

Society of Americanists Review



Volume 3 (2021/2022)

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Italian American Stuff: A Survey of Material Culture, Migration, and Ethnicity¹

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Abstract: In this article we offer a critical survey of some approaches to material culture studies within an Italian mobility context, with a focus on Italian American history and culture. We situate our work in relation to greater academic and activist concerns that emphasize the transnational and political while highlighting ideologies that shape how particular kinds of vernacular aesthetic practices are valued or, more likely, devalued, among both hegemonic U.S. culture and the dominant perspectives within Italian American communities. We thus illustrate the ongoing relevance of studying material culture from an Italian American angle, including emerging digital models for doing so.

I thought of my mother,
sewing those coats for years, piles of basting
thread covering her feet, and what we can pass on,
and what we can't and the *biancheria* I have saved
for my daughter and how much else we give
when we try to pass it on.
—“*Biancheria* and my Mother,” Maria Mazziotti Gillan²

“Hey, I’m Italian—we know how to use bricks and tomatoes.”
—Mario Calmi³

In 1942, sculptor Louise Nevelson encountered the bootblack Giovanni Indelicato (1887-1960) near her downtown Manhattan art studio and was struck by his lavishly decorated shoeshine kit. Stopping to admire his encrusted bricolage, Indelicato informed Nevelson that he had yet another one at home, one that he never used and that was, in his opinion “the most beautiful shoeshine stand in the world” (Sciorra 2008a). Upon visiting Indelicato’s home Nevelson beheld a copiously adorned ensemble of shoeshine box, stool, customer’s chair, and two footrests.

Indelicato, who had emigrated at age twenty-three from Sciacca, Sicily, in 1910, had embellished the utilitarian objects with a dazzling arrangement of multicolored buttons, costume jewelry, metal studs, ceramic figurines, and patterned balls, bells, and doorknobs. The seats were upholstered with patterned material and festooned with dangling baubles. When Nevelson told Alfred

H. Barr Jr., Director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), about Indelicato's creation he decided to exhibit what he called a "baroque shrine" in the museum's lobby for a few brief weeks across December 1942 and January 1943. The press covered the display of this Italian American laborer's artistry which Nevelson had proclaimed "subconscious, surrealist art ... an epic of Mediterranean culture" (Sciorra 2008a). Despite this public heralding, the museum re-christened Giovanni Indelicato as Joe Milone in its press release and on the exhibit wall text. In 2014, Indelicato's granddaughter Cherylann Indelicato stated that according to family members, Nevelson deemed his name "too ethnic, too Italian" (Indelicato 2014).

MoMA never acquired or purchased Indelicato's personalized shoeshine kit, and for seven decades it was believed lost to history. In 2014, it surfaced in a small auction house in southern New Jersey, and through the assistance of one of the authors of this essay, Joseph Sciorra, and others, it was ultimately purchased by the Fenimore Art Museum in Cooperstown, New York. Today it is exhibited prominently as part of the museum's permanent collection of folk art (Sciorra 2014; Kahn 2014; Di Stefano 2015, 42-49).

Indelicato's picassiette creation raises a host of questions and issues that help us examine the role of material culture in

depicting and interpreting Italian American history and culture. For example, what information is needed to understand the motives of an object's maker? To date, there is no known documentation of Indelicato being formally interviewed about his inspirations and/or motives for creating his augmented work and the few biographical facts about him come from a 2014 interview with his granddaughter (Sciorra 2014).



Figure 1. The Fenimore Art Museum's publicity photograph of Giovanni Indelicato's (1887-1965) shoeshine kit which it acquired in 2014. Courtesy Fenimore Art Museum. Photograph by Richard Walker.

What might we have learned from a focused conversation with the artist? Given that there is no Italian precedent for Indelicato's

work in traditional folk culture, what were his influences? Now re-contextualized in a new display environment, how will his creation be made to speak in the future and what stories will it be made to tell?

We use the story of Indelicato and his decorated shoeshine kit as a starting point because they highlight a number of the central themes of this essay, including the intersection of migration and material culture, the role material culture has in shaping and delineating Italian ethnic cultures, and the place of materiality within memory work and public displays. In this article we offer a critical survey of some of the approaches to material culture studies within an Italian mobility context, with a precise focus on the history of Italians in the United States. We seek to illustrate the usefulness and ongoing relevance of studying material culture specifically from an Italian American angle, including emerging digital models for doing so. We situate our review by highlighting some of the themes within the vast field of material culture studies and suggesting directions for some possibilities still to be considered specific to Italian America.

Why Study Italian Migration through Material Culture?

A material culture approach has been applied across an array of humanistic fields. Although mostly visible within the work

of archeologists, cultural historians, art historians, folklorists, ethnographers, and anthropologists, a material culture approach has become increasingly adopted across the liberal arts, including literary studies and film studies. In each case, scholars of material culture understand their focus of study—the material objects themselves—as being broadly defined. Falling within this rubric are such things as handcrafted objects, factory-made ones, artifacts of daily life, artwork, architecture, and landscapes, as well as books, photographs, films, and other mass-produced products. In all cases, analyses unpack the relationships between individuals and physical objects and in so doing, open up a door to other disciplinary focuses, including revisionist histories highlighting marginalized communities or personal narratives offering insight into unbeknownst or little-known associations and identities.

Materiality, the actual physicality in space, can work symbolically to express human sentiments, fragilities, and strengths alike while also illuminating modes of production, political forces, and socio-cultural dynamics.⁴ Elevating the roles and relationships people and communities have to physical things also allows for a useful focus on the everyday and the vernacular, an analytical slant sometimes ignored by more conventional approaches to history and culture.⁵ For our purposes—and our interests on Italian migratory and Italian American experiences—those material connections become strategies for recovering stories otherwise not well documented

or seemingly devalued in standard migration narratives. In addition, this approach also offers new interpretive strategies to accepted Italian ethnic cultural texts and historical realities about Italian migration, Italian Americans, and the Italian diaspora generally.

Our concerns in this essay fall squarely within the realm of the everyday and the vernacular. What Antonio Gramsci might have seen as part of the subaltern's folklore is what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has called "the arts of everyday life" that have the potential to reveal embedded and sometimes disjointed layers of meaning:

The arts of everyday life are highly utilitarian arts: they give form to value... it's not about discovering that what we normally consider as art in museums or galleries also occurs in the everyday world... It is about the arts of living, by which I mean giving value meaningful form... But if you take my approach, which has to do with giving value form, that form may or may not be beautiful; it may or may not be virtuosic; it may or may not be an exemplar of craft. But meaningful form and value for me are at the heart of what art is (1997, 421).

In defining some of the boundaries of art, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett also notes the relevance of the underseen and undervalued within quotidian spaces; she suggests that aesthetics are brought forth in the shape, style, and use of an object. This "highly utilitarian" understanding of "arts"—which connects the everyday to an individual's actions—is a key component of our approach to material culture, which especially suits our ethnic and migration interests

so well, for it bolsters ways of knowledge outside of standard intellectual hierarchies and systems.

A material culture approach works well for migration scholars as it permits a focus on the individual through personal, intimate even, knowledge, while it emphasizes continuity between the past and the present. Migration scholars who focus on material culture often address issues such as consumerism, trauma, artistry, and play. A significant subfield in contemporary material culture work around migration overlaps with border studies and an interest in the materiality of mobility. Border studies frequently considers the material that individuals take with them, acquire, or lose along their journeys through, for instance, Central America and into the United States, across Africa and the Mediterranean to arrive in Italy or Spain, or during other land- and sea- crossings (see Basu and Coleman 2008; De León 2013; Trabert 2020; and Horsti 2019).⁶ Such approaches also call attention to the physical aspects of borders themselves “such as fences and border posts” that “are fundamental in thinking about bordering” (Horsti 2019, 3). These physical aspects help illuminate not only the process of migration itself but also the longer effects and relationship migrants and their families have to those borders well after settlement in new countries has occurred.

Migratory experiences as well as ethnic lives are thus accessible through the objects and stories connected to that culture. Material culture, along with the ideas associated with it, are transported, created, reproduced, and narrated to construct stories of individual, family, and community migrations. Objects migrate along with people and with that movement those things become reference points for narratives of displacement and loss, as well as reinvention and belonging. The items immigrants bring along or leave behind—from personal, hand-made objects to mass-produced consumer items—tell us much about their shaping of their own experiences. As we have said elsewhere, “objects have agency but it is our action – as scholars, as curators, as educators, in addition to everyday individuals – that activates them as palimpsests with layers of past, present, and future meanings” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 148).

In considering the Italian American case, we know that objects take different routes in their transformation into Italian American migrant objects and that “there is no single object that marks the varied Italian American identities” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 136). Items are transported from Italy to the United States (sometimes being brought to other countries first) and then on to secondary and tertiary sites (e.g., from immigrant tenement to third-generation suburban homes) often inherited to become treasured heirlooms. In addition, things are created in the United

States amidst new conditions and realities that assert meaning through design, form, and use.⁷ At the same time, objects created and purchased in the United States make their way back to Italy either through shipment or return visits. On occasion, ethnically coded things move from an original site to become showcased and enshrined in display environments such as museums. Items developed, refashioned, or otherwise involved in an Italian American ethnic community reflect or inform values, beliefs, and experiences of that community.

Scholars who focus on the Italian diaspora, and Italian America specifically, have adopted a material culture approach to consider a multitude of experiences, beliefs, and practices: from domestic life to the arts, from religion to popular, consumer culture.⁸ When applied in such ways, material culture becomes the center knot of a tightly woven narrative about the varieties of Italian American experiences. This narrative, especially with theoretical slants that emphasize the transnational and political, can highlight the ideologies that shape how particular kinds of vernacular aesthetic practices are valued or, more likely, devalued, among both hegemonic U.S. culture and the dominant perspectives within Italian American ethnic communities. Thus, a material culture approach to Italian American studies leads to a nuanced understanding of how objects have been exploited to develop and sustain public images and

memories of Italian American history and thus create master narratives about Italian American ethnicity.

Earlier works concerned with Italian American material culture are worth being aware of even though their engagement with the subject is not always the field's primary focus. For example, one of the earliest publications to deal with immigrant material culture, and in particular the changes that occurred vis-à-vis consumption, use, and display is Phyllis H. Williams's 1938 *South Italian Folkways in Europe and America*.⁹ Neither a rigorous scholarly study by today's standards nor a tightly focused examination of material culture per se, the reader though discovers snippets of Italian American material culture during the era of mass migration (1880-1924), often with the biased perspective of a middle-class white (non-Italian) American woman.¹⁰ In fact, this perspective plays out in other examples from the first decades of the twentieth century, even those who were sympathetic to and committed to the struggling conditions of many first-generation Italians (e.g., Jacob Riis's photography; Mary Ets's interpretations of the immigrant, Rosa, in her testimonial).¹¹

Such studies, at the very least, offer an opportunity for a preliminary overview of a topic and present a sampling of potential expandable points of interest. Much of the scholarship

on material culture connects with a host of various other fields of study as a way of deepening interpretation. For example, Evan Casey and Deidre Clemente note that “[t]he fusion of oral history and material culture... is particularly powerful because it tells us how people felt about their things—the objects that they made, bought, and used” (2017, 18). Such an approach that links objects with narratives of lived experiences and affecting presence is useful for our current exploration.



Figure 2. Frank Sinatra and Italian American members of “Franco’s Italian Army” wearing decorated helmets in support of Pittsburgh Steelers fullback Franco Harris, 1972. Harris was the child of an African American G.I. and his Italian war bride. Courtesy Detre Library and Archives, Heinz History Center.

Since the 1990s, a growing body of scholarship has examined Italian American material culture. For example, Margaret Hobbie compiled *Italian American Material Culture* as part of the Greenwood Press series documenting ethnicity and material culture at a time that witnessed a growing interest in both topics. Covering thirty-one states and Canadian provinces, the book is divided into three sections dealing with objects located in or as part of archives and museums; architecture, monuments, and sites; and sacred and secular festivals. Each entry contains basic institutional and contact information as well as brief descriptions of the holdings, venues, or annual events.¹²

Our essay, instead, builds on more recent scholarship, work which has also been done with a transnational, diasporic angle, creating a dialogue between the traditionally siloed fields of Italian studies and Italian American studies.¹³ This is particularly important given Italy's complex and diverse migration histories in which a staggering number of its citizens—thirty million from 1876 to 2010 (Fiore 2017, 4)—left their home to migrate elsewhere. This diaspora, among the largest ever, spread across northern Europe, Africa, the Americas, and Australia; it developed historically and is ongoing, making border-crossings of different kinds a defining characteristic of the nation-state of Italy as well as its associated cultures (e.g., Gabaccia 2000; Choate 2008; Ruberto and Sciorra, 2017a, 2017b; Ballinger 2020). For the purpose of this country-specific journal,

we focus our article on the United States, although we maintain the need to look at material culture, as well as other forms of expressive culture, not confined to national borders but instead as part of transnational networks and multidirectional flows (e.g., the houses constructed in Italy by repatriated immigrants; emigrant-sponsored World War I memorials in Italy).¹⁴

We limit and arrange our review into five, sometimes overlapping areas of Italian American material culture, embedding a synthesis of scholarship on these topics into our own analysis. These areas are expanded upon and discussed below: the home and domesticity; architecture and vernacular structures¹⁵; landscapes; statuary and public monuments; and finally, display environments and museums. We survey, rather than comprehensively review, each area. For instance, in the domestic area, we do not cover in any detail the material culture of food and its preparation. Similarly, we do not discuss the lives, works, and displays of studio-trained artists—although we make some gestures towards this in discussing the work of monument makers—working in modernist and contemporary styles. Also, while such items as books, photographs, and film fall squarely within the purview of material culture studies, we only address those cultural examples marginally if at all.

Our chosen areas of focus are not meant to be the only or last word on these topics, and we recognize some of our own blind

spots in our arrangement.¹⁶ Most prominently is the way our own categories reinforce conventions that we otherwise and elsewhere work to undermine. That is, how assumptions around race and gender get mapped on to suppositions about ethnicity and class often in conventional ways, reinforcing, for example, the historical emphasis on men's lived experiences (e.g., men's involvement in building and monument construction). In other words, our categories beg questions that we do not have easy answers to. How do we include gendered readings of public monuments beyond simply referring to the representations of gendered bodies in stone and bronze? How do we understand the politics of domesticity in analyses of the traditionally circumscribed private lives of women? While we have suggested some answers to these and related questions, we hope that this article brings attention to the possibilities that a serious look at the material culture of Italian Americans may offer.

The Home and Domesticity

Ethnicity has long been understood to be visible and practiced within domestic spaces, and more often than not, the work of women (di Leonardo 1984, 191-229; Orsi 1985, 129-149; 204-217). Everyday objects—from a coffee cup to a bureau—are invested with symbolic import that resonates beyond the utilitarian to convey and reinforce notions of self, family, and a larger collective that extends beyond the walls of a home. The home is a “material

environment [that] becomes the most powerful sign of the self” and the family group (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 123). Material culture scholars are keenly attuned to investigating how mundane household objects become inculcated with value and meaning and in turn exert a psychological and sociological influence on individuals.

Italians of the great wave of migration came from a culture of scarcity and thus the range of objects they possessed were limited. Immigrants were restricted by how much they were allowed to transport in their transatlantic journeys (Tirabassi 2014, 265n26). The few objects they lugged with them in bags, suitcases, and trunks to the United States included clothing, cooking utensils, work tools, religious items, and the occasional musical instrument (Hobbie 1992, xvi; Tirabassi 2014, 60). Italian women often brought along their trousseaux consisting of embroidered towels, tablecloths, bedding, intimate apparel, and other items. For these migrating women, such hand-crafted items were understood, as Edvige Giunta and Joseph Sciorra have argued, as “beautiful objects, examples of their skill and resourcefulness [and] a potential source of wealth and an epitome of womanhood” (2014, 3). Casey and Clemente, in their study of early immigrant clothing, emphasize the multiplicity of meaning of everyday material objects. Their study, which interweaves an analysis of material culture and oral histories, recognizes the complicated role sewn garments

played: “clothing was a keepsake, a physical sensation, and a source of cultural tension between generations” (2017, 15).¹⁷ Through analysis of such intimate and domestic objects, we develop a richer understanding of the aesthetic perspectives and labor practices of women and we rethink female agency within and outside domestic spheres (see also Merish 2016, 204-206).

At the turn of the twentieth century, Italian immigrants struggled to establish and maintain a safe domestic environment in light of the overall displacement created by their movement, their economically precarious situation, and their racist reception in U.S. society. This balance was particularly challenging for those Italian immigrants who saw their time in the United States as temporary, saving enough money to return to buy property or otherwise support their families in their hometown. In this way, early Italian immigrants created transnational identities that often involved a “diasporic private or domestic sphere” with “intimacies across borders” (Baldassar and Gabaccia 2011, 2). In any era, how immigrants engender a sense of home—what Sara Ahmed et al. describe as “homing”—in a strange and estranging world involves a creative negotiation between the past place and its associated meanings and the constantly emerging new place (Ahmed et al. 2003, 8-9).¹⁸

One noteworthy source for gleaning information about the

domestic material culture of early Italian immigrants is the photography and writings of social reformer Jacob Riis. His now classic photographs—themselves examples of material culture—of immigrant living quarters in late nineteenth century New York City depict raw, squalid spaces. The few objects seen are utilitarian, those necessary for survival: cooking utensils, bundles of presumably clothes, minimal furniture. Yet, in his publication *The Children of the Poor*, Riis notes “the artistic arrangement of tallow-dips stuck in the necks of bottles about the newspaper cut of a saint on the corner shelf” found in the tenement apartments where Italians lived (Riis 1905, 12). From other sources we know that inexpensive chromolithograph prints depicting sacred personages or Italian royalty hung on the walls, along with calendars, as expressions of religious and political affiliations as well as aesthetic proclivities (Tirabassi 2014, 66-69). In addition, embroidered valances were hung on cupboard shelves and fireplace mantels, and curtains were used in doorways separating the cramped rooms of tenement apartments (Gabaccia 1984, 82-83).

As Italian families established themselves, they began to acquire additional domestic materials. Lizabeth Cohen’s seminal work on the material culture of immigrant homes, including those of Italians, shows that their choices reflected both preferences based

on rural European values and Victorian-style U.S. middle-class aesthetics (Cohen 1982, 302-303; see also Fitts 2002, 1-17). The large, plush, and highly decorated bed (much prized in places like Sicily) was the ideal in their new homes and this preference was carried over into other furnishings, such as upholstered chairs. This domestic preference was by then outdated among the U.S. middle class (but nonetheless still existed) who had moved beyond the cluttered decoration and furnishing of the Victorian home to embrace the Colonial Revival style and the Arts and Crafts Movement. As Italian (as well as other European) immigrants purchased wallpaper, drapes, carpets, and upholstered furniture to fill their homes as markers of economic success, Progressive Era reformers condemned this consumption not only as wasteful but also as contributing to a filthy and unsanitary environment (Cohen 1982, 295). Immigrant workers' rejection of the reformers' interventions in their domestic spaces and consumer goods helped reinforced emerging Italian American social values (Tirabassi 2014, 68-69).

