh.edu/ineng/pag2/pag2-title.html>.

“Cabeza de Vaca, A Film by Nicholas Ecchevaria”. On-line Archive of Southwestern Writers Collection: Cabeza De Vaca. Albert Alkek Library. Southwest Texas University. San Marcos, TX.
URL: http://www.library.txstate.edu/swwc/cdv/further_study/film.html
“Rev. Thomas Furphy Lecture: Nobel Peace Prize Winner Shimon Peres,” DeSales University Alumni Winter Report, 1999.
Play Review: Anton Chekov’s *The Seagull*. DeSales Minstrel, Dec. 1998.

Conferences

Panel Chair: “Reel Mobsters/Fictional Gangsters in Literature, Film and Television” 39th Northeast MLA Annual Conference, Buffalo NY, 11 March, 2008.

Panel Chair: “Is This the End of Tony Soprano?: Exploring the Ongoing Cultural Impact of HBO’s *The Sopranos* in the 21st Century” 38th Northeast MLA Annual Conference, Baltimore MD, 2 March, 2007.

“We don’t make meatballs here anymore: Reel Italian American Foodways in *Dinner Rush*” 37th Northeast MLA Annual Conference, Philadelphia, PA, 3 March, 2006.

“Negation and Expression: History and Identity in Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of my Mother*” Midwest MLA Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, 11 November, 2005.

“Imaginary East Harlem and American *Italianita* in Garibaldi Lapolla’s *The Grand Gennaro*.” The New York Metropolitan Area American Studies Association 2005 Conference. New York, NY. 29 October, 2005.

“Sausage and peppers are on not my menu!: Italian American Film Foodways” MLA Annual Convention, Philadelphia, PA, 28 December, 2004.

“Interrogating the Representation of Historical Narrative in Alice Munroe’s *A Wilderness Station*.” Midwest MLA Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO, 5 November, 2004.

“A paradise inhabited with devils”: The Representation of Italy and *Italianita* in Roger Ascam’s *The Schoolmaster* and Thomas Nashe’s *The Unfortunate Travele.r*” Midwest MLA Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO, 5 November, 2004.

Basta! Tony Soprano’s Problematic Identity *Percorso* in HBO’s *The Sopranos*. South Central MLA Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA, 29 October 2004.

“Westward Soprano: Route to Roots? Examining the Italian American *Percorso* in HBO’s *The Sopranos*”. MLA Annual Convention, San Diego, CA, 29 December 2003.

“My Italy” and “My Country”: *Italianita* in Margaret Fuller’s Letters and Tribune Dispatches”. Society for the Study of American Women Writers Second International Conference, Fort Worth, Texas, 25 September 2003.

"Cabeza de Vaca: The Rider on the Psychic Borderlands in Nicolas Echevarria's *Cabeza de Vaca*". Society of Early Americanists Biennial Conference, Norfolk, VA, 9 March 2001.

Panel Moderator: *Second Annual Women's Studies Graduate Student Conference on Women and Gender*, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, 14 April 2000.

Courses Taught

Lehigh University

English 2, Spring 2010, 2011

American Studies 101: The Italian American Experience, Spring 2006, Spring 2008

English 198: The Immigrant Experience in American Literature, Fall 2005

English 1: "Class, Ethnicity, and War", Fall 2005

*English 191: "Paisans, Pasta, and *La Cosa Nostra*: The Italian America in Experience in Literature, Film, and Television"* Fall 2004

English 1-45: "Work, Ethnic Identity, War Stories" Fall 2004

English 2: "Exploring the Sixties: Representing Radical Experience" Spring 2000, 2001, 2004

English 1: American Stories, Fall 2003

English 301: "Virtual Americana: Teaching American Culture On-line, (co-instructor) Summer 2003

English 2: "Radical Experience in American New Journalism" Spring 2003

English 123: Survey of American Literature 1 (Teaching Assistant), Fall 2002

English 2: "Racism, Rebels, and Radical Experience", Spring 2002.

English 486: Teaching Composition: Practicum (Teaching Assistant), Fall 2001

English 1: Composition and Literature, "Telling Stories", Fall 2001

English 1: Composition and Literature, "Writing American Culture", Fall 2000.

English 1: Composition and Literature: "Reading Culture", Fall 1999.

Lafayette College

English 110: College Writing: Imagining America, Writing America, Fall 2006 – Spring 2008

Cedar Crest College

English 354/245: "South Asian, African, and Caribbean Post-colonial Literature" Spring 2004 / Spring 2010

English 220, "Survey of American Literature, Fall 2010

DeSales University *English 104: Communication and Thought*: Fall, Spring 2009-2011

Muhlenberg College

English 215: American Writers, Fall 2003-Fall 2011

English 362: "Contemporary Fiction", Spring 2004

English 281: Italian American Literature and Film, Summer 2007, Fall 2011, Spring 2009
English 215: American Writers, Summer 2007, 2008
English 375: Post-Colonial Literature, Summer 2006, 2008, 2011
English 375: Post-Colonial Literature, Fall 2008
American Studies 101: Introduction to American Studies, Spring 2009

Guest Lecturer

"Cabeza de Vaca and Shamanism", English 290, Lehigh University, Sept. 2000.
"Pre-Writing Strategies", Teaching Composition: Practicum, Lehigh University, Oct. 2001.
"Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*" Survey of American Literature, Lehigh University, Sept 2002.
"Rebecca Harding Davis: Life in the Iron Mills" Survey of American Literature, Lehigh University, Oct. 2002.
"Work in Nineteenth Century America: Fanny Fern" Survey of American Literature, Lehigh University, Oct. 2002.
"Edgar Allen Poe's *The Philosophy of Composition*" Survey of American Literature, Lehigh University, Oct. 2002.

Previous Work Experience

Allentown School District, Allentown, PA, 1999.
Substitute Teacher, K-12th grade
Madison Cleaners, Allentown, PA, 1977-1997.

Professional Memberships

American Italian Historical Association
Modern Language Association
Northeast MLA
New York Metropolitan Area American Studies Association

Service

Lehigh University English Department Graduate Student Mentor
Co-coordinator (2003)
Lehigh University English Department Graduate Committee (2002-2004)
Lehigh University Williams Writing Prize Judge: Spring 2002
Lehigh University Writing Program Graduate Assistant (2001-2002).
Lehigh University Writing Committee (2001-2002).
Organizer: First Year Teaching Fellows Orientation and Workshops, Fall 2001.
Teaching Fellows Orientation Workshop leader, Fall 2001.

Lehigh University Graduate Student mentor, 2000- 2004.
Graduate Student English Department Chair Liaison (2000-2001).
Winter 1999 Graduation Commencement Speaker, DeSales University.
Allentown School District volunteer aide (1997-present).

Teaching Interests

20th Century American Literature
Post Colonial and World Literature
American Studies

Italian-American Literature
Composition and Literature
American Immigrant Literature

References

Thomas Cartelli, Professor of English, Muhlenberg College.
Elizabeth Fifer, Professor of English, Lehigh University.
Dawn Keetley, Associate Professor of English, Lehigh University
Alec Marsh, Associate Professor of English, Muhlenberg College.
Stephen Myers, Professor of English, DeSales University
Gregg Scully, Assistant Dean, Wescoe School, Muhlenberg College.