The kitchen as the site of food preparation, display, and consumption was critical in the process of homing for early immigrants, and analysis of it is a key component of Italian ethnic material culture studies. Sicilian immigrant families in Manhattan's Little Italy during the early twentieth century repurposed the tenement kitchen into a combination *soggiorno* (living room) and

salotto (sitting room), based on coveted upper-class Italian housing models and not peasant domestic spatial configurations (Gabaccia 1984, 82-83). Simone Cinotto describes “the magic of the family table as the site where expressions of solidarity, bonds of affection, storytelling, humor, material culture, and taste have produced an original Italian American identity” (2013, 20). Consumption was very much part of the creation of the immigrant home that became increasingly pronounced as work became more secure, incomes increased, and migrant families were united and stable. The years following World War I witnessed “a feminization of migrant food consumption” (Zanoni 2018, 191-120) with the increased arrival of women migrants and family unification. Ultimately, food was vital in establishing and perpetuating the Italian American notion of what Robert Orsi called the *domus*, that is, the family and its “actual physical home” as the central focus of moral life (Orsi 1985, xx). As “the religion of Italian Americans,” the *domus* would go on to fuel the imagination in the scripting of a cultural, almost mythic, narrative (Orsi 1985, 77).

The *domus* also comprises the relationship Italian Americans had to home ownership. As a central ideal for southern Italian immigrants, home ownership was understood as “a fundamental source of autonomy, empowerment, and security” (Cinotto 2014, 9) and the means by which the family could establish and control

a space of its own. Italian Americans would, in turn, physically reshape the American-style house in the service of family in accordance with their vision and needs. Perhaps the best-known example of such a transformation is that of the finished basement. Lara Pascali's ethnographic study in New York City, Montreal, and Toronto documents how post-World War II Italian immigrants finished the basement with the private house's second kitchen, a space that would become "the social center of the home" (2011, 49). For it is there that women prepare every day and holiday meals, and the families eat, where neighbors and *paesani* gather to casually socialize, and where the mundane household chores like washing clothes and canning seasonal foods are conducted. The multiuse area is, according to Pascali, a "liberating space," one in which immigrant women "can simplify their daily routines and exercise control over their surroundings" (2011, 61).

Consumer products that are not Italian imports or Italian American-specific can also be portals for exploring ethnic identities by examining the uses and practices around those goods. Consider the role of a television in the creative formation of Martin Scorsese, a filmmaker specifically associated with an Italian American cinematic tradition. In the case of Scorsese's childhood, the consumer product of the television, as Scorsese's family used it and as Scorsese himself remembers it, became central in his later development as an ethnic filmmaker (Ruberto 2015, 63-66). In this

post-World War II era and into the white ethnic revival of the 1970s, Italian Americans began increasingly to embrace a positive group image which they affirmed, in part, by turning to “Made in Italy” imported consumer goods, from food products to clothing. In this way, a middle- and upper-class ethnic identity was cultivated and reinforced through the symbolic display of a consumer-driven style of Italian commodities (Tricarico 1989, 24-46; Cinotto 2014, 1-31; Ruberto and Sciorra 2017a, 9-10).



Figure 3. Francesca and Giuseppe Stallone in front of their annual domestic St. Joseph altar, in the Brighton Beach section of Brooklyn, circa 1948. Courtesy of Angela Valeria.

Further, religious material culture plays a significant role in

sacralizing and empowering the *domus*. Perhaps the most powerfully charged object of religious material culture is the domestic altar, the near exclusive domain of women. Kay Turner writes about the ancient tradition of the home altar, noting that this “matrifocal legacy of religious custom” is a site whereby women create visual and material “links between people, between things, and between realms” in an assemblage of relationships of the past and the present, the heavenly and the terrestrial (Turner 1999, 44, 79). Among Italian Americans, this role of women’s home altars is most dramatically seen (and studied) in the annual altars or *tavole* (tables) assembled in honor of St. Joseph, found in Sicilian American communities in California, Texas, Louisiana, and Massachusetts.¹⁹ Another similarly charged domestic religious folk art tradition, although not associated with women, is that of the *presepio*, the miniature landscapes depicting the Nativity that Sciorra calls an ephemeral “fantasyscape... enlivened by narrative and performance in the service of Christian pedagogy, autobiography, and family history, and the engendering and strengthening of community affiliation” (Sciorra 2015, 63). Within Italian American Catholic homes, the sacred is thus constituted, enacted, and interpreted by lay people through the artistic placement of and assiduous involvement with a multiplicity of objects invested with sanctified power and new meaning.

Architecture and Vernacular Structures

Italian immigrant labor contributed significantly to the building of U.S. infrastructure and in particular the construction of large-scale architecture. As Donna Gabaccia notes, “Italian men were earthmovers, masons, and hod carriers—veritable human steam shovels who built the transportation and urban infrastructures of modern capitalism” (Gabaccia 2000, 74–75). Despite this labor force, Italians immigrated too late in the development of the United States to foster appreciably influential ethnically defined architectural types and styles that would impact the larger host society in a significant way (Gabaccia 2000, 74–77; Upton 1986, 14; Hobbie 1992, 69).²⁰ And yet they left their mark on the built environment in innumerable personal and ethnically defined ways.

Once dotted across rural communities throughout the country, from Louisiana to Washington, from New York to California, Italian men built stone and brick ovens for bread baking. As far back as the 1860s, Italian miners panning for gold in the Sierra Nevada Foothills (often referred to as California’s Mother Lode region) constructed dome-shaped ovens out of local stone that were used as communal ovens (Costello 1981, 18–26). Italian railroad crews are overrepresented in the construction of rock ovens which were abandoned as the workers moved on down the line. Such was the case in Little Falls, New York, where railroad laborers built

an oven around 1891 that could hold up to one hundred loaves at a time. Today the partial ruin, with its intact walls but collapsed vault, is protected by a wood covering and a historical marker celebrating immigrant labor history (Millo 2020). A photograph taken near Anaconda, Montana depicts fourteen workers around a domed rock oven with one man holding a wood peel with a round loaf and another with a sign that reads “Questo è il nostro forno 9 Marzo 1906” (This is our oven March 9 1906) (Vegars 1991, 50).



Figure 4. The sisters, Antoinette Becce (left) and Vittoria Becce (right), flank their mother Lucia Santorsa Becce (second from right), and their aunt Antoinette Becce (second from left), as they pose before inserting raised dough into Lucia's family oven, Waterbury, Connecticut, circa 1930. Courtesy of Joanna Clapps Herman.

As families settled, especially in places like Louisiana and California, they built ovens for their domestic needs (Angelo 1939, 94-97;

Kniffen 1960, 28-29, 34; Costello 1998, 66-73). In her memoir about growing up in Waterbury, Connecticut, Joanna Clapps Herman writes about the daughters “who were raised in America but with 15th century customs” which included baking bread weekly in a large brick oven their immigrant father had constructed on family grounds (2011, 134-135). In Denver, Lena Ingram (birthname Polluconi) used her backyard oven to earn money after her husband died in a mining accident (Rudolph 2020). While Italian Americans continue to build backyard ovens, they are used for markedly different means than earlier times, as when post-World War II Italian immigrant Vincenzo Cutrone of Dyker Heights, Brooklyn, contracted fellow immigrants and masons Nicola Costabile and Biago D’Aquino in 2007 to build a brick oven with terracotta roof tiles used mainly for pizza making for large family gatherings (Cutrone 2021).

The Western United States provided early Italian immigrants with vast terrain to construct buildings of various sorts that exhibited distinctive Italian architectural traits. This immigrant vernacular architecture demonstrated an adaptability to place and social condition, a resourcefulness to accessible materials and tools, and a continuation of labor and cultural practices which value the decorative arts, community, and the expression of culture. One extant example is the Romaggi Adobe in Calaveras County,

California which was built by Giovanni Romaggi out of schist and adobe in the 1850s as his home, to which he eventually added a store and bar. Abandoned by the 1930s, the non-profit Save the Romaggi Adobe Foundation, founded in 2002, actively worked for almost twenty years to secure the property and restore this example of Gold Rush-era architecture based on Italian vernacular housing (Marvin 2012). As of this writing, the Foundations' ultimate goal of fully restoring the building and creating a Gold Country Family Museum is still not completed, making the example also a useful reminder of the challenges of preservation and storytelling of Italian American histories outside of standard institutional (often urban) spaces (Nestor 2015).²¹ Another place in the Western United States where immigrants interposed an Italian-identified architectural style is in Paradise Valley in north central Nevada, where Italians from the region of Piedmont designed and constructed buildings that Howard Wight Marshall states "stand apart in their medium of construction, their striking appearance among other buildings on the ranches, their durability and resistance to removal or alteration, and the fact that people in Paradise Valley say these old stone buildings are important" (1995, 4; see also Carter 1992, 95-111). These immigrants from Alpine valley towns in the province of Biella built storage facilities, horse barns, ranch houses, and bunkhouses out of sandstone and granite that contributed to a unique sense of place (Marshall 1995, 63-100).



Figure 5. In 1884 Joseph Cavagnaro built a stone shrine to St. Joseph for Giuseppe Ferretti in a rural area near Moccasin, California. Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2020.

Religious architecture is yet another example of a unique ethnically identified mark on the built environment. Italian roadside shrines (*edicole sacre*) have been adapted to the U.S. landscape from rural to suburban areas. In 1884, Joseph Cavagnaro built a stone shrine to St. Joseph for Giuseppe Ferretti in the Mother Lode region. Throughout the northeast, contemporary Italian Americans construct shrines to the Madonna and the Catholic saints in the front yards of their private homes based on expressions of what Sciorra categorizes as “religious tenets, familial commitments and responsibilities, and ethnic associations

communicated through form, placement, and ritual behavior” (2015, 3; see also Marchi 2019, 133-142).

While Catholic clergy often relied on Italian laborers and craftsmen in the building of neighborhood churches and other subsequent ecclesiastic-driven devotional structures, Italian immigrants were known to construct freestanding chapels and other buildings beyond clerical oversight. In Williamsbridge, the Bronx, Francesco Lisanti, a baker from Basilicata, commissioned a family chapel of granite block in 1905 after an Italian priest allegedly absconded with donations collected for building a Catholic church for the Italians that area. The chapel was used by the family as well as neighbors for the sacramental rites of baptism and marriage, funerary masses, and weekly and holiday masses up until the 1960s (Sciorra 2001, 26-30). Meanwhile, in 1937, a group of Italian American men began constructing a grotto dedicated to Our Lady of Mount Carmel in the Rosebank section of Staten Island. Today, members of the lay voluntary association maintain the elaborate shrine and celebrate the Madonna's July 16 feast with an annual procession through neighborhood streets while devotees visit the shrine daily (Sciorra 2015, 121-152). These sacred spaces are a testament to immigrant building skills and an ethnically infused Catholicism.

A unique addition to the construction of both sacred spaces and

secular sites occurred during World War II at the hands of Italian prisoners of war who were housed in camps across the United States, including spaces in Hereford, Texas; Douglas, Wyoming; Chambersburg, Pennsylvania; San Luis Obispo, California; and on O'ahu, Hawaii. They collectively built altars, shrines, and chapels, some of which are still standing, such as an altar near Taunton, Massachusetts, built out of local stone. They also built secular site-specific pieces many of which are still extant, including fountains, statues, retaining walls, and murals (Ruberto 2022). These structures have come to inform and shape the American cultural landscape in lasting ways.

Italian Americans have also contributed significantly to the wonders of what John D. Dorst calls “vernacular display environments... where objects are formally organized for viewing, but largely as the result of personal, non-institutional, and non-professional agency” (1999, 120). These idiosyncratic art environments, many of them in California, have entered the canon of site-specific art environments, recognized as part of what Laura E. Ruberto has described as “Italian American expressions [that] speak to a California way of experiencing and shaping immigrant life” (2014, 110): Sabato “Sam” Rodia’s Watts Towers in Los Angeles; Baldassare Forestiere Underground Gardens in Fresno; Emanuele “Litto” Damonte’s Hubcap Ranch in Pope Valley; and Romano Gabriel’s Wooden Sculpture

Garden in Eureka. The most recent research on these sites has sought to shift discussion of their creators away from previous depictions as naïfs or crazies and toward exploring Italian American elements, histories, and philosophies of these works.²²



Figure 6. Detail from Romano Gabriel's Wooden Sculpture Garden, Eureka, California. Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2017.

Landscapes

Material culture studies also considers landscapes transformed by humans—from a humble backyard garden to a large swath of an urban neighborhood—as part of its purview. As D.W. Meinig writes, “we regard all landscapes as symbolic, as expressions of cultural values, social behavior, and individual actions worked upon particular localities over a span of time...And every landscape is a code, and its study may be undertaken as a deciphering of meaning, of the cultural and social significance of ordinary but diagnostic features” (1979, 6).²³ The embodied practices of inhabiting, moving through, and engaging with these created spaces activate the built environment.

Joseph Inguanti, writing about gardens in suburban towns in Connecticut, observes that post-World War II Italian immigrants used horticultural skills learned in their respective hometowns to create “landscapes of memory,” and thus establish an “Italian American landscape” through “the grafting of Italian aesthetic and horticultural customs onto existing American residential models” (2011, 89). The multimedia venture, *The Italian Garden Project*, connects contemporary perspectives on sustainable locavore culture with the “traditional Italian American vegetable garden, preserving this heritage and demonstrating its relevance for

reconnecting to our food, our families, and the earth” (*The Italian Garden Project*). This revisionist approach to vernacular horticulture features video profiles of gardens and gardeners—the vast majority being post-World War II immigrants—and a developing online archive of individuals and their family-based practices.

The historically male recreational activity of bocce has created gendered spaces of ludic conviviality throughout the country, and the changes those spaces have experienced over the course of 130 years help illustrate shifting experiences and views of Italian Americans at leisure. Early immigrant men played on open ground occasionally using round stones when wood balls were unavailable (“An Italian Summer Resort” 1892, 762). Over the course of the twentieth century, clay bocce courts became increasingly visible as recognizable ethnic landscaped structures speaking to an interest in community, a focus on place-making, and leisure time. In the mid-1930s, Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s administration constructed bocce courts in New York City parks in neighborhoods with considerable Italian American residents. In Philadelphia during the 1970s, the bocce court became a shared space for pre- and post-World War II Italian immigrant men from different generations who gathered to play, socialize, and communicate in a familiar setting for both older and younger Italian speakers (Mathias 1974, 22–30). By the end of the last century, Italian American women increasingly challenged the circumscribed male space of the courts

to gain access. In 2013, Nancy Coletti of Brooklyn commented on those men who resisted change: “They want to keep us in the kitchen, sewing, cooking, dressmaking. We’re too old for them to keep us pregnant. They get bossed by women at home, so they want to be macho here” (Berger 2013). And change has come in other forms as population demographics shift in once predominantly Italian American communities, including Latino and Asian American men taking up the sport alongside older Italian American men as in the case of San Francisco’s Crocker-Amazon Bocce Ball Club and at William F. Moore Park aka “Spaghetti Park” in Queens (Chiang 2016; Boo 2013). But demographic shifts have also witnessed on the one hand the adoption of the game by a younger coterie of players while on the other hand the removal of bocce courts from city parks as gentrification overwhelms areas once home to working-class immigrants and their descendants (Greenwalt 2013; Frost 2020).

Cemetery landscapes are likewise important sites of material culture where displays of ethnic expression are part of the geographies of thanatology. Immigrant mutual aid societies were occasionally responsible for purchasing and maintaining properties to establish burial sites for their members like the San Francisco Italian Cemetery (in Colma) which first opened in 1899 by the Società Italiana di Mutua Beneficenza (founded in 1858). Its

Italianate look of stone and marble chiseled burial vaults and stone pathways comes from the work of the original Italian craftspeople, including the Bocci and Fontana families, who shaped it in its early years (Fredricks 2014). In continuous use since 1910, L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in Tampa, Florida, with its photoceramic



Figure 7. Multihued mosaic tilework and photoceramic portraits of the deceased are a noted feature of tombstones at L'Unione Italiana Cemetery in Tampa, Florida. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2020.

portraits of the deceased, is distinguished by the tombstones decorated with multihued mosaic tilework (Estabrook 2006, 62-63, 116-117). Hope Cemetery in Barre, Vermont, while not an ethnic-specific burial site, is renowned for the exquisite granite tombstones and statuary crafted by Italian immigrant carvers and sculptors for a once predominantly anarchist and socialist clientele (Allen 1997; Croce 2007). Inguanti's research on New York City's Calvary Cemetery, a burial ground with no specific ethnic affiliation or identity, shows that Italian Americans transform their family members' gravesites through decoration and plantings to "bring their own ethnically inflicted version of perpetual care" (2000, 24).²⁴

The transformation of larger swaths of land and the imprinting of ethnic markers has been of increasing interest to scholars of Italian American studies. Jerome Krase has written extensively on the "visual sociology of the vernacular culture of Little Italies" or what he calls "spatial semiotics" to identify and outline material spatial practices (2004, 20, 33). In a different vein, Cinotto debunks the popular myth that northern Italian immigrants created "winescapes" in California simply because of shared similarities between Italian and California ecosystems. Instead, extensive work—deforestation, digging canals, laying sewage systems, building dams—by low-waged immigrant labor transformed inferior soil

into productive vineyards and wineries (Cinotto 2012, 47-59). And in the Northeast, immigrants from the northern area of Friuli used masonry, construction, and tile working to transform the material landscape of Philadelphia's Chestnut Hill neighborhood in ways that demonstrate, according to Joan Saverino, "how the relationship between ethnicity and place is complicated, layered, emotionally laden, and intensely personal" (2010, 54). Such refashioning of landscapes aligns with other beliefs and practices as well (even those as diverse as leisure or religion). Italian Americans in Oakland, California, conveyed a sense of ethnic identity through their participation in the building of the city's Children's Fairyland in the 1950s, specifically the Pinocchio display of 1953. Such public support helped shape Italian Americans in the area as prominent members of the city at large (Ruberto 2008b). At the same time, ethnic city landscapes can also have a highly personal and faith-based rendering, as in the case of religious material culture, urban landscape, and ritual behavior in New York City, where, for Sciorra, "these expressions are vivid and creative ways in which personal devotion is publicly enacted and negotiated as long-standing and integral parts of the city's religious landscape" (Sciorra 2015, xviii).

Without a doubt, a material culture approach is also helpful in understanding the landscape of Italian American neighborhoods, so-called Little Italies, especially since so many developed from immigrant communities into tourist-friendly cityscapes.

Visible across the United States is the revitalization of these neighborhoods as tourist and commercial hubs, in which “the market reproduces ethnicity” through “the construction of commodified versions of their ethnic pasts for consumption by a variegated clientele in a landscape of consumption and heritage” (Kosta 2014, 226). For Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, the cultural production of “heritage” includes “the transvaluation of the obsolete, the mistaken, the outmoded, the dead, and the defunct... Once sites, buildings, objects, technologies, or ways of life can no longer sustain themselves as they formerly did, they ‘survive’—they are made economically viable—as representations of themselves” (1998, 149, 151). In the case of Little Italies, this transvaluation is visible repeatedly and suggests multiple ways cultural heritage gets aligned and intertwined with economic systems. Across the United States, developers and business associations have transformed former Little Italies into self-conscious and deliberate “ethnic Disneyland” (Krase 1990, 28)—San Diego’s India Street, San Jose’s Little Italy, Providence’s Federal Hill, Pittsburgh’s Bloomfield, New York City’s Little Italy—destination sites for the commodification of ethnic heritage heavily imbued with nostalgia.²⁵ Such neighborhoods’ topography is everchanging, “a performative display of memory,” as Steven Hoelscher (2003, 662) characterizes it, whereby developers, business associations, and non-profits alike (generally Italian American led) put to use artifacts coded as

Italian ethnic and imbued with nostalgia to shape neighborhood redevelopment.²⁶

Statuary and Public Monuments

Pellegrino D’Acierno suggests that Italian Americans historically valued an “eye-intensive culture of scenes and the theatricalized individual” (1999, 754). This attention to the human form is linked to sculptural models from antiquity that dominated artistic traditions in the West. Such a theatrical approach to the artistically-rendered body is further enhanced by the involvement and dominance of highly skilled Italian artists and artisans—casting in plaster and bronze and sculpting in granite and marble—working in Italy and the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who crafted small pieces for domestic display and monumental works dominating the public landscape. In the twenty-first century, this historical engagement with the artistic rendering of celebrated individuals and allegorical figures is no longer a straightforward story of accomplishment and contribution by immigrant artisans and the ethnic community at large. Italian Americans’ relationship to heroic figures raised on pedestals in commemorative spaces have become increasingly entangled in questions of history, power, and race in the United States. Statues of individuals who Italian Americans have commissioned and/or crafted, from Christopher Columbus to Confederate combatants, have been deemed unsuitable for such

glorification (see Cox, 2021 and Thompson, 2022). Subsequently what were once understood to be normative Italian American narratives of artistic accomplishment and ethnic assimilation have become more complicated stories revealing the role material culture plays in the reworking of ethnic and racial identities in an everchanging civic society (see Ruberto and Sciorra 2022).

One of the earliest craftspeople to migrate were the *figurinai* (or *figuristi*), male artisans who made inexpensive plaster cast statutes suited to working- and middle-class incomes, and thus helped popularize an appreciation for sculpture in the United States (Sensi-Isolani 1990, 99; Soria 1997, 65-75).²⁷ *Figurinai* (who hailed primarily from the area around the city of Lucca, in Tuscany) offered an eclectic mix of reproductions that included religious, political, classical, allegorical, and animal statues befitting the diverse tastes of a heterogeneous clientele. In addition, plaster casts became important sources for art students and established artists wishing to learn from copies of classical models. The fact that children, often apprentices, hawked their wares through city streets attracted the attention of the press and child welfare agencies which brought awareness to their plight and, in addition, fueled the perception of Italians as vagrants, mendicants, and a public nuisance (Sensi-Isolani 1990, 103-104). In time, workshops, often family-operated, were established throughout the East Coast,

the Midwest, and in San Francisco, which produced novelty statues and crafted detailed architectural ornamentation (Noyes 1989, 34-37; Soria 1997, 68-75; Balodimas-Bartolomei 2019), as well as such unique creations as the life-size diplodocus dinosaur models funded by Andrew Carnegie in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, around 1900 and still on display across the globe, and a WPA-sponsored Nativity scene in Hartford in 1938 (Rea 2001, 249-250; “Rossi, Vincent and Girard” n.d.).²⁸

American sculptors, creating small art pieces or monumental works, came to depend on these Italian immigrant craftspeople and artisans to execute their vision. The likes of August Saint-Gaudens and Frederic Remington used the Roman Bronze Works in New York City, established by engineer Riccardo Bertelli and sculptor Giuseppe Moretti, which introduced the lost-wax process for casting bronze to the United States, for the fine detailing the immigrant-run foundry produced (Boulton 2021, 77-84). Stone carvers and sculptors made impressive contributions to the major building projects with architectural ornaments and large-scale carving, from the six Piccirilli brothers’²⁹ gigantic marble Lincoln Memorial designed by Daniel Chester French to Luigi del Bianco’s Mount Rushmore envisioned by Gutzon Borglum (Koffler and Koffler 2006; Gladstone 2014).³⁰ As Marjorie Hunt notes in her study of the Italian artisans who worked on the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., “stone carving bound them to the

past—to a rich tradition of craftsmanship going back generations in the families and communities—and connected them to the creation of a lasting legacy in stone” (1999, 37).³¹



Figure 8. Cast chalkware displayed at the Museum of International Folk Art, Santa Fe. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2019.

This rich cultural heritage of artistry and craft informed the art of Italian American sculptors working in more modernist artistic traditions like Beniamino Bufano and Concetta Scaravaglione (Parkman 2007, 43-60; Kushner 2011, 271-283).

The Italian artistic involvement in the monument boom around the turn of the twentieth century was part of the material manifestation of uncontested ideals of bourgeois society. A number of Italian and Italian immigrant sculptors were creators of monuments to the Lost Cause of the Confederacy that promoted the false narrative of U.S. history concerning the Civil War. This revisionist ideology not only erased slavery as the cause for state secession but fueled the white supremacist policies of Jim Crow. Achille Perelli's monument to Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson (1881) in New Orleans; Gaetano Trentanove's Sterling Price Monument (1901) in Springfield, Missouri; Louis Amateis's Spirit of the Confederacy (1908) in Houston; and Leo Lentelli's Robert E. Lee monument (1922) in Charlottesville, Virginia³² are just a few Lost Cause monuments designed or executed by Italian immigrant sculptors. Pompeo Coppini may be one of the most prolific Italian American artists engaged in the glorification of the Confederate cause and military by populating the Texas landscape with works such as the Confederate Monument (1903) in Paris, Hood's Texas Brigade Monument (1910) in Austin, the Last Stand (1912) in Victoria, and the Jefferson Davis statue (1919) in Austin,

among others (Heyman 2018). Alexandra de Luise writes that “Coppini helped legitimize the practice of memorial building that in effect honored white supremacy” (2019). Thus, Italian immigrant sculptors and their works become implicated in debates regarding the preservation of artistic works and historic artifacts that served as propagandistic art at the service of white supremacist ideology.

In similar fashion, the carved and cast statues of Christopher Columbus, most of them funded, created, and donated by Italian Americans, have come under increasing scrutiny by Indigenous and anti-colonial activists. In the wake of protests following the 2020 police killing of African American George Floyd in Minneapolis, activists have toppled, and municipalities have removed, multiple public monuments to the fifteenth-century Genovese navigator and colonizer (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020b). As symbols of ethnicity born out of historical moments, such as publicly displayed artworks do not remain static objects and are open to reinterpretation by members of a pluralistic society. Elsewhere we have discussed the historical roots of Italian Americans’ relationship to Columbus, which was initiated by the *prominenti*, the small group of economic, political, and culturally elite immigrants, who sought to link the established American Columbus hero with the discriminated Italian immigrants at the time while also forging a national *Italian* identity in the diaspora (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020a, 69-71). In time, their initiative

succeeded as a mythological and malleable Columbus became accepted as a particularly *Italian American* icon. After World War II, and especially leading up to the 1992 quincentenary, middle class Italian Americans commissioned and donated an astonishing number of Columbus statues and monuments to municipalities throughout the country. During this period:

the meaning of Columbus monuments and celebrations became unambiguously associated with the Americanization of European immigrants' descendants and their embrace of that privileged status together with a highly Americanized sense of Italian ethnicity. The rhetoric shifted from Columbus-as-struggling immigrant towards reinforcing symbols associating him with American patriotism and a hyphenated white ethnic pride (Ruberto and Sciorra 2020a, 72-73).

In the twenty-first century, Italian Americans' defense or reputation of Columbus monuments as physical markers of Italian ethnicity reveal how material culture serves as critical sites for interpreting and shaping identity, especially as these objects concern history, cultural politics, and perhaps most importantly whiteness.³³

Public commemorations of Italian American icons have long moved beyond Columbus and have become more visible in recent decades as possible alternatives to that problematic figure. These include sculpture, monuments, and other public sites to anonymous Italian immigrants in St. Louis (1972) and New Orleans (1995), as well as for individuals like fisherman Pietro Ferrante in

Monterey (1969), baseball player Joseph DiMaggio in San Francisco (1981), inventor Antonio Meucci in Brooklyn (1989), boxer Joey Giardello (birthname Carmine Orlando Tilelli) in Philadelphia (2011), and canonized nun Frances Xavier “Mother” Cabrini in Manhattan (2020).



Figure 9. Frank Vitale's 1990 bronze statue, *The Fisherman*, Pittsburg, CA. The inscription (not shown) reads "In memory of the Italian fishing pioneers who settled and developed early Pittsburg." Photograph by Laura E. Ruberto, 2018.

These commemorations suggest alternative ways to observe Italian American history in the public sphere that circumvent the monolithic Columbian model. In addition, memorials to working

class history and labor activism that involved Italian Americans have been erected in this century: the 1907 Monongah Mine Disaster in West Virginia (2007)³⁴, the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire in New York (currently in production), and the 1912 Lawrence Textile Workers' Strike in Massachusetts (2012), among others. Despite the listing of inscribed Italian surnames in some of these memorials, these are not specifically intended as ethnic markers, nor are they necessarily read as *Italian American* by visitors; although they also may act in that way for certain individuals. These last examples also beg the question as to why certain Italian American labor and civil rights activists (e.g., Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti, Pietro "Pete" Panto, Angela Bambace) have gone unheralded in bronze or stone in visible venues.³⁵ The choices Italian Americans have made concerning who to publicly commemorate or not are charged with ideological weight concerning the construction and interpretation of the historical past.

Display Environments and Museums

Everyday and specialized objects are highlighted and raised to particularly privileged status by being placed in curated display environments—not only in the expected spaces of galleries and museums, but also in other locations such as homes, social clubs, and businesses. Sometimes objects are removed from daily use to be put on display (e.g., an old Moka coffee maker or ravioli cutter)

to become a knick-knack on a shelf, while other items may be made or purchased with the intent of display (e.g., needlework, a photo frame, a banner). It was such domestic appurtenances, signifiers of immigrant culture, that caused consternation for U.S.-born children. This second-generation trepidation is articulated by author John Fante in a personal essay:

I am nervous when I bring a friend to my house; the place looks so Italian. Here hangs a picture of Victor Emmanuel, and over there is one of the cathedral of Milan, and next to it, one of St. Peter's, and on the buffet stands a wine-pitcher of medieval design; it's forever brimming, forever red and brilliant with wine (1933, 92).

In all cases, these varied exhibits highlight the way things can serve as powerful receptacles for memories, emotions, and philosophies of individual lives and collective sensibilities.

The contemporary home—whether rented apartment or privately-owned house—and its associated household objects are visible sites for conscious displays of material culture that evoke ethnically-marked affiliations, histories, and associations. These domestic display environments can be understood as amplified sites where “cherished household objects... provide tangible, enduring, and vitalized signs that can communicate the continuity of one's experiences, relationships, and values” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 224). Family-centered demonstrations of Italian American identity are evident in family photographs³⁶, postcards, souvenirs, and artwork depicting Italian sites and

landmarks,³⁷ or heirlooms like embroidered cloth and crocheted tablecloths. These objects are not merely legacies that make direct connections to ancestors, but displays of what gets saved, valued, and treasured in the vicissitudes and precariousness of life, especially for immigrants and their descendants (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1987, 83).

This was the case of 85-year-old Adele Sarno's Little Italy apartment, a space that became the focal point of a public debate around exhibiting Italian American ethnicity and economic redevelopment in Manhattan when she was evicted in order to build a twelve-story apartment building that would house the Italian American Museum (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 755, 767-768). Sarno's domestic displays wonderfully illustrated the interests of Italian Americans of her generation perhaps better than a curated exhibit in a structured museum: "the over-sized, tinted photograph of Sarno, age 16, poised regally as the crowned 'Queen of the San Gennaro Festa' that hung on the wood-paneled wall of her apartment, the small objects that lined her china cabinet and marbled-topped, Venetian-style coffee table" (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 146-147). In this way, the domestic becomes *museumfied* and inhabitants become curators and docents of their own lives and spaces. The notion of value (usually personal and familial) becomes further complicated by the contemporary practice of digital images and the scanning of family photographs

and documents. It imposes order on to digitized objects by technical means (i.e., apps and services that display images by date, location, or face recognition); digital domestic displays (i.e., digital frames that display items in random or synchronized ways); or creating social media stories and postings.

Beyond the home, vernacular displays are also mounted in the hyper-ethnic settings of semi-private social clubs and the commercial spaces of restaurants and specialized markets that document local histories while also creating often sentimental and mythic depictions of Italian Americanness. In Brooklyn's Castel del Golfo Social Club, established by post-World War II Sicilian immigrants, the storefront space operates as a rotating gallery in which the works of local artists are mounted as part of an annual *Serata Culturale* which also involves the recitation of poetry in Sicilian (Sciorra 2007; Sciorra 2011, 127-130). The displayed paintings, sculpture, and craft work often depict town landscapes or agricultural and fishing activities from an Italian remembered or imagined past as well as recording a club's activities and history. For example, numerous display cases, posters, and ephemera documenting the history of the club and of Italian Americans in Oakland's Temescal neighborhood are among the items on view in the "Isabella Room" of the Colombo Club (founded in 1920). Framed photographs of male Italian American pop icons (e.g., Sylvester Stallone in *Rocky*) flank objects depicting the *giglio* feast,

as celebrated in Nola and Brooklyn, adorn the Brooklyn Giglio Boys Club (founded in 1995) in the Williamsburg neighborhood. These clubs also function as archives to Italian American history, sometimes with surprising results. For example, someone at San Francisco's Italian Athletic Club (founded in 1917) recognized the name of (Frank) Capra on a reel in the Club's storage rooms. The result was the restoration of what is generally considered to be the director's first documentary film, *La visita dell' Incrociatore Italiano Libia a San Francisco, Calif., 6-29 Novembre 1921* (see Ruberto 2010).

In Redford, Michigan, immigrant Silvio Barile transformed his bakery/pizzeria and adjacent property into a site-specific art environment by decorating it first with collages of magazine imagery, posters, personalized signage, and subsequently crafted concrete statuary promoting the glories of Italian history and culture in didactic displays he self-consciously christened the Italian American Historical Artistic Museum (Cicala 2017, 93-116).³⁸ Pedagogy is less a concern at Mazzaro's Italian Market, in St. Petersburg, Florida, where one encounters a cornucopian array of Italian food products amidst a carnivalesque assemblage of objects signaling an ethnic identity at the service of consumption. The store's exterior walls are decorated with murals of Italian scenes (e.g. Venetian canals, Pizza Navona's fountains) and the entrance is a brick and stone façade with a series of arches,

topped by terracotta roof tiles. The commercial space's interior is a miscellany of signifying cultural references: Renaissance Italy (e.g., statue reproductions), an urban Italian American neighborhood (e.g., family photos, chalkware Catholic statues), a cinematic Made in Italy (e.g., vintage Vespa scooters), and popular culture icons ranging from Frank Sinatra to Robert De Niro. Seen as a whole, this vernacular display offers shoppers a highly commercialized version of an Italian ethnic identity of their choosing.

In addition to these vernacular domestic, social, and commercial display environments, museums and historical societies are purposely created as institutional spaces offering an official imprimatur to collect, archive, present, and interpret Italian American history and culture. Material culture is at the center of these efforts, as Melissa Marinaro, Director of the Italian American Program at the Senator John Heinz History Center in Pittsburgh, observes about its 1,000 Italian American-related objects: "When an artefact enters the museum's permanent collection... it no longer stands alone and, instead, becomes a point of reference in a much larger story" (2020, 11). We find it especially meaningful to consider the context by which material objects focusing on Italian ethnic identity and cultural heritage are collected, displayed, and narrated in these institutions. Elsewhere we have reviewed the process by which personal and community objects throughout the United States have been recontextualized into Italian American



Figure 10. The sacred and the commercial juxtaposed in one of several display environments at Mazzaro's Italian Market, St. Petersburg, Florida. Photograph by Joseph Sciorra, 2020.

museums, focusing on eight such spaces (created between 1978 and 2016) and the way they privilege “certain lived experiences

and construct authorial narratives of identity” through their displays and collections (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 137). In that study, we distinguished between “amateur” and “professional” museums, defined in great part by the former being community-based and the latter informed by a level of expertise from the field of museum studies.³⁹

All such ethnic museums and museum-like spaces are invested to different degrees in the “conspicuous construction” of ethnicity (Hoelscher 1998, 373) even while the collection and display practices differ wildly. Those differences—from the salvage model of Philadelphia’s History of Italian Immigration Museum to the glossy, high-tech exhibit displays of the Italian American Museum of Los Angeles—underscore a variety of factors such as funding resources and curatorial choices. At the same time, the structural and aesthetic choices in Italian American museums to different degrees “rearticulate... hegemonic narratives of struggle-and-success and ethnic assimilation... [and by and large such museums] structure a dominant history whereby Italian American ethnic lived experiences become central to the U.S. experience, often at the cost of more nuanced history attentive to issues of race, class, or gender” (Ruberto and Sciorra 2018, 146). In these ways, aesthetic practices and ideological perspectives become deeply intertwined to shape and sustain notions of Italian migration and ethnicity at these cu-

rated spaces.

Conclusion

We have offered a broad overview of some of the ways a material culture approach to Italian American studies has been and can be used to support an elaboration of the field of knowledge. Similar to Rhiannon Daniels, Anne O'Connor, and Katherine Tycz's review of Italian studies, we have attempted to detail "the permeable nature of Italian [American] studies and to investigate how material culture fits into its evolving interdisciplinarity" (2020, 154). By organizing some of the concerns of Italian American cultural history vis-à-vis material culture, we have given shape to the depth of work already being done, topics that are still evolving, as well as themes we imagine as possible direction for future work.

We are excited by the increased use of material culture across many avenues of Italian American and Italian diaspora studies. Noticeably, scholars have more and more taken a material culture studies approach to literature and cinema in Italian migration contexts. This emergent work includes close readings of literary texts through a material culture lens (e.g., Bona 2015; Merish 2016, 200-211; Caronia 2019, 208-233; Pelayo Sañudo 2020, 125-146) and unpacking film through object studies (Tamburri 2019, 70-75). Such work suggests some of the possibilities of expanding our

understanding of already-well-known cultural texts by revisiting them through object studies and thematic analyses. At the same time, these directions show us how material culture studies can be made more inclusive through specific ethnic readings.

As we complete this essay—written collaboratively from two distinct coasts and under the veil of a pandemic—we cannot help but also think about the place of digital culture and virtual worlds both in the act of writing this analysis and in the subject at hand. Especially given our interests in migration and mobility, thinking about digital or virtual movement within our scholarship on material culture is a logical next step. As Douglas Davis (and others) have noted, the work of art in the digital era is provocatively “chameleon like” (1995, 381), a point that holds true for all aspects of online culture and that suggests a need for awareness in our scholarship of how we talk about and analyze material objects found on our screens. Paolo Bartolini reminds us that “[t]he dematerialization of objects that has come about in postmodernity has introduced a different form of interaction between objects and humans... Today virtually everything in the world demands to be on display” (2016, 15). How do online exhibits or Instagram stories of material objects associated with Italian American culture create and reinforce virtual heritage? Illustrate nuances of ethnic change? Highlight historical realities? Or, even, support uncritical notions of Italian American

communities or neighborhoods?

Digital exhibits, social media platforms, and online synchronous events all point to new forms of display and distribution. They also point to how communities can function across great divides, suggesting emerging models for experiencing and making sense of material culture. The Italian American wonders that rise from those disjointed interactions and digital sparks will potentially be new ways of imagining and practicing Italian ethnicity. We see examples of these dynamic experiences already: for instance, the collaborative project between Florida Atlantic University and the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute at Queens College (City University of New York), on the Vivo-Fruttauro Collection (*itamm: Italian American Memories*, n.d.). The online project, produced by a group of graduate students, presents a cache of discarded family letters sent in 1947 between New York City and Italy that were found on a Brooklyn curbside and then transformed into an online repository.⁴⁰ Such a project opens up the possibility of narrativizing, visualizing, and analyzing Italian migrant ethnic histories in a broadly accessible approach.

These online opportunities also suggest new ways of processing the digital stuff people come in contact with online.⁴¹ Such digital works are not solely tied to what we visually experience on a pixelated screen, but also to the buried information digital objects

house and carry with them. Robert Wellington (and others) have discussed the distinction between the “digital” and the “digitized” with respect to art history as well as the critical thinking around the mobility of a digital object—not focusing so much on which objects a particular network houses or displays, but rather how does a virtual object’s metadata offer multiple levels of interpretations and uses (2020). Metadata, including elements such as public (hash-)tagging or more hidden HTML coding, offers objects the possibility to tell stories on the one hand in a more structured manner, but on the other hand in more culturally ambiguous ways. As scholars invested in the power of the material, understanding the role of information technology on processing *things* will be more and more valuable to the work we do. It is still a bit hard to grasp how these and other digital humanities questions apply to the fields of Italian American or Italian diaspora studies. And yet at the same time their relevancy is palpable to us, especially when we consider the larger ramifications for education and cultural outreach around the academic work we do.

Our work on Italian American cultural histories is tied to greater academic and activist concerns around migrants and refugees, human rights and border policing, and labor struggles and racialized practices. The objects people carry with them, the stuff of their everyday lives, the sites they build, the spaces they occupy, each and all participate in and negotiate politicized and political

aesthetics. As educators and cultural advocates, we hope our work on Italian American material culture offers tools and occasions for understanding the changing landscapes of the places we live in, illustrating how migrants' and their descendants' cultural expressions and consumer choices from both the historical and recent past are useful for better understanding the dynamics of our present and, importantly, useful suggestions for education and change for the future.

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Endnotes

1 A version of this article was published in Italian (Ruberto and Sciorra, 2021, 45-95).

2 Mazziotti Gillan (2014, 337).

3 Kilgannon (2015).

4 Given our focus on material culture studies in Italian American studies we are not focusing on reviewing foundational texts within the field of material culture studies. Here we only call attention to a few scholars' work who have inspired our perspective but who do not deal with Italian ethnic themes, e.g., Arjun Appadurai (1986), David Miller (1987), and Henry Glassie (1999).

5 Berger and Del Negro (2004) investigate the concept of *everyday life* in contemporary scholarship.

6 We see the applicability of Basu and Coleman's observations to Italian migrations and material culture: "We are ambitious in our scope insofar as we adopt an inclusive interpretation of both migrancy and materiality. We refer to 'migrant worlds' rather than 'migration' *per se*, in that we are not only concerned with the materiality of migration itself, but also with the material effects of having moved, perhaps many years earlier, to a new place, and with the inter-relatedness of the movements of people and things. In addition, we want to convey the sense that a 'world' – an often fragmented and fragile set of material and non-material assumptions and resources – can itself be made mobile, seemingly translated from one geographical location to another, even as it is transformed in the process." (2008, 1).

7 For example, Valenti Angelo's children's book, *Golden Gate*, describes an Italian immigrant fisherman adapting his boat to new materials and resources in California: "But Grandfather was not yet convinced this was the way a boat was made. Maybe this was the way in America, but not in Italy, where he had seen it done

differently. And besides, hadn't he himself built several boats for the canals in the marshes there"? (Angelo 1939, 119).

8 In 2016 the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College, City University of New York) sponsored a conference dedicated to the theme of "Migrating Objects: Material Culture and Italian Identities."

9 The book's subtitle more clearly states its goal: *A Handbook for Social Workers, Visiting Nurses, School Teachers, and Physicians*.

10 This point of view is evident, for example, in discussions about home decorations and clothing which are framed as "competitive spending and even competitive waste" (Williams 1969, 71) rather than inventive and ethnically informed ways of giving form to value.

11 See Cosco (2003, 21-60) on Riis; see Merish (2016, 200-211) and Bona (2010, 73-94) on Rosa.

12 In the digital era this publication is more useful as a historical artifact in its own right than a means for locating Italian American material culture.

13 Bartolini describes this shift: "Materiality and material culture in the Italian context came to the fore with original insights in 2010, with the inaugural issue of the journal *Italian Studies* devoted to cultural studies. Instructively, in the introduction to the volume, the editor, Derek Duncan, wrote that, 'The third element that characterizes the essays in this issue is their commitment to understanding culture in terms of its materiality, and to focusing on the conditions of its reception, or indeed consumption, as well as its production'" (2016, 13).

14 See Bartoloni (2016) and Daniel, O'Connor, and Tycz (2020, 155-175) for a review of material culture work within Italian studies with a section devoted to Italian mobilities. See also our introductory essay (2022) to a special issue journal on the

topic of monuments, memorial, and Italian migrations for a trans-national approach to material culture.

15 We adopt the term vernacular to refer to buildings, built environments, landscapes and many other kinds of objects that can be associated with a particular community but are not part of an institutional system of training and labor practices, even if some aspects might be (e.g., learned art of needlework or iron work). Central to the term is that, as Glassie has noted, is an idea that we have “prepared it for analysis” (in Vellinga 2011, 184).

16 Bartolini reminds us that “Whatever angle one wishes to take, be it the material, the symbolic, the virtual, the psychoanalytic, the economic and political, or the phenomenological, things and objects continue to occupy us and demand our attention” (2016, 16).

17 For more on Italian immigrants’ women’s clothing see also Caratozzolo (2014, 35-56) and Sautman (2018, 143-174).

18 Ahmed, Castaña, Fortier, and Sheller describe homing as “the reclaiming and reprocessing of habits, objects, names and histories that have been uprooted—in migration, displacement or colonization” (2003, 9). See also Vanni’s application of this concept to Italian immigrant women’s relationship to and use of needlework in Australia (2014, 121-135).

19 On Sicilian American St. Joseph altars see Estes (1987, 35-43); Turner and Seriff (1987, 446-460); Manini (1992, 161-173); Primiano (2007, 113-25); Sturm and Lewis (2007); and Del Giudice (2010, 1-30).

20 By influential types we are referencing such U.S. architecture as Scandinavian log cabins, African shotgun houses, and Spanish Catholic missions.

21 We thank Kenneth Borrelli for providing updated information on the status of the initiative.

- 22 See also Scambray (2011) and Del Giudice (2014).
- 23 See also Jackson (1984).
- 24 For more on Italian American cemeteries see McGrath (1987, 107-113); Matturi (1993, 14-35); and Ruberto (2013).
- 25 For more on San Diego's Little Italy, see Fiore (1999, 89-110); Verdicchio (2003, 10-24); Ruberto (2007, 109-122).
- 26 The Italianate-tourist site in the United States, albeit always informed by an exploitation of artifacts coded as Italian or Italian American, is not always associated with immigrants or even Italian American cultural history. Some of the grander expressions of Italianness through landscape, architecture, and leisure are in such spaces as Venice Beach's canals, Las Vegas's casinos, or the Italianate-style of the Getty Museum in Los Angeles and the Hearst Castle in San Simeon, California.
- 27 This artistic migration was amazingly widespread with sellers found in all the major European cities, the Americas as well as Australia.
- 28 Thanks to Marie Corrado, archivist at Pittsburgh's Carnegie Museum of Natural History, who, at our request, uncovered some of the names of the over 85 Italian artisans who worked on the museum's displays: Serafino Agostini, Manno Fabri, and Emil Poli.
- 29 The Piccirilli brothers were Attilio, Ferruccio, Furio, Getulio, Masaniello, and Orazio.
- 30 Borglum's association with the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy in general further complicates Mount Rushmore, which was carved out of Lakota Sioux sacred lands.
- 31 Much has been written about various immigrant carvers and sculptors, see Audenino (1996, 779-795); Ayala (1980); Sciorra and Vellon (2004); Bochicchio (2012, 70-82); and Giorio (2012, 145-168).

32 Lentelli completed the project after the original sculptor, Henry Shrady, died.

33 See our previous work on Italian Americans and Columbus (2017, 2020a, and 2020b). See, also, this crowd-sourced Google Doc, “Italian Americans Speak Out Against Columbus,” for an up-to-date list of related sources, academic and otherwise.

34 See Saverino (2022) for more on memorials crafted to commemorate the dead miners.

35 Related in sentiment and political intent are some of the 1960s Free Speech Movement commemorations in Berkeley: the Mario Savio Steps (1997) and the Berkeley Big People statue (2008, removed in 2020) (see Ruberto 2008a).

36 See Zeitlin, Kotkin, and Cutting Baker (1982, 182-192); Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1987, 66-69); and Halle (1993, 87-118) for further discussion of domestic displays of family photographs.

37 See Del Negro (2004, 75-76) and Sciorra (2008b) for discussion of souvenirs and postcards from Italy, respectively, in the Italian immigrant home.

38 Barile’s museum and environs were destroyed the year after he died in 2019.

39 While that study was on a small group of museums devoted to Italian American history, we also recognize a much larger set of examples that fall within this broad museum category, including: permanent exhibit spaces devoted to Italian Americans in more general public institutions (e.g., the Italian American Program at the Senator John Heinz History Center); landmarked buildings associated with Italian American history (e.g., Socialist Labor Party Hall in Barre, Vermont), as per Ruberto and Sciorra (2017b, 128, 137).

40 In keeping with this initiative is the Immigration His-

tory Research Center's "Digitizing Immigrant Letters Project" in which epistolary correspondence mined from the center's archive housed at the University of Minnesota is made available online, including Italian migrants (<http://ihrc.umn.edu/immigrant-letters/letters/category/italian-language/>).

41 See also Wagner (2017, 72-83).

The American Taste of Globalization: The Case of McDonald's in Italy

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Abstract: This article analyzes the history of McDonald's restaurants in Italy, in order to investigate the American constituents of globalization and address the question of how globalization reflects and spreads American values.¹ The analysis of the chain's expansion in the peninsula unveils how the American character of globalization resides, not as much in the exportation of McDonald's Big Mac and French fries, as in the global diffusion of specific American systems of production and consumption, as well as of those standardized operating procedures and business practices that are at the core of the so-called "McDonald's system."

Rome, Summer 2019. Two similar events have marked the hot days of the Roman culinary atmosphere. One went unnoticed, the other one attracted significant attention. The first was the announced opening of Italy's second "Five Guys" restaurant, a lesser-known American fast food chain, a few steps away from Fontana di Trevi.² The other event was the "it will not happen" opening of a McDonald's restaurant next to Terme di Caracalla. Of these two, only the latter encountered resistance, adding to the long history of polemics against the opening of any McDonald's restaurant in the Roman city center. But why did so many Italians protest against the arrival of one fast food chain, while mostly ignoring the other? The media gap between the two events points us to the recognition that McDonald's stands for much more than merely fast food. As Peter Berger has noticed, sometimes a hamburger is just a hamburger, but when it is consumed beneath the golden arches, it becomes "a visible sign of the real or imagined participation in global modernity" (Berger and Huntington 2002, 7). In other words, what makes McDonald's different is its having become a universal symbol of broader and global(izing) processes of capitalist transformation, which have gone on at least since the early postwar decades.

The goal of this article is to analyze these transformations using food, postwar Italian society, and McDonald's as case studies: focusing on McDonald's history in Italy can in fact help us

understand the relationship between the postwar Americanization process and the subsequent transition to globalization. My underlying assumption is that in embracing, as well as in opposing McDonald's, Italians were confronting not merely a brand or a multinational corporation, but a whole way of life, based on criteria of efficiency and productivity and affecting systems of food production and consumption, as well as (the pace of) people's daily life (Schlosser 2001). The fact that such of way of life resembles in its core aspects (productivity, democracy, and their translation into specific social practices) the American way of life points to a link between "McDonaldization," globalization and Americanization.³ The analysis of the chain's expansion in the peninsula will unveil how the American character of globalization resides in the global diffusion of U.S. systems of mass production and mass consumption, as well as of those standardized operating procedures and business practices that are at the core of the so-called "McDonald's system."

In a speech made in 1999, former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger remarked how globalization was nothing more than "another name for the dominant role of the United States" (Kissinger 1999). A few months earlier, in *The New York Times*, Thomas Friedman had similarly proclaimed "Globalization-is-U.S." (Friedman 1999). At the same time, anti-globalization protests, all around the world, were challenging the increasing influence

of American multinational corporations, giving a strong anti-American tone to the charges of imperialism directed against such corporations.

As noted by several scholars, however, even though the U.S. is indeed “the country with more assets and fewer liabilities” on the frontlines of globalization, globalization has not resulted in the homogenization of the world along American lines, nor in the predominance of the US as the only globally hegemonic power (Friedman 1999, 368; Barber 1995; Eckes and Zeiler 2003). On the contrary, the post-Cold War “age of globalization” has been marked by the political and economic rise of many non-American competitors, which have expanded their influence and presence. This trend has become particularly evident after the 2008 crisis, which unveiled many of the contradictions of America’s capitalist order, undermining the U.S. global hegemony and challenging American neoliberal paradigms of globalization (Nolan 2010). More recently, a few scholars have argued that globalization, rather than making macro-regional institutions like the EU more dependent, has made them more resilient and able to keep up their global role (Guinea and Forsthuber 2020). Or, alternatively, that globalization has caused a substantial retreat toward more nationalistic economic and political stances, increasing the popularity of right-wing protectionist parties throughout Western

Europe (Colantone and Stanig 2019).

Globalization has not only fostered increasing cultural homogenization and a more multipolar world. It has also proceeded hand in hand with a parallel push toward localization and greater cultural variety. Globalization means, thus, the relaunch of local and national cultures and the global circulation of many non-American models and products, from sushi to Mexican chili, from French baguettes to Italian cappuccino (Barber 1995). As a result, we now live in a more multicultural world than ever before and our consumption options have substantially increased.⁴ Even American hegemonic control over the Internet, and thus over one of the most influential agents of globalization, is increasingly challenged. Despite, in fact, the dominant role of giant American corporations like Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple, the U.S. no longer dominates the production and ownership of the Internet's material infrastructures (Winseck 2017).

There is therefore no doubt that the American "neoliberal corporate globalization is but one form" and that other non-Western paradigms of globalization exist (Sassen 2003, 2). But even if American neoliberalism's global influence is not unchallenged, it is however still unparalleled. All around the world,

people face American-driven expressions of capitalist globalization every day. Yes, the international success of products like *La Casa de Papel* or *Squid Games* points to the growing popularity and appeal of non-American cultural items and models. Nonetheless, these products owe their global circulation to American corporations and platforms like Netflix. In 2017, French historian Regis Debray argued that the Americanization of Western Europe can be considered a *fait accompli*. One year later, the Italian periodical magazine *Limes* addressed the issue of “where [meaning in what fields and over what aspects of the global order] do the Americans rule?” (Debray 2017; *Limes* 2018). Likewise, various scholars have pointed out American corporations’ persistent ability to exercise their “coercive soft power” (Cohen 2016) and impose American products, logistics, distribution and production systems, and consumption models (Ellwood 2020). Similarly, Paul Freedman has noted how, although the feared McDonaldization of the world “has not quite happened,” the United States continues to be the “transmission agent” for “diverse and mixed up dining practices. Sushi is originally Japanese, tacos Mexican, and pizza Italian, but their export and diffusion is via American heterogeneity” (Freedman 2021). Accordingly, scholars have called to “(re-) establish Americanization as a viable field of historical research” (Kuisel 2020).

These considerations suggest that addressing the nature of the relationship between Americanization and globalization is still relevant. How do we reconcile different perspectives, which either associate or separate globalization from enduring American hegemony? To what extent, outside the United States, is globalization perceived as having to do with some form of American global prominence? And how American is it actually? In order to answer these questions, I look at the relationship between Americanization and globalization from within the West, focusing on “intra-core” economic, cultural, and political connections and exchanges.

In particular, I have relied on three case studies. First of all, I have selected not simply an iconic American corporation, but a food corporation. Food has represented one of the major “fault lines of globalization” (Ellwood 2012, 460-461; Marling 2006). On the one hand, food products are extremely mobile. On the other hand, food is inherently local. As foodways are deeply embedded in broader economic and social infrastructures, practices of food consumption and their related systems of food production involve large (national and local) economic interests, the defense of which has played a crucial role in the resistance against globalization. Even more importantly, the way food is produced and consumed, and the cultural meaning attributed to the social act of eating

shape and define people's social, ethnic, cultural, and religious identities, transforming food practices into crucial sites of political and cultural confrontation (Bourdieu 1984; Mennell 1985; Gabaccia 2000; Diner 2003). This is particularly true in today's increasingly interconnected and globalizing world. Food globalization has meant greater variety of food choices, but also greater homogenization of foodways, leading people to cling to their traditional foods to maintain a connection to their contexts of origin (Brulotte and Di Giovine 2014; Long 2016).⁵ Looking at food consequently enables us to consider instances of cultural hybridization, as well as the homogenizing impact of American global corporations.⁶

Moreover, food has been a key element in the post-Cold War Italian debate over the effects of an American-driven globalization process. Italy's culinary traditions and foods have fundamentally shaped Italian cultural identity and economy, especially as part of the country's postwar reconstruction effort (Dickie 2009; Scarpellini 2014; Parasecoli 2014).⁷ In the last four decades, Italy has also transformed its food into a powerful cultural and economic trademark, globally enlarging its cultural influence and commercial presence through what David Ellwood has defined as an efficient "gastrodiplomacy" (2016). Italians have consequently feared and largely opposed McDonald's homogenizing threat to the country's identity, culture, and economy.⁸ In addition, the

branded regional character of Italy's culinary tradition has led several scholars to consider the Italian localist gastronomic model as particularly suited to resist the imposition of McDonald's glocal paradigm (Zamagni 1998; Montanari 2010; *Il Corriere della Sera* 1999; Counihan 2019). Italy provides therefore an illustrative case study to analyze the way in which, in order to make its entrance into the country, McDonald's needed to locally adapt its American formula and tame its globalizing effects. Such adaptations did not, however, alter the chain's business practices and standardized modes of production.

As for McDonald's, the reliance on the fast food chain to examine the American template of globalization is not entirely new. On the contrary, the concept of "McDonaldization," often used as a byword for globalization, was first introduced in the early 1990s by the American sociologist George Ritzer, who sought a "useful lens through which to examine globalization theory" (Ritzer and Malone 2000, 101).⁹ This association (globalization/McDonaldization) is, at least in part, connected to the role that American transnational corporations have played as major agents of Americanization, and that they still play as the main drivers of globalization.¹⁰ Within this framework, however, I contend that the possibility to use the history of McDonald's to reveal the American template of globalization does not depend on the

American origin of the company, nor on the Americanness of the products the fast food chain distributes. On the contrary, a primarily “multilocal” character has defined McDonald’s activities since the outset. McDonald’s has always been a franchising company, operating through a global network of local enterprises, and selling locally produced food items. Moreover, hamburgers originated in Germany, and while potatoes were indeed one of the most important articles brought to Europe from America, the Europeans had apparently been the first to fry them, so that one of the most iconic American foods is in fact called “French” fries.¹¹

But if neither the company nor its products are intrinsically American (i.e. if neither the agents nor the objects of globalization are American), then how, exactly, does McDonald’s help to explain the relationship between America and globalization? Just as the Americans did not create hamburgers and French fries, McDonald’s did not invent fast food. On the contrary, forms of fast food — from the French crêpes and croque-monsieur to the Italian pizza — could be found in most European culinary traditions long before the golden arches graced the cobblestone boulevards of the old continent. What, however, I believe McDonald’s has been responsible for is the global extension of a fast food system. That system, which I understand as both a way of thinking and a way of acting, profoundly transformed European

cultural habits, forms of food production and food consumption, and people's mentality. To signal such transformations, George Ritzer has efficaciously defined "McDonaldization" as "the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as the rest of the world" (Ritzer 1993, 1). McDonald's influence thus goes well beyond the kind of food people eat, or the pace at which they eat it. The diffusion of its fast food system has more importantly implied the introduction of new values, new standardized principles, and new homogenizing practices.

Some studies on McDonald's commercial penetration abroad have however challenged Ritzer's idea that the global spread of McDonald's fast food culture represents a form of cultural imperialism. In particular, the examination of the chain's experience in East Asia has unveiled how local consumers "have transformed their neighborhood McDonald's into local institutions," forcing the corporation to adapt its offer and allow slower and hybrid forms of food consumption (Watson 2006, 6). These conclusions are in line with Roland Robertson's idea that globalization operates as a force of cultural heterogeneity and thus as a form of "glocalization" (Robertson 1992 and 2018; Roudometof 2016). According to this point of view, glocal companies like McDonald's do not simply respond to a pre-existing cultural variety, but also

contribute to its formation.

My study shifts the focus from East Asia to Western Europe, but similarly looks at an “economically resilient and technologically advanced society noted for its haute cuisine” (Watson 2006). In doing so, it partially draws the same conclusions reached by the analysis of “the golden arches East.” The conquest of Italians’ stomachs undoubtedly required a substantial “Italianization” of McDonald’s offer and the full implementation of the chain’s multilocal strategy. Nonetheless, focusing only on the chain’s adaptations to local tastes and habits – whether enacted by McDonald’s or imposed upon the company by local consumers – might lead to overlook the imposition and spread of McDonald’s unchanging operating principles. What I have therefore attempted to do is to look at McDonald’s local adaptations, while also underscoring the diffusion of McDonald’s unaltered fast food system. My consideration of Italian fast food chains as evidence of McDonaldization (i.e. as a variation and not an alternative to McDonald’s fast food system) represents an invitation to consider not simply to what extent McDonald’s has locally adapted, but also how local/national fast food chains have McDonaldized.

There is no doubt that McDonald’s is a successful glocal company

able to present itself as a confederation of locally autonomous retailers. Nonetheless, the analysis of its impact in Italy will cast light on the way in which McDonald's has contributed to the spread of American standardized production methods, consumption models, and business practices. The chain has thereby participated in the emergence of what the political theorist Benjamin Barber has defined the "McWorld:" a new, neoliberal, and consumerist global system, often associated to persistent forms of American hegemony due to the dominant American character of its global popular culture (Barber 1995, 83-84).¹² In fact, even in the face of increasing multiculturalism, no other national culture has been made as spatially unbound and popular worldwide as American culture. Somehow, then, globalization is unquestionably American, but, how, exactly? One useful answer lies — I believe — in the *modus operandi* of American multinational corporations like McDonald's, which have continued to set and spread the American logistics through which globalization operates. Such point of view takes the moves from William Marling's insight that "the real American face of globalization consists of methods and logistics" (Marling 2006, 190). In particular, Marling has argued that to understand how American globalization is, we should look not at the global spread of McDonald's, but at the worldwide diffusion of those American franchising practices on which McDonald's has founded its success. Compared to Marling, however, I believe that the American essence of McDonald's *modus operandi* does

not stop at its franchising structure. Rather, we can learn much by moving beyond logistics to a thorough analysis of the “McDonald’s System.” By proposing an efficient fast food service designed to reduce workers’ eating time, to be affordable to everyone, and such that every franchisee is given the opportunity to climb up the social scale, McDonald’s effectively expresses and exports two core American values, democracy and productivity.¹³ The American essence of globalization is consequently made evident — I contend — by McDonald’s universal application of the core principles of American capitalism in their McDonaldized version.¹⁴

The McDonald’s System

In 2010, the McDonald’s Corporation had 33,000 restaurants in 117 countries, serving an average of 64 million customers a day, with a net income of \$4.9 billion. McDonald’s today is not only the most famous and one of the leading fast food chains in the world; it is also the world’s largest owner of retail real estate property; the company actually makes more money from collecting rent than from selling food. Its popularity and global spread is such that *The Economist* has even come up with a so-called “Big Mac Index” to measure the purchasing power parity between different currencies. The secret of this incredible success lies at the very origin of the company.

McDonald's founding fathers were two brothers, Dick and Mac McDonald, who opened their first hamburger stand in Pasadena, in 1937.¹⁵ Three years later, they moved to San Bernardino and built a new barbecue drive-in. The first "McDonald's" was inaugurated on May 15, 1940. In 1948, they decided to entirely reorganize their kiosk, making speed the essence of their business. They fired the carhops, got rid of the flatware, and reduced the menu to only nine items. Even more importantly, they came up with a "new method of preparing food, designed to increase the speed, lower the prices and raise the volume of sales:" the "Speedee Service System" (Love 1995, 15). Resorting to food processing and assembly line techniques, they were able to streamline food preparation and service.

Their vision consisted in the full application of Taylorism and Fordism to food production and consumption, prescribing both a rigid division of labor and increased mechanization.¹⁶ The resulting McDonald's restaurant was a "fast food factory," intended to guarantee strict quality standards for food, service, and cleanliness: a "symphony of efficiency with no waste of motion," designed to perfectly serve the customers through forms of standardized and democratically priced mass consumption.¹⁷ The operation was a success. In the subsequent years, the McDonald brothers

expanded their business, replicating their “Speedee system” in a series of franchises.

The fast food system and the franchising system were therefore both in place when Ray Kroc made his first visit to San Bernardino, in 1954. Impressed by the Speedee Service System, Kroc convinced the brothers to spread it nationwide. He entered a contract with them, giving him the exclusive right to franchise the system nationally. In line with the McDonald brothers’ dedication to uniformity and rationalization, Kroc’s franchising company was conceived as a centralized organization that would set rigid standards for the franchisees. Each franchisee was provided with manuals explaining in detail how to run the restaurant and asking them to be loyal to the McDonald’s system.¹⁸ At the same time, however, the system designed by Kroc was intended to combine conformity with franchisees’ creativity and entrepreneurship, entrusting them with advertising operations, and remaining open to proposals for new product development. Kroc crafted, hence, a franchising formula that outsourced the costs for the brand’s expansion and enabled McDonald’s to preserve the core aspects of its system, while leaving free initiative and some autonomy to local businessmen. Such a line of action was consistent with his idea that franchising represented a form of democratic capitalism, the perfect key to a full realization of the American Dream.¹⁹

Moreover, a similar balance between corporate control and local initiative also was applied to the company's suppliers. In this regard, it is important to point out that the spread of McDonald's restaurants in the United States, as would be the case later internationally, did not only transform American food service, but also food processing, distribution, and packaging systems. Whenever local suppliers were not able or willing to respect the standards set by McDonald's, Kroc looked for new sources of supply and new processing methods, mostly relying on small suppliers willing to be McDonaldized. In doing so, McDonald's changed "the way farmers grow potatoes and the way companies process them; the way ranches raised beef and the way the meat industry makes the final product" (Love 1995, 119).

McDonald's was from its outset something more than a fast food chain, then. It was a whole and entirely new system of production, distribution, and consumption, influencing how food is produced and consumed, but also how we understand and define it. It represented a new mindset based on efficiency (rapid service, with no waste of time), control (standardization and application of strict norms), predictability (always the same product, prepared according to the same formula), and calculability (fixed affordable costs and prices).²⁰

In 1959, the 100th McDonald's restaurant opened in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin. In 1961, Kroc bought out the McDonald's brothers for \$2.7 million (corresponding to today's \$23.3 million). In 1965, the company went public, with the first sales of McDonald's stocks. By then, McDonald's had sold two billion hamburgers and opened almost 1,000 restaurants. The following decade, the company began its international expansion. The first non-U.S. McDonald's restaurant was opened in Richmond, Canada, in 1967. Four years later, in 1971, McDonald's crossed the Atlantic Ocean for the first time, opening a restaurant in Zaandam, not far from Amsterdam. Shortly after, the golden arches also reached the German Federal Republic and Japan. According to Mario Resca, in its initial conquest of the European market, McDonald's hoped to leverage the lack of quality restaurants easily accessible to the middle and lower classes, making an effort to appear to be a local enterprise (Resca and Gianola 1998). To this end, the corporation extended its franchising concepts. The key to success in Europe was, in fact, considered the same as in the United States: entrusting local operators with the cultural translation of a specific US brand culture (Vignali 2001). As in the United States, however, local autonomy was balanced by the corporation's control over the uniformity of McDonald's procedures.

This loyalty to McDonald's standard formula did not mean,

of course, lack of adaptations. On the contrary, in Europe, McDonald's soon realized that its suburban expansionist strategy would not work, given the different urban and residential layouts of most European societies. The conquest of the European market was therefore soon reoriented toward city centers. Moreover, the tendency to recruit local entrepreneurs and leave them a certain degree of autonomy helped the company to develop distinctively European marketing strategies, combating the image of an intrusive American corporation. At the same time, however, the decision to stick to its fixed menu created the need, similar to what had happened in the United States, to McDonaldize Europe's food supply systems. Whenever it could not import the necessary equipment or food products, McDonald's was willing to develop and impose upon European food industries its methods of supplying, processing, and distributing food. It thereby triggered a series of social and economic transformations that went well beyond the change in Europeans' food habits. The reliance on local suppliers presented numerous advantages. First of all, it prevented McDonald's from incurring the high importation tariffs imposed by most European nations on food products. Secondly, and similarly convenient, it allowed marketing McDonald's menu as a homegrown product. It thereby helped in defending the restaurants from the persistent anti-Americanism of many Europeans. McDonald's experience in Italy provides perhaps one of the best examples of the merits, as well as of the limits, of such

multilocal lines of action.

McDonald's in Italy: Fast Food vs. Slow Food

By the time the golden arches landed in Italy, Ray Kroc's fast food chain had already opened its eight-thousandth restaurant and served its fifty-billionth hamburger. Italy was the last Western European country to host a McDonald's restaurant. When it finally opened, in 1985, McDonald's was simultaneously met with large protests and incredible enthusiasm. The delayed arrival in the peninsula was the outcome of several factors. In particular, the political tensions and the economic situation of the 1970s, characterized by the threat of terrorism, recurrent waves of strikes, and high levels of inflation, had prevented McDonald's from venturing into the Italian market. Likewise, until 1982 Italian labor legislation prohibited part time employment, one of the key aspects of McDonald's business, the so-called "McJobs."²¹ At the same time, there was a certain perplexity about entering a market that already had a strong fast (and non-fast) food culture of its own, especially given "Italians' chauvinism when it comes to food" (Resca and Gianola 1998, 48).

And yet, the presence of the typically Italian fast food culture of *bar* and *pizzerie* was also considered a potentially favorable factor,

providing fertile ground for McDonald's fast food formula.²² In this respect, Louis Mele, McDonald's representative in Italy in the 1980s, positively commented that "Italy has always been a fast food country."²³ McDonald's consequently aimed at offering, not as much a new kind of food consumption, as a new kind of "food service based on quality, cleanliness and attention to customers." The actual entrance into the Italian market proved anything but simple. This was mostly due to the long and complex bureaucratic procedures required to open a restaurant in Italy, which appeared incomprehensible to McDonald's United States officials. According to Jim Cantalupo, president of McDonald's International, "we struggled, and fought hard to establish ourselves," with the constant fear of losing all the money McDonald's had invested (Resca and Gianola 1998, 32-33).

To be fair, it should be pointed out that Italy was also not unfamiliar with American fast food culture. Well before McDonald's arrival, the creation of the Italian "Autogrill" restaurants had introduced Italian society to fast food service in 1947, offering standardized, frozen, pre-packaged food products, and characterized by a uniform corporate image.²⁴ Nonetheless, when the first fast food restaurants started to pop out in Italy's major cities, their main source of inspiration was indeed Ray Kroc's fast food chain. Despite, in fact, the proclaimed Italianness of most of

these early fast food companies, the ownership was usually their only Italian aspect. Such was the case for “Quick,” for “Wendy’s,” and for the various other small chains resorting to American sounding names like “Burger One,” “Kenny Burger,” “Big Burg,” or “Benny Burger” (Bartolini 1983; Alberini 1984).²⁵

Most of these were located in Northern Italy, particularly in Milan, which a newspaper called “a Burger City” in 1984 (*Il Corriere della Sera* 1984).²⁶ According to an Italian journalist, the city was literally swamped by a “hamburgermania”: a phenomenon “emulating the United States but with an economic foundation” (Salvadori 1986, 13). The leader of the sector and the first major Italian fast food chain was Burghy, controlled by Luigi Cremonini, owner of Italy’s largest meat industry, Inalca. By the time McDonald’s arrived in Rome, in 1986, Burghy already had twelve restaurants, serving 9,000 customers a day, and generating an annual revenue of twelve billion Lire (Salvadori 1986, 13).

Burghy’s success, like the mushrooming of fast food restaurants in all major Italian cities, was considered “a sign of the changing times,” an answer to the growing demand for extra-domestic eating outlets produced by the increasing pace of people’s life and work (*Il Corriere della Sera* 1984, 15; Salvadori 1983, 9). In

this regard, its administrators distinguished Burghy from the gastronomic offer provided by traditional restaurants. Rather than discussing the culinary arts, their marketing emphasized how fast food meals represented “a ritual of necessity,” intended to meet specific needs, propose a new and “young way of eating,” and create new jobs (Bartolini 1984, 19; Chiodini 1986, 17). As such, the spread of fast food in Italy mirrored and adapted to, but also promoted broader economic, social and cultural transformations, preaching and adhering to the dogmas of American productivity.

The postwar emergence of an industrial and modern Italian mass society had in fact gradually transformed the rhythm and organization of people’s work. Such trends came to full realization in the 1980s, creating fertile ground for the spread of a fast food culture. In particular, the rising number of women working outside the home, the growth of Italy’s service industry, increased urbanization, and the spread of the “long working day” contributed to sever the long-lasting relationship between the home and the family meal (Capatti et al. 1998; Scarpellini 2014). The new Italian society fostered individual food consumption and increased the amount of extra-domestic meals. Fast food service seemed therefore to answer “a real public demand,” in line with a new and increasingly neoliberal organization of labor, which required greater productivity and reduced time-wasting activities

(Della Rovere 1986, 24; Enriotti 1986; Lombardi 1986, 31). By the mid-1980s, according to Confcommercio, the Italian organization representing the companies of the service sector, seventeen million Italians consumed their lunch outside of home every day. Seven million of them resorted to commercial catering services, including the timely and economically convenient fast food restaurants (Bartolini 1983; Bartolini 1985, 6).

Italians became therefore increasingly accustomed to fast food precisely when Italy was going through its second — and even bigger — economic miracle of the postwar era. This was the age of the so-called “Milano da bere” (“Milano to drink”), and of the emergence of a new kind of youth culture, the one of the so-called “*paninari*” (“Sandwiches”), which soon became fast food’s greatest fans.²⁷ Besides the many office workers resorting to fast food for their short lunch breaks, the main customers and employees of this new kind of restaurants — in Italy, but also elsewhere in Europe — were the teenagers.²⁸ The *paninari* came to represent the best expression of the “*paninomania*” (sandwichmania) of the 1980s. Moreover, the fact that the *paninaro* was depicted as the symbol of an “increasingly Americanized” society points to the public perception of fast food as a vessel of Americanization, precisely at a time when the public debate’s focus was increasingly shifting from the Americanization paradigm to the

globalization one (Nava 1985, 3).²⁹

It was this favorable context in which McDonald's built its almost immediate, if also contested, success. It was founded on the ability to meet the new needs of an Italian society that wanted to enjoy the pleasures that American-inspired consumer culture could offer, and in which the time spent eating was increasingly less. But the 1980s was not only the era of the *paninari*. It was also the time of a new collective patriotic fervor. As effectively highlighted by historian Antonio Varsori, and as pointed out by the popular press of the time, during the 1980s, the concepts of "patria" and "nation" gained new legitimacy, fully entering Italian political and public debates (Nava 1985, 9; Romero and Varsori 2006). Italians' rediscovered patriotism was paralleled by the full development of the rhetoric of the "Made in Italy" —the successfully advertised, domestically and globally, Italian sense of style and way of life.³⁰

The Made in Italy rhetoric also invaded Italian food practices, contributing to the definition and institutionalization of a uniform Italian culinary identity. In fact, it was at this time that foods like pasta and *parmigiano* definitively became core components of Italians' identity.³¹ This explains why, in the 1980s, the arrival of McDonald's and its fast food formula was also perceived as a

cultural threat to Italians' "buon gusto" ("good taste"). Notably too, the spread of fast food strengthened the public push to launch, both domestically and internationally, Italian food, contributing to the Italian State's increasing political and economic investment into the country's gastronomic sector (Sassatelli 2019).³²

The homogenizing effects produced by both the definition of a uniform Italian culinary identity and the increased circulation of globalized food products generated a series of impactful resistances, even if the Italian economy and parts of society embraced fast food.³³ In particular, multilocal globalism triggered the (re)-discovery and promotion of (similarly constructed) Italian regional cuisines: *vis à vis* the threat posed by food industrialization and globalization, Italians attributed renewed importance to their local culinary traditions, transforming the regional character of their gastronomic patrimony into an added value. This renewal followed the emergence of several political and social movements intended to safeguard and re-launch Italy's variegated culinary heritage and its manifold local traditions and products. The most notorious of these was the Slow Food movement, born in reaction to the standardization of food production and food consumption embodied by McDonald's.

These divergent trends simultaneously provided fertile and hostile grounds for the diffusion of fast food. Now that I have outlined them, I can proceed to consider the main sources of McDonald's success in Italy, as well as of the various anti-McDonald's protests. As mentioned, the golden arches' entrance into the Italian boot was anything but smooth. The "McDonald's Italia srl" was created in September 1985, with the task of franchising restaurants in the "McDonald's System" (Camera di Commercio 1985).³⁴ A few months earlier, the CEO of McDonald's in Western Germany had proposed to Peter Schütz — German supervisor of the chain's restaurants in Munich and married to an Italian woman — to open and manage an outpost-restaurant in Bolzano, exploiting the large recognition that the brand already had in the Federal Republic (Schütz 2010). The eventual entrance in Italy occurred therefore on tiptoe, on October 15, 1985. No official inauguration was organized, as the company opted for a "silent opening." It might be because of this that the chain publicly recognizes its first Italian McDonald's as the one inaugurated a few months later in Rome.

Rumors of an opening in Rome had circulated at least since the beginning of 1985, with the press recurrently hinting at various possible locations, from Piazza Trevi to Piazza del Popolo or Trastevere. In December 1985, it however became official that the

golden arches would land in Piazza di Spagna, in the location of the former “Rugantino” restaurant, which had been closed and taken over by Jacques Bahbout (C.R. 1985, 25).³⁵ After the necessary construction works, the restaurant was officially inaugurated on March 20, 1986. It became the biggest McDonald’s restaurant in the world, with 450 seats, a game area for the kids, a piano, an innovative salad bar, marble adornments, wooden tables, and *sanpietrini* on the floor: all elements intended to appease the gastronomic and architectural tastes of the Italians (Laurenzi 1986).

The opening was an incredible success, with crowds in line from the early morning, and over 20,000 people showing up to have their “bite of America” (Lampugnani 1986). Similarly crowded scenes were replicated in the following days, exceeding all the company’s expectations. Success, though, brought protests. Neither, in fact, the general public’s excitement, nor Bahbout’s reassurances that the restaurant had no intention of altering the layout of the piazza saved McDonald’s from the large demonstrations that animated the weeks after the opening (C.R. 1985, 25). On the day of the inauguration, the crowd enjoying the “americanate” (things American) was paralleled by a hostile crowd, comprised of local shop and restaurant owners, Left and Right party members, political activists, environmentalists, trade unions representatives,

famous actors and singers, and members of the newly formed “Committee for the protection of the historical center” (Forti 1986, 31). In the following days, the Roman municipality received twelve different petitions asking to revoke McDonald’s license.³⁶

According to historian Emanuela Scarpellini, such protests resulted from a combination of several factors, including an enduring anti-American ideological tradition, the fear generated among local retailers by the arrival of a giant corporation, the increased public attention to healthy food, and the important role played by historical monuments and sites in the definition of Italian identity (Scarpellini 2014). A dive into the press of the time unveils, however, that it was mostly this latter aspect, the preoccupation for the city’s urban décor, that seemed to concern McDonald’s opponents. In this regard, *L’Unità* reported that critics argued that they could not “allow a section of Rome, the showcase of Made in Italy, to be offended by a horde of *paninari*, by embittered *borgatari*” (“suburbanites”) (Lampugnani 1986, 12; Lampugnani 1986, 17). This point of view is confirmed by the statements appearing in all other major newspapers, similarly lamenting how McDonald’s “marked another stage in the city center’s decline,” “upsetting the atmosphere of the most beautiful city in the world,” and “disfiguring” Rome (*Il Corriere della Sera* 1986, 34; Argiolas 1986, 17; Lampugnani 1986; Della Rovere, 1986).

Analogous protests had characterized the opening of most other fast food restaurants in the capital, and would continue to do so (Lombardi 1986, 30). In the case of McDonald's, however, the problem seemed to be, not only the "fast food invasion," but also its "Americanizing" effects (*L'Unità*, 1986).³⁷ In the weeks that followed the inauguration, several initiatives were consequently undertaken to force McDonald's to close and to prevent the opening of additional outlets. To this end, the Roman City Council unanimously voted to revoke McDonald's license. They also solicited clearer legislation on the transformation of traditional restaurants and cafés into fast food restaurants (Petacco 1986a, 27; Petacco 1986b, 30). McDonald's opponents did not however stop on the Campidoglio municipal steps. On April 20, they took to the streets of Rome, organizing a large demonstration headed by prominent politicians and entertainment figures, from Claudio Villa and Renzo Arbore to Renato Nicolini and fashion designer Valentino. The rally ended up with a collective "spaghettata" in Piazza di Spagna.

On the one side, there were thus the *paninari* and the many young customers drawn to McDonald's to seek a form of cultural transgression. To them, the chain's fast food ways represented an

opportunity for emancipation: there, they could enjoy their new purchasing power, have a gathering spot, break the rules of adult behavior, and have a bite of America.³⁸ On the other side, there were the numerous demonstrators, to whom McDonald's fast food system represented an economic threat and a challenge to their cultural identity. Such reclaiming of fast food outlets as either sites of transgression or as places menacing embedded food practices and cultural habits confirms food's role as an instrument of political confrontation along – in this case – generational and class lines (Bendix and Fenske 2014).

Additional attempts to stop the fast food invasion took place over the course of the summer. None of them, however, significantly concerned or undermined McDonald's activity. As a matter of fact, a series of commentators noted how the very fuss and the polemics created by McDonald's opponents had further increased its notoriety. According to Bahbout's partner, Francesco Bazzuchi, "the more protests there were, the better the business went" (Resca and Gianola 1998, 120-121).³⁹ In 1986, the McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna was the company's most profitable outlet in the world. On its side, McDonald's rebutted all accusations and pointed out the way in which the architectural design of the restaurant had been adapted to fit the historic public square. It also pointed out the significant contribution made to the city's

economy through the employment of 250 workers.

It can be argued that the initial opposition to McDonald's, largely revolving around Italy's artistic patrimony, was barely connected to a larger discourse against the fast food system itself, or to the threat that fast food might have posed to Italy's culinary tradition. This surprised foreign observers. In the midst of the Piazza di Spagna protests, a British journalist tellingly asked his readers, "what indoctrination process could be able to convince Italians to eat dried meatballs when they have one of the most renowned cuisines in the world?" (Bernabei 1987).⁴⁰ The marginality of the concerns revolving around food production, food consumption and food quality does not mean, however, that the issue was completely overlooked. During the days of the protests in Piazza di Spagna, the opposition to McDonald's did not completely fail to include food-related considerations. Such was, for instance, the case with the public inquiries made in March 1986 into the quality of the meat used by McDonald's and other fast food chains (Salvadori 1986, 13). And such was the case with the anti-McDonald's demonstration organized by "Agrisalut," in Piazza di Spagna, on World Food Day, in 1986 (Forti 1987, 30). At the same time, McDonald's opponents did not fail to negatively criticize fast food's connection to an American and capitalist vision of the world, which valued quantity, productivity, and profit over quality

and socialization. More than concerns about urban architecture, these critiques would become central in the following decade, making a significant contribution to the public discourse on the relationship between American capitalism, fast food culture, and globalization.

One year after the inauguration, commentators agreed that “McDonald’s has won the battle and the city centers are crawling with hamburger houses” (Grignetti 1987, 20; Franceschini 1987). Nonetheless, the second Roman McDonald’s opened only in the Fall of 1987 and was located in the non-central neighborhood of the “EUR” (Greco 1987, 15; Grignetti 1987, 34). Three years after its arrival, McDonald’s had opened only four restaurants in Italy, versus the 61 already existing in France, and the over 250 present in Germany and Great Britain. In the spring of 1990, McDonald’s finally opened its first restaurant in Milan. By then, the company seemed to have learned the lesson of Italian architectural “inviolability.” The chosen location, in piazza Duca d’Aosta, was deliberately “not close to the Duomo,” and McDonald’s had agreed to make a contribution to improve the surrounding environment by planting trees in the square (Po. 1990, 36). Two other Milan restaurants soon followed. In each of these, McDonald’s opted for “an elegant interior design” and made “a few concessions to the Mediterranean diet,” including in its menu

chicken, fruit salads, and caprese salads (*Il Corriere della Sera* 1990, 32).

Such partial adaptations to Italy's urban environment and taste characterized, in fact, all McDonald's restaurants in the peninsula, in line with the company's multilocal strategy and consistent with the will to "integrate ourselves in the country" and "become part of the community everywhere" (Grignetti 1987, 34; Franceschini 1988).⁴¹ In this regard, it is worth reminding that Kroc's franchising philosophy left a certain degree of autonomy to the franchisees, who could slightly adapt McDonald's formula to the needs of the territory in which they operated. At this stage of McDonald's European expansion, however, adaptations were still limited to slight variations and did not involve the inclusion of local food products. Moreover, the management of McDonald's operations in Italy was still entrusted to North American businessmen and not yet to Italian entrepreneurs.

By the end of the decade, then, the status of McDonald's activity in Italy kept swinging between ups and downs. On the one hand, the amount of McDonald's restaurants was still small, especially in comparison with all other Western European countries. On the other hand, however, McDonald's fast food formula seemed to

have caught on in the peninsula, with the number of American-like fast food restaurants progressively growing as well. Fast food's mix of success and resistance found expression in the development and spread of Italian versions of fast food, which simultaneously proved the influence of the American model, but also the selective appropriation and reinterpretation to which it was subject once abroad. Besides in fact the many copycats who offered hamburgers and fries inside American-like restaurants with American-sounding names, the arrival of American fast food led many Italian restaurateurs and food experts to look for a way to combine "the need for a quick meal with that of not losing their taste for quality food." To them, the goal was to elaborate an Italian alternative to fast food. In doing so, they could promote not only Italian food products, but also "an Italian food culture compatible with the demands of the present world" (Enriotti 1986, 16). Such calls for a "fast cibus" (cibus is the Latin word for food), which should combine quick service with the employment of typical Italian products, were consistent with the belief that for fast food to go "from being a fad to being a habit" and thus to become part of Italians' daily life, it was necessary to Italianize it (Zanini 1985, 6; Bartolini 1983).

The progressive application of the fast service formula to several Italian products, for example the "pizzerie al taglio," increased at

a greater pace than McDonald's did in the 1980s (Alberini 1985, 28).⁴² At the same time, there were several examples of fast food restaurants offering typical national Italian, or regional meals. The most significant elaboration of an Italian way to fast food was the one implemented by Luigi Cremonini with the launch, even before his acquisition of Burghy, of "Italy & Italy." This was a chain of 9 Italian fast food restaurants serving "sangiovese wine and spaghetti" (Bernieri 1986, 29; Lonardi 1988; Passerini 1988, 17). Cremonini's declared intention was to mix American rapidity and organization, with Italian cooking methods and products. His was, at the root, a fast food franchise chain that employed pre-packaged, frozen and standardized food products.⁴³ It was thus not — I argue — so different from McDonald's.

The spread of this kind of Italian fast food raises the issue of whether it is the employment of Italian food that makes a fast food restaurant "Italian/Italianized." Should this be the case, the parallel spread of US fast food chains offering an Americanized version of "typical" Italian meals and food products — from Pizza Hut to Olive Garden — would account for some Italianization of American society (Parasecoli 2014).⁴⁴ As however Cremonini himself noted, in his defense of "hamburger and French fries fast food" from charges of Americanization, the global spread of pizza or pasta had not led people abroad to feel "colonized by the

Italians” (Triani 1986, 14).⁴⁵ Cremonini missed the mark, though. Undoubtedly, the fact that the United States’ contemporary culinary culture is made up by a multiplicity of ethnic cuisines (Gabaccia 2000; Wallach 2014; Long 2016), the awareness that “the [American] national pie had foreign ingredients” (Hoganson 2007), as well as the fact that Americans originally considered Italian food (imported and spread by immigrants) as unhealthy (Diner 2003), are all factors that complicate any colonizing narrative when considering the relationship and mutual influences between Italian and American foodways.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, it was not because fast food has nothing to do with some form of cultural colonization that Americans did not feel “Italianized.” On the contrary, the very spread of fast food outlets serving Italian food products, whether in the United States or in Italy, proves not so much the development of successful Italian alternatives, as the effective McDonaldization of Italian food and food service.⁴⁷ It represents a merely adaptive variation to the dominant American model and thus testifies to — perhaps even more than the diffusion of McDonald’s outlets — the success of the American fast food system.

Based, therefore, on the belief that it is not the origin of the food offered that makes fast food chains either Italian or American, the extension of “the principles of the fast food restaurant” to

the Italian food sector accounts for the actual Americanization of Italian food practices. What makes McDonald's an Americanizing vessel of cultural change is not only (nor mainly) the commonly celebrated or lamented spread of the Big Mac or French fries, but the diffusion of those American systems and methods that are at the heart of McDonald's fast food formula.⁴⁸ In this regard, it is quite emblematic that "Italy & Italy" became a favorite destination for "those metropolitan tribes inspired by overseas rituals" (alluding to the *paninari*), and thus for teenagers going there to have a taste of America, rather than for people looking for an Italian alternative to American fast food (Bernieri 1988, 38).

The long-lasting effect produced by McDonald's, and more generally by the fast food system, arises not as much from the introduction of hamburgers and French fries into Italians' diets, as from the exportation of specific business practices and food production methods founded on efficiency, standardization, and on the expansion of the franchising system. When reflecting on fast food and its popularity, several Italian commentators illustratively pointed out the parallel spread of franchising. In particular, the historian and intellectual Giorgio Bocca defines Italian franchising as the expression of an "impressive cloning of America, or Italian multiplication of the American way of life." Using McDonald's as example, he commented how several experts had defined 1987

“the great year of Italian franchising” (Bocca 1987).⁴⁹

Only a few years later, in the new post-Cold War context, the Italian journalist Vittorio Zucconi commented: “the McDonaldization of the world is done: McDonald’s is the most visible symptom of the achieved rationalization of the world” (1997). There is no doubt that the end of the Cold War acted as a springboard for McDonald’s definitive transformation into an empire on which “the sun never sets.” If in 1975 only 8% of the company’s sales came from outside the United States, that percentage had rose to 25% in 1995. Five years later, at the turn of the millennium, McDonald’s was selling more abroad than in the United States, operating in 117 countries through 26,462 restaurants.

Within this positive context, Italy represented a partial exception. On the one hand, the chain had enlarged its clientele. The era of the *paninari* was over and McDonald’s was serving an increasing number of white-collar workers and families (Poloni 1992, 42). On the other hand, however, there were still only ten McDonald’s restaurants in Italy at the end of 1992, and the company registered a net loss of L. 1.608.113.881 (Camera di Commercio 1992). Two years later, the number of outlets had

risen to twenty-three: progress, but still an unsatisfactory amount compared to the almost 300 McDonald's existing in France and the over 500 in Germany and Great Britain. In a Western Europe increasingly enjoying its lunch beneath the golden arches, Italy seemed determined "to hold on against the invasion of Kroc's successors" (*Il Corriere della Sera* 1994). To quicken its expansion, the company decided to strengthen its multilocal strategy, starting the "Italianization" of the chain. The first step in this direction was made in 1995, when the management of McDonald's Italian operations was entrusted to an Italian businessman, Mario Resca, who had successfully managed several restaurants in Lombardia and headed one of McDonald's Italian franchised companies.⁵⁰

It was under Resca's guidance that McDonald's fully started its ongoing integration into the country's socio-economic and cultural fabric. To this end, he decided to enlarge the company's reliance on Italian managers (Donelli 1995, 21). In a similar way, he increasingly resorted to Italian suppliers, thereby intensifying the local look of the company.⁵¹ By 1996, the percentage of Italian producers among the company's overall suppliers rose from 20% to 75% (Tamburini 1996). At the same time, McDonald's entered a partnership with several Italian business groups, signing agreements with the important chains "Agip" and "Rinascente" to open its restaurants in all Agip service stations and inside UPIM shopping centers

(Grion 1994; Sa. 1995, 20).

Despite Resca's Italianizing efforts, at the beginning of 1996, McDonald's still only had thirty-three restaurants in Italy. Moreover, in terms of sales and presence, the golden arches lagged far behind Burghy, which had significantly expanded itself and turned over 400 billions Lire a year. The situation was, however, about to be unexpectedly reversed. In March 1996, McDonald's took advantage of Cremonini's financial difficulties to take over all Burghy and "Italy & Italy" restaurants, transforming them into McDonald's (Ce. 1996, 25; Brogi 1996, 40).⁵² In the blink of an eye, McDonald's tripled its presence and the golden arches seemed finally ready to conquer "the land of pizza," transforming Italy into what one newspaper called "a more normal country, in line with the others" (Taino 1996, 1).⁵³

Nonetheless, in 1997, the head of McDonald's International Division commented how the chain still held only a "fractional" section of the Italian food market. This was in a context in which Italians were spending only \$4 per capita a year on fast food (vs. the \$42 spent in France and the \$376 in the United States).⁵⁴ With a L. 458 billion turnover, the subsequent year proved McDonald's most profitable one since its arrival in the peninsula, instilling

confidence in further growth (Cavalli 1998, 17). The company continued to expand at a slow pace, failing to meet the goal of reaching 335 restaurants by the new millennium. Moreover, between 1999 and 2002, McDonald's was caught up in the protests realized by the growing Italian anti-globalization movement. The chain became a favorite target for the various constituencies of the movement, from Left to Right, including Catholics, animal rights advocates, environmentalists, trade unionists, and farmers.

On its side, McDonald's met its opposition by deploying its usual multidomestic arsenal. Despite in fact progressing at a slow pace, the company reiterated its confidence in its ability to gradually conquer Italian stomachs (Bagnoli 2000, 19). The fast food chain reacted to Italians' skepticism by further adapting to the local context. Against charges of deteriorating Italy's historical areas and city centers, McDonald's built outlets that fit better into the community and added value to the historical patrimony. For instance, the first McDonald's that is also a museum was opened on the Via Appia, south of Rome (Clemente 2017; Fiore 2017; Povoledo 2017).⁵⁵ At the same time, the company highlighted its contribution to Italian economy by underscoring its predominant employment of Italian products and suppliers.

Starting from the late 1990s, McDonald's Italian branch strengthened its multilocal approach by launching a series of initiatives addressing Italians' taste for fresh and quality food. To this end, the chain increasingly advertised itself as an Italian enterprise, committed to sustaining the growth of local producers and giving value to the traditions of the community in which it operated. This trend has been more substantially implemented in the last two decades, through the inclusion of various Italian signature food items in McDonald's menu. In 2008, "McDonald's became even more Italian" with the inclusion of *parmigiano* in its hamburgers.⁵⁶ A few years later, the company launched its "McItaly Burger," soon followed by a new "line" of burgers ("Adagio" and "Vivace") realized in collaboration with Italy's most famous Michelin-starred chef, Gualtiero Marchesi (Bernardi 2011; Scarci 2011; Ferrona 2011).

There were of course limits to the effectiveness of this "Italianizing" strategy. The declarations made by McDonald's about its 100% Italian supply-chain have often been considered a form of green-washing crafted to distort public attention (LaPira 2015). At the same time, the idea of McItaly has been criticized as a form of cultural appropriation and, as one offended critic said, "a monstrous act of national betrayal" (Fort 2010; Petrini 2010).⁵⁷ Moreover, not all of McDonald's attempts to include typical Italian

products in its offering have been successful. On the contrary, an experiment realized with “Pizza Mia” in 1999 was a total failure.

One of the most effective critiques aiming to expose the way in which McDonald’s multilocal strategy has not altered the homogenizing and globalist nature of the company came from the Italian Slow Food movement. This was born in 1986, in reaction to the golden arches’ arrival in Rome, and is now an international movement operating all across the world (Parasecoli 2003; Leitch 2003). Slow Food does not oppose globalization *per se*. The movement conversely praises globalization’s capacity to connect different local cultures. It however opposes its standardizing effects and the idea of a homogenous culture for all, which is considered the basis of McDonald’s activity. Slow Food rejects the fast food system as the epitome of a “fast life,” which “in the name of productivity has changed our way of being and threatens our environment and our landscapes” (Slow Food 1989). The opposition is not merely between foodways, but rather between ways of life: McDonald’s fast life, modeled on the machine and founded on productivity and profit, opposed to the slow pace of life of Slow Food’s snail, founded on the rediscovery of traditional local cultures. Carlo Petrini (i.e. Slow Food’s founder) and his fellows consequently favor local forms of fast food, as long as they are defined by their direct relationships with a territory

and sustain biodiversity against gastronomic homogenization.

This stance is consistent with Slow Food's effort to include the consumption and the production of food in a single discourse, arguing that what is wrong with fast food is not as much the pace of its consumption, as the overall capitalist system of production, distribution, and consumption behind it.

In line with such vision, Petrini has argued that McDonald's has diversified its offer in order to adapt to local tastes much less than it could. He has underscored how the corporation still relies on intensive monocultures and on the employment of selected and "high performance" breeds.⁵⁸ Even McDonald's reliance on local suppliers — he contends — does not entail the employment of local products. In this respect, Slow Food has recurrently accused McDonald's of imposing its standards globally, what the sociologist George Ritzer defined "vertical McDonaldization," spreading worldwide homogenous food varieties, at the expense of local ones. To oppose such a paradigm, the movement has promoted a series of initiatives, from the Ark of Taste to Terra Madre, aiming to reverse McDonald's kind of glocalization and create a vision for a non-McDonaldized global world. This does not mean, of course, that Slow Food's program is free of flaws. On the contrary, several scholars have underscored the movement's shortcomings, including modest instruments, especially when compared to

McDonald's, and the contradictions inherent in its mixed political agenda and commercial enterprises.⁵⁹ Nonetheless, Slow Food has effectively belied McDonald's multilocal rhetoric, outlining a different model of globalization: while McDonald's localizes its global standards to uniformly and internationally spread them, Slow Food aims at globalizing local models, in order to locally preserve differentiated forms of food production and food consumption.

Conclusion: An American vessel of globalization

As argued by numerous scholars, the tendency toward localization is just as much intrinsic to globalization as that toward homogenization. This is because globalization triggers local reactions, empowers local communities, allows the global circulation of local cultural practices, and requires local filters and adaptations to be sustainable and accepted (Robertson 1992; Appadurai 1996; Cox 1997; Eckes and Zeiler 2003; Friedman 1999). The consequent localization put in action by global corporations such as McDonald's does not, however, alter their basically globalist nature. It is true that McDonald's does not offer (anymore) globally homogenous food in globally homogenous restaurants. It nonetheless serves its food globally through a homogenous system of production, distribution, and consumption. It is the global extension of such a system, not the alleged

homogenization of tastes generated by the universal presence of the Big Mac, that is the essence of McDonaldization. Within this framework, the Italian origins of McDonald's suppliers and products do not make it an Italian company. McDonald's offers food produced by local farmers, but it also imposes on them its global standards.

McDonald's fast food formula is hence much more than a rapid type of food service. When we speak of the McDonald's system, we are referring to ideas and models, such as productivity, which are part of the longer history of Americanization and Americanism.⁶⁰ Moreover, McDonald's has simultaneously been perceived as the symbol of America's global reach, and one of the main multinational corporations driving globalization. On the one hand then, McDonald's has deliberately inserted itself into American tradition, leveraging its association with the American way of life whenever it was convenient to do so. On the other hand, we have seen how, even in business terms, McDonald's is not as much an American corporation, as a federation of locally operated, semi-autonomous franchises, able to present themselves as inherently Italian (or French, German, Japanese, etc.).

McDonald's intensified glocalization has substantially and

successfully changed the company's outlook and structures. It has, however, not essentially transformed its (American and capitalist) operating procedures and, therefore, it has not altered its role as an American vessel of globalization. In this context, the "McDonaldization" of the world came to embody precisely such a U.S.-imposed kind of globalization. My examination has hence revealed that the key to understanding how globalization still reflects and spreads American values should not be looked for in the global circulation and acceptance of American products. In other words, the presently hegemonic global culture is not American in its origin, or in its contents. It is rather American by virtue of the global spread of specific business practices, and systems of production, distribution, and consumption.

To conclude, the analysis of McDonald's landing in Italy has highlighted how McDonald's fast food was immediately perceived as American and Americanizing. As such, it was viewed as threatening Italian cultural identity, heritage, and traditions and, thus, resisted. The opposition to McDonald's as a distinctively American menace was however counterbalanced by the widespread enthusiasm and fascination generated by fast food, especially among the new Italian youth, which went to McDonald's to taste and experience the American way of life. Moreover, we have seen how the spread of McDonald's fast food formula

contributed and was simultaneously favored by the broader social transformations undergone by the Italian society in the 1980s, which created an increasing demand for rapid forms of food service.⁶¹ In a similar way, the diffusion of fast food chains went hand in hand with the parallel industrialization of the Italian food sector, as well as with the emergence of large agribusiness groups. In this context, McDonald's expansion depended upon the company's capacity to McDonaldize its local suppliers. In enlarging the presence of the golden arches, McDonald's exported its American and standardized systems of production and consumption, the diffusion of which was confirmed by the emergence of several Italian imitators.

The Italian links in the McDonald's archipelago helps thus explain both Americanization and globalization, as well as the way in which the former became the latter. The secret is not in the sauce. It is in the system. How is McDonald's both American and global? In fact, it is neither. As shown also by other studies dedicated to the chain's expansion abroad, McDonald's is primarily multilocal (Watson 2006; Fantasia 2018). This is because the core structure of its business is represented by the reliance on its successful franchising structure. It is nonetheless this globally applied, but originally American franchising formula that — I contend — characterizes the McDonald's system as an American form of

globalization. In this regard, Marling has effectively argued how the “American ability to standardize the practices of decentralized business operation has had an enormous impact on globalization” (Marling 2006, 162). Adding, however, an additional consideration to Marling’s vision, it is my belief that the American essence of McDonald’s lies, yes, in its franchising structure, but also in the fast food system and in its principles, which McDonald’s has globally spread. McDonald’s offers transnational food items in locally adapted formulas, but the production, packaging, and distribution processes which sustain its offering are American. In other words, McDonald’s fast food is not American. But its globally extended fast food system is.

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Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise specified, all translations from Italian to English are mine.
- 2 To be fair, it should be pointed out that Five Guys has not yet been able to open its Roman restaurant. Interestingly, the first Five Guys' restaurant was opened in Piazza San Babila in Milan, the site of Italy's very first fast food restaurant, Burghy. For more on this, see the *Il gambero rosso* articles enlisted in the works cited section.
- 3 Of course, American culture cannot be reduced to these two values. On the contrary, the United States has expressed and spread a variety of, at times even contradictory, values. Nonetheless, it is my conviction that, especially after WWII, American notions of democracy and productivity fundamentally defined American culture and were at the core of United States officials' definition and projection of the so-called *American way of life*.
- 4 In this regard, Hunter and Yates have effectively argued how globalization has carried along the cultural heterogeneity of the Western world, which is now consequently less "monolithic" than it was during the Cold War.
- 5 Looking at globalization through food consequently represents a good way to cast light on the enduring dialectic between global and local dynamics (Ray and Srinivas 2012; Watson and Caldwell 2004; Wilk 2006)
- 6 In the words of James Watson and Melissa Caldwell, "as food practices change, notions of national identity are threatened, especially when American corporate interests are involved" (Watson and Caldwell 2005, 2).
- 7 Since the unification of the country, in 1861, food has represented a determinant component of Italy's national identity and a crucial instrument of its nation-building process. Such centrality finds confirmation in the extensive historiography dedicated to

food and its role in Italian history. Among the most important contributions, it is worth quoting the works by Andrea Capatti, Massimo Montanari, John Dickie and Emanuela Scarpellini. For further reference, see works cited.

8 As proven by the iconic scene from *An American in Rome*, in which Alberto Sordi gives in to macaroni, Italians' receptiveness and fondness for American consumer culture seems to have never extended itself to gastronomy.

9 Ritzer does not however consider McDonaldization as a synonymous of globalization. He rather retains it a form of globalization and "a specific type of globalization" (that is, the globalization process as driven by multinational corporations in their continuous ambition to grow).

10 On American corporations as the main drivers of globalization, see the chapter by James Davison Hunter and Joshua Yates in Berger and Huntington. The relation between Americanization, US corporations, and globalization is further confirmed by the incredible amount of studies dedicated to American global businesses and their contribution to globally spread American models and secure United States' global hegemony. See, for instance, the studies by Emily Rosenberg or Mira Wilkins.

11 The hamburger is an originally Russian food, brought to Hamburg by German sailors. According to one version of the story, German immigrants exported it to Cincinnati, where it became a "German delicacy." Another version is that the first to propose the hamburger sandwich with ketchup and mustard was Emeric Gruber, a German émigré originally from Hamburg and living in Chicago. On the origins of French fries there are various versions. According to the most common one, the Belgians were the first to fry potatoes, after the Spanish had introduced them in Europe. According to another version, fries became instead popular in France, thanks

to a French medical officer, Parmentier, who had been forced to eat potatoes while imprisoned in Prussia during the “Seven Years war.”

12 Eckes and Zeiler have less radically sustained that globalization represents a broader and longer process, which has significantly underlain, but should not be equated with the development of the American century. They have nonetheless acknowledged how the Cold War has somehow facilitated the spread of American-style globalization, so that, by 1989, American popular culture was indeed hegemonic in most of the world (Eckes and Zeiler 2003).

13 This point of view is in line with Eric Schlosser’s idea that fast food represents an inherently American view of life and way of doing things.

14 As previously stated, the intention here is not to reduce America’s culture to notions of democracy and productivity. These values have however fundamentally defined the American way of life, so that their spread can be considered as participant into the postwar Americanization process.

15 The reconstruction of McDonald’s history is mostly based on John Love’s study.

16 The Oxford Dictionary defines Fordism as “a system of production based on mass consumption and especially the use of the assembly line,” and Taylorism as a “the principles or practice of scientific management and work efficiency as practiced in a system known as the Taylor System.” As noted however by the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci, Fordism is not merely a mode of production. It rather represents a new “civilization,” a whole value system, which prescribes social behaviors oriented to sustain standardized mass production and standardized mass consumption. For more on Fordism and Taylorism, see the works by Frederick W. Taylor, Bruce Pietrykowski, Len Holden, Bruno Settis, and Daniel Watson.

17 Quote from the movie “The Founder,” directed by John

Lee Hancock, The Weinstein Company, 2016.

18 Failing to do so, or changes to the formula would result in rejections to renew the franchising contract.

19 A personification himself of the self-made man, Kroc conceived McDonald's as an enterprise offering to everyone the opportunity to become a successful businessman, embodying the individualistic essence of American capitalism.

20 According to Ritzer, efficiency, calculability, control and predictability are the core aspects of McDonaldization.

21 In this respect, Mario Resca would subsequently underscore how "traditionally and culturally, Italians are used to *il posto fisso*" (permanent employment/position), so that flexibility was usually faced with stiffness by Italian trade unions (Resca and Gianola 1998, 100).

22 The "pizzeria al taglio" is generally a small outlet, with no seats, selling pre-prepared pizza by the slice. The *bar* is a sort of café, which sells espresso, croissants and sandwiches. Pizzerie and *bar* are usually independent enterprises and not part of a chain. The fast food definition can therefore be only partially applied to them. They serve fast food, but they do not adhere to the fast food system.

23 Mele's words are reported by Mario Resca and Rinaldo Gianola.

24 A product of Italy's economic miracle and expression of the postwar mix between American models and Italian practices, the autogrill had been one of the symbols of the Italian way to modernity (Colafranceschi 2008).

25 Quick is a Belgium-based fast food chain, while Wendy's is a famous American fast food chain. Both entered the Italian market through a joint venture with major Italian groups, which formally owned the Italian restaurants of the chain. All these fast food chains

preceded McDonald's.

26 In this respect, it is worth pointing out that, ahead of the protests against the McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna, the issue of fast food restaurants' effect on the urban layout of Italy's historical city centers had been raised also in Milan. Here, however, any actual opposition had been prevented by the largely favorable opinion of the Milanesi, and by the trade unions' pressures to safeguard the jobs created by the many fast food chains.

27 The translation into "Sandwiches" is proposed by Victoria De Grazia. For a broader consideration of the *paninari's* subculture, see the study by Paolo Morando.

28 It is here worth mentioning Rick Fantasia's study on fast food in France. In the course of the 1980s, McDonald's main customers in the hexagon were the so-called *décalés* (the offbeats): a post-1968 generation of apolitical cultural rebels very close to the Italian *paninari* and similarly attracted to fast food chains by the opportunity to "taste" the American way of life (Fantasia 2018; Ariés 1998).

29 In 1983 Thomas Levitt had in fact introduced and popularized the idea of "the globalization of the market," tellingly commenting how the "general drift toward the homogenization of the world" induced by globalization was effectively exemplified by "the success of McDonald's from the Champs Elysées to the Ginza" (Levitt 1983).

30 Emanuela Scarpellini's studies have effectively underscored how Italian fashion, design and food came to be the core elements around which Made in Italy, and, more generally, Italians' cultural identity were defined.

31 On this, see the work edited by Alberto Capatti, Alberto De Bernardi and Angelo Varni.

32 It was illustrative, in this respect, the organization of Italy's

first food fair, Cibus '85, in 1985. According to its organizers, such initiative was supposed to internationally present Italy as the "Food Valley of the world." The food fair would be replicated in the following years and is still taking place (Mondini 1985, 10).

33 It is important to keep in mind that both the definition of a uniform Italian cuisine and the re-launch of regional culinary practices should not be considered a phenomenon comprised in the 1980s. They were conversely rooted in broader postwar socio-cultural modernizing processes.

34 Srl stands for "società a responsabilità limitata," which literally means "limited liability company." It is a kind of legal corporate entity in Italy.

35 The negotiations with Bahbout and his Italian partner, Francesco Bazzucchi, had actually been going on for a while, but an agreement was reached only in the course of 1985.

36 These included the one presented by Valentino, the famous fashion designer, lamenting that McDonald's stink would damage his next door atelier. The dispute with Valentino lasted until June 1986, when a group of experts definitively expressed itself in favor of McDonald's, denying any actual "olfactory" damage (Sanvoisin 1986b, 27; Bultrini 1986).

37 In this respect, it is worth pointing out Carlo Vanzina's opinion. Not alien to fast food (he was the writer and producer of the movie *Italian Fast Food*), Vanzina expressed his disdain for "those who want to Americanize our country," opposing the McDonald's in Piazza di Spagna to the "modern, enjoyable and cozy" layouts of Milan's fast food outlets."

38 In this respect, Rick Fantasia has effectively illustrated how, similarly to Italy, in France too, young people appreciated fast food's self-service formula and the possibility to eat with their hands and

at any time of the day. These gave them the impression of a “no-rules” eating environment.

39 On the day of the spaghettiata, the restaurant cashed in more than any other day.

40 In a similar way, the American Mike Cannon considered foolish those Italians that aspired to eat hamburgers and fries, when they could have Italian cuisine (Sanvoisin 1986a, 30).

41 Adaptations had ranged from the decision to start the conquest of the Italian market from the city centers (and not from the suburbs, as in the United States), to the marble and sanpietrini of the Piazza di Spagna restaurant, or to the introduction of the salad bar, which had been defined as “a specificity of McDonald’s Roman restaurants.”

42 As early explained, the “pizzerie al taglio” are generally small outlets and an independent enterprises. The fast food definition can therefore be only partially applied to them.

43 With its 9 restaurants, in 1987 Italy & Italy served an average of 2000 people a day. The spaghetti were pre-cooked and frozen, the restaurants were based on self-service and the menu was nationally standardized. As a result, the only thing that differentiated Italy & Italy from the more American-like Burghy was the food it offered. With the creation of Italy & Italy (but also, for instance, with the decision to include cappuccino and cornetto in Burghy’s menu), Cremonini somehow anticipated McDonald’s introduction, in the 1990s and 2000s, of typical Italian products in its menu.

44 The chain “Olive Garden” was born in 1982, founded by the General Mills Corporation. It went in the direction of offering Americanized Italian food also McDonald’s decision to experimentally launch the “McPizza” in 1989, on the wave of the popularity of two of its greatest competitors, “Pizza Hut” and “Domino’s Pizza” (respectively created in 1958 and 1960). The “McPizza” was

temporarily introduced only in Kentucky and Indiana, but it never caught on. To be fair, however, in the case of pizza, Italy's claims over it are complicated by the fact that, in many ways, pizza has become a "planetarian food product." On Olive Garden and the way it was perceived as "an Americanized version of Italian food, imitative of McDonald's bad taste," see Franceschini, 1987.

45 To be fair, it should be pointed out that the global spread of Italian food products has gone hand in hand with the circulation of Italian culture and people, and thus with forms of Italian cultural influence (Cinotto 2013 and 2014).

46 It was only in the second half of the 20th century that Italian food, following both the full integration of Italian-Americans into US society and the studies on the Mediterranean diet by Ancel Keys, acquired prestige in the United States and became increasingly popular (Levenstein 1985).

47 In this sense, neither Pizza Hut, nor Domino's should be considered the product of the Italianization of American fast food. On the contrary, the spread of more traditional pizzerie and/or Italian restaurants can be considered participant into the international success of Made in Italy and thus into forms of Italianization. Italian food, thanks to Italian immigrants, Italian food industry and the initiative of the Italian State has in fact played a major role in enhancing Italy's cultural influence and commercial reach around the globe.

48 Once again, the reference is to Marling's argument, according to which what makes globalization American are not its American "contents" (i.e. the global circulation of American goods), but rather the American logistics through which it operates. It is here worth pointing out how, according to Ritzer, the best indicator of McDonaldization is not the universal presence of American fast food chains, but the existence of indigenous clones, which testifies to the global spread of McDonald's operating principles.

49 In this regard, Victoria De Grazia has conversely pointed out how, in the “Age of Benetton” and thus “in the mid-1980s, exploiting decades of adeptness in adjusting to cross-border commerce, fleet-footed European merchandisers came to challenge superannuated American chains on their own turf.” She has hence commented how “to speak of the ‘Europeanization of American retailing’ indicated that European merchandisers had now not only learned the American game but become full-fledged global players.” The reference here is to an article published in 1986 by Joanne Legomsky. There is of course no doubt that the European appropriation of specific American models has at times proven more successful than the American model itself. Such Europeanization does not however take away anything from the previous Americanization of European practices (Victoria De Grazia 2005, 460-461).

50 Mario Resca had joined the McDonald’s family in 1992, when he had become the franchisee of the restaurant in Corso Vercelli, Milan. After having doubled his restaurant’s revenue, he was entrusted with managing other McDonald’s outlets in Lombardia.

51 And yet, it is interesting to note how in the list of McDonald’s Italian suppliers is included “Coca Cola Italia,” which raises some questions on the criteria based on which a supplier is considered “Italian.” “Coca Cola HBC Italia” is indeed, at least legally, an Italian company, but can Coca Cola be considered an Italian beverage?

52 The Burghy brand was valued L. 122.272.299.952. In consideration however of the inclusion of “Italy and Italy,” and of the supply contract established with Cremonini’s Inalca (i.e. Cremonini became McDonald’s exclusive supplier of beef in the peninsula), the overall transition – mediated by Banca di Roma – was considered worth L. 200 billion (Camera di Commercio 1996).

53 Although the conversion of Burghy's restaurants into McDonald's took a few years, the takeover allowed the company to quickly go from 33 to over 100 restaurants. At the same time, it enabled McDonald's to bypass many of the problems originating from its recurrently difficult relations with local public administrations.

54 The main cause for these low levels of fast food consumption was considered the spread of Italian "bar," defined as an "all-Italian anomaly" able to effectively compete with American-like fast food outlets.

55 The restaurant incorporates an ancient Roman street and the archeological remains surrounding it. In a similar way, the McDonald's in Pompei had been designed by local architects to be appropriate to the surrounding archeological area.

56 Parmigiano had made its first brief appearance in a McDonald's burger in 1997. See McDonald's Italia – History Section: <https://www.mcdonalds.it/mcdonalds-italia/la-nostra-storia> (Last Accessed: September 2020).

57 According to Petrini, the Mcltaly pretended to offer "a bite" of true Italian taste, whereas it represented in fact an erasure of Italian diverse culinary identities in favor of tasteless homogenization.

58 Giancarlo Terzano has similarly pointed out how McDonald's has been responsible for the global imposition of a specific type of potato (the burbanck), of the iceberg lettuce, and of selected cattle breeds: the potato might be produced locally, but its variety and production process are standardized (Terzano 2005).

59 In this regard, Alison Leitch has effectively cast light on the way in which Slow Food's campaigns to protect "endangered foods" have contributed to transform many food products, which were "once a common element in local diets," into "exotic" and

“privately patented” items for gourmet consumption (Leitch 2003). Even more radically, Kelly Donati has spoken of Slow Food’s exotic and nostalgic rendering of the cultural other and its fetishization of cultural diversity “to satisfy the appetites of a privileged minority” (Donati 2005). For other similar critiques, see also the study by Janet Chrzan and Marie Gaytán.

60 Within this interpretative framework, Fordism and Taylorism are posed as precursors of McDonaldization, which continues the (twentieth century) global spread of America’s capitalist system, but under the new heading of (twenty-first century) globalization. In this respect, some historians have even come to trace a long historical trajectory that goes from Fordism, via postwar Americanization, to present day globalization and “McDonaldization.” See the work by Robert J. Antonio and Alessandro Bonanno.

61 In this sense, McDonald’s took advantage of the incipient European de-industrialization processes and of the consequent progressive growth of the service sector.

The Underground Railroad (2016) as Anti-White-Supremacist Fantasy

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Abstract: The possibilities the fantastical genre offers for commenting on the reverberations of the United States' colonial heritage have been exploited extensively in contemporary narrative works. One example is Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), in which he employs Toni Morrison's concept of the Africanist presence in the realm of the fantastic to show how the stereotypical image of a "Black other" still haunts the White American imagination. Situating Whitehead's bestseller within the field of Critical Whiteness Studies, this article examines how the fantastical encounter with the "Black other" comments on the image's persistence in American society and on its function to maintain White supremacy.

“ [T]he subject of the dream is the dreamer,” Toni Morrison once wrote (1992, 17). While Morrison was talking about the nature of fiction in general — and of nineteenth-century romance in particular — the metaphorical quality of the novel as dream, as a collection of figments of the mind, seems particularly apt for the genre of fantasy. In her introduction to fantasy literature, Rosemary Jackson specifies that the dream-like quality of fantasy is not the result of an escapist mode of writing, but of an assemblage of specific narrative techniques and structures expressing cultural and social concerns: “Like dreams, with which they have many similarities, literary fantasies are made up of many elements re-combined, and are inevitably determined by the range of those constitutive elements available to the author/dreamer” (Jackson 1981, 8). Fantasy is therefore not the invention of an alternate space separated from the empirical world but adapts and re-shapes its elements “to produce something strange, unfamiliar and *apparently* ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different.” (Jackson 1981, 8). Fantasy therefore is a subversive literary mode, drawing on aspects of the real “in a parasitical or symbiotic relation” (Jackson 1981, 20) in order to undermine them.

With the “construction of the impossible” (James and Mendlesohn 2012, 1) at the center of its narrative techniques, fantasy highlights its difference from reality only to use the resulting liberated

critical view and the heightened creative license for insights into the same reality. This epistemic potential of fantasy can only be leveraged when the distance between the fictional world and reality finds its optimal balance in the “paraxial area [as] [...] the spectral region of the fantastic” between the real and the unreal (Jackson 1981, 19). The creation of this paraxial area is what makes fantasy both connected to and estranged from reality, “[I]ike the ghost which is neither dead or alive, [...] a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness. It [fantasy] takes the real and breaks it” (Jackson 1981, 20). The subgenre of historical fantasy also operates in this paraxial area, balancing the possible and the impossible by creating a fictive world that is sufficiently alienating for the reader to achieve a critical distance, like Brecht’s alienation-effect, while its historical references continually and explicitly establish a link back to the extratextual reality. Historical fantasy’s position in this transitional space between the familiar and the alien, between the possible and the impossible enables a closer look at the absurdities, absences, and “hidden truths” of our reality by means of distancing and estranging without ever entirely losing touch with the empirical world.

Following Bakhtin, Jackson infers that fantasy’s hybrid nature resists generic categorization: “Spatial, temporal, and philosophical ordering systems all dissolve” (1981, 15). Fantasy can bring together different temporal reference frames, as “the tools of the

fantastic offer a powerful way to address the contemporary world as well as the distant past” (Okoafor 185). Historical fantasy in particular represents “the ways of knowing and making sense of the world that are excluded by the dominant discourse of history” (Schanoes 237). Historical fantasy therefore not only emancipates its presented world from temporal constraints, but also from entrenched modes of knowledge production.

The Underground Railroad (2016) by Colson Whitehead exploits the possibilities of historical fantasy to address the “distant past” of slavery and its reverberations in the contemporary world, showing how close to the twenty-first-century reality this past really is (Dischinger 2017, 85-87; Li 2019, 2). With its fantastic anachronisms, the novel points out omissions in the dominant discourses of the United States as a way to link its past, present, and possible future (Li 2019, 2). One of those omissions is that Whiteness has been silently operating to structure American society in favor of White people to the disadvantage of Black people (Baldwin 1998, 178).¹ The novel estranges its readers from its anachronistic version of American history, only to use the resulting creative liberation to critically dissect the White supremacist system (Dischinger 2017, 87) that has been, and still is, a covert part of America’s dominant discourses. As Li states, *The Underground Railroad* “exposes the truths of history” and the present by performing its own alternate history in the fantastical

space (2019, 2-4). Maus identifies this aversion to convention in Whitehead's novels in general:

In his choice of forms Whitehead parodies and appropriates the conventions of literary genres as a means of subverting the formulaic conclusions to which they have been reduced. At the same time, Whitehead's choice of subjects parodically appropriates various forms of 'conventional wisdom' present in American culture as a means of subverting the unexamined, ignored, or malevolent aspects thereof (Maus 2021, 19).

One might speak of a subversion of convention on multiple levels, for which fantasy, as "the literature of subversion" (Jackson 1981) provides a suitable medium. Accordingly, Whitehead's fantastic collage of elements of African American history in *The Underground Railroad* serves to challenge established categories and conventions of Western knowledge to eventually "subvert the unexamined, ignored" role of Whiteness in the construction of this knowledge. This role is not easy to grasp, given that Whiteness is imaginary, but also extends its power into US-American reality, serving to justify discriminatory practices. Fantasy's often eccentric detachments from reality enable to capture both sides of this dynamic, to show just how far Whiteness and Blackness are from being representations of reality without diminishing the consequences people suffer because of those racial concepts. I argue that the novel uses its hybridity as a "spectral presence" between reality and imagination to reveal the belief in White

superiority and Black inferiority as “real-life fantasy,” to highlight the absurdity of the parasitical relation between Whiteness and Blackness, and to subvert the American White supremacist belief system.

***The Underground Railroad* and Whiteness’ Parasitical Relation to Blackness**

Like Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, *The Underground Railroad* offers a temporal, yet anachronic, outline of slavery in the United States and its ramifications in the present. The reader accompanies the protagonist Cora on her journey as a runaway slave through multiple states and stages of American (post-)slavery history. The novel zooms in on events that oftentimes have been omitted from dominant American history writings, such as the Tuskegee syphilis experiment, where Public Health Service secretly infected African Americans with syphilis for research purposes (Dischinger 2017, 90), and zooms out regularly to remind the reader of the overall picture of African American history. As Okorafor suggests for Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*, “[t]he continuity of view intensifies the brutality and impact of slavery. Only through a fantasy novel can slavery be presented in such entirety” (2012, 183). Colson Whitehead’s fantastical reworking of this history however highlights not primarily the physical brutality of slavery. It rather focuses on an essential, yet no less violent, condition for slavery’s persistence, a condition that has been ignored by the American

public for a long time but still operates to uphold the racial hierarchy that became firmly established during slavery: Whiteness as a hidden but ever-present construct performing violence on African Americans.

In his essay “On Being ‘White’ ... and Other Lies,” Baldwin addresses Whiteness as an overarching racial imaginary that determines American reality: “America became white—the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white — because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation.” (Baldwin 1998, 178). Whiteness, as well as Blackness, had to be invented because of the “necessity of justifying a totally false identity and of justifying what must be called a genocidal history” (Baldwin 1998, 179). This relation between Whiteness and Blackness makes the latter a key for insights into the former, as “it is the Black condition, and only that, which informs us concerning white people. It is a terrible paradox, but those who believed that they could control and define Black people divested themselves of the power to control and define themselves” (Baldwin 1998, 180). What Lipsitz calls a “possessive investment in whiteness” (2018, 3) is thus, according to Baldwin, first and foremost a possessive investment in Blackness, in the “repudiation of the black Other” (Mills 1997, 58-59). In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison implicitly builds on Baldwin’s idea of, how she

calls it, the “parasitical nature of white freedom” (Morrison 1992, 57), a thought that appears also very prominently in Wilderson’s *Afropessimism* (2020, 16). According to Morrison and Wilderson, the function of African Americans in society has been reduced to that of a host for the White parasite, as “implements for the execution of White and non-Black fantasies” (Wilderson 2020, 15). Having been established during slavery, this exploitative relation continues into the present moment as “the afterlife of slavery” (Hartman 2007, 6).

While Afropessimists like Wilderson claim that this unequal relation cannot be changed as it is too deeply anchored in Western society, Morrison sees a possibility to work toward a betterment of the American situation by raising awareness about Whiteness through literature. She develops a literary critique that enables readers to detect the discursive praxis of “American Africanism” (Morrison 1992, 6) in American literature that implicitly enables Whiteness’ exploitation of Blackness. At the center of this critique lies the so-called “Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992, 46), the name Morrison gives to the host of the White parasite, to the “Black other” that conditions Whiteness’ existence. She tries to grasp the complexity and the inherent absurdity in the construct of an othered Blackness by summarizing the “fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American”

(Morrison 1992, 38). The Africanist presence is the image of a naturally enslaved, inferior, and powerless Black counterpart to a superior Whiteness, “both a visible and invisible mediating force” that is always present, even in its absence (Morrison 1992, 38-46). It is key to the definition of a White American identity, “[f]or in that construction of blackness *and* enslavement could be found not only the not-free but also, with the dramatic polarity created by skin color, the projection of the not-me” (Morrison 1992, 38). The connection of this presence to the mode of fantasy becomes apparent when one considers that, like a ghost, the Africanist presence is “a spectral presence, suspended between being and nothingness” (Jackson 1981, 20). Whiteness is haunted by this ghostly shadow of the Africanist presence, which does not exist in empirical reality; it is a White fantasy, an imagined construct, even though it has very real consequences for African American reality in the United States. Paradoxically, Whiteness, too, is an invisible presence that has been hidden in public discourse and dominant writings of history but nevertheless haunts the United States since its beginnings, hindering it from realizing its vision of a functioning, multicultural society. Literary fantasy as equally “spectral presence”, characterized by its position in between categories, offers a mode for exploring such paradoxes in American race relations. The following close reading of *The Underground Railroad* will show that fantasy’s duality can provide a powerful vehicle for highlighting Blackness and Whiteness as parts of the American

imagination and negotiating their power in reality.

A Fantastical Train Crashes into the American Racial Hierarchy

Fantasy is a particularly apt mode to critically examine the parasitical relation of Whiteness to Blackness as it “exists in a parasitical or symbiotic relation to the real.” (Jackson 1981, 20). Whitehead’s novel draws on the historical Underground Railroad, a network of people that helped many African Americans escape from slavery, however imagining it as an actual train system transporting slaves underground from one station to the other. Cora rides this fantastic railroad from Georgia to “the North”, stopping in different states, where she witnesses and experiences various parts of American history like the Black Codes, lynchings, or eugenics programs in an anachronic fashion. The parasitical form of the fantastic railroad depends on its connection to the empirical world. The translation of the real Underground Railroad into a fantastical train system estranges the readers from this alternate history and puts them at a critical distance to make them aware of its critique of the American racial hierarchy. The railroad transports the readers into the space of the imaginary, where racial fantasies can be examined, always coming back to its connection with reality. In the novel, the underground railroad divides the setting into dark underground and light surface (Martín Salván 2020, 15), into beneath and above, which relates to the

division of American society into an allegedly superior Whiteness and inferior Blackness. The railroad thus functions as national allegory for the United States where Whiteness and Blackness are equally set in opposition to one another (Dischinger 2017, 89). The underground's darkness refers to the Blackness upon which White Americans base their identity. This becomes evident in Lumbly's final advice to Cora and Caesar before their first ride on the train: "Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America" (Whitehead 2016, 69). Cora follows this advice and sees "only darkness, miles and miles" (Whitehead 2016, 70). Despite America's White appearance on the surface, its identity is based on darkness, on its imagination of a "dark, abiding, singing Africanist presence" (Morrison 1992, 5) under the surface. The fantastical nature of the underground railroad, however, reveals the Blackness it represents as equally only imagined, as a fantasy that is impossible to exist in the empirical world. The railroad's existence as a mere fantasy also declares the existence of a White superiority and a Black inferiority in the extratextual world as impossible, without denying the real consequences this racial fantasy has for African Americans in the United States. The fantastic representation of America's Black-White dichotomy discloses both racial concepts as social constructs that do not describe a natural given but stem out of a White imagination. The contradictory meanings assigned to the underground railroad add to its fantastical, absurd impression. Dischinger points out that

the divergent semantics of the underground railroad represent both enslaved Blackness and African American freedom. He interprets this contradiction as mirroring the inconsistencies in American national mythology (Dischinger 2017, 89) – another re-enactment of elements of the real by the fantasy parasite:

The black mouths of the gigantic tunnel opened at either end. It must have been twenty feet tall, walls lined with dark and light colored stones in an alternating pattern. [...] Two steel rails ran the visible length of the tunnel, pinned into the dirt by wooden cross-ties. The steel ran south and north presumably, springing from some inconceivable source and shooting toward a miraculous terminus (Whitehead 2016, 67).

The alternation of “dark and light colored stones” represents the underground’s promise for a life where White and Black are recognized as equal – as well as America’s promise for a life in freedom. This freedom is described as a “miraculous terminus” to highlight the impossibility of its realization in a White supremacist environment. Like America, the underground railroad with its “black mouths” is a result of Black labor; thus subjugates African Americans while promising freedom at the same time. The paradoxical portrait of the enslaving train to freedom parallels America as enslaving “land of the free” (Dischinger 2017, 89). The fantastical re-combining of elements of the real sets the readers at a critical distance towards the absurd and contradictory alien world presented in order to make them shockingly aware of the

parallel to American reality.

The railroad entails even another contradiction, representing at once safety and danger for Cora and Caesar. As enthusiastic as Cora is in passing from the underground “into the daylight” (Whitehead 2016, 93) for the first time, as frightfully is she escaping “into the darkness” (Whitehead 2016, 130) again when she realizes that the Whiteness governing the American surface demands her life. Contrary to the association of darkness with evil and danger, the underground railroad is here connected to hope, safety, and freedom. Accordingly, the light surface is associated with fear, racism, and death instead of following the popular association of lightness with innocence (Delgado and Stefancic 2012, 84-85). This reverses the binary opposition between Black and White, evil and good, through the semantic connotations of the narrated spaces. However, despite the underground railroad’s transportation of hope, its darkness scares Cora and Caesar: “The darkness of the tunnel quickly turned the boxcar into a grave” (Whitehead 2016, 90). This darkness represents the Africanist presence beneath the surface of White America. As this image projected onto African Americans has been used for the legitimization of slavery and the killings of Black people, it causes Cora and Caesar to be scared when confronted with the vehicle that is digging their own grave.

Bringing together contradictory concepts in the fantastical oxymoron of the underground railroad also formally subverts those concepts. The oxymoron as “the basic trope of fantasy [...] holds together contradictions and sustains them in an impossible unity, without progressing toward synthesis” (Jackson 1981, 21). Black inferiority and African American freedom are held together and portrayed as a unity that is impossible to exist in the extratextual world. The binary opposition between darkness and light, between Blackness and Whiteness, however inversed their semantic connotations, is depicted as “impossible unity” as well, as an unnatural combination that does not describe empirical reality in the United States but a fantasy present in its national mythology.

The opposed meanings of the railroad-oxymoron are completed with a contradiction stemming from its form of the fantastical. As a fantasy, it is a parasite of reality; as representative of an allegedly inferior Blackness, it simultaneously works as a host for Whiteness. This clash of opposites in one form serves fantasy’s main purpose to resist “definite meanings” (Sartre in Jackson 1981, 18) and to exert “pressure against dominant hierarchical systems” (Jackson 1981, 17) by “shifting constructs, and thereby scrutinize[ing] the category of the ‘real’” (Jackson 1981, 21). Being the central fantastical element in the novel, Whitehead’s train network exerts pressure on the American hierarchy between Whiteness and Blackness and shows us that no definite meanings can be assigned

to the people grouped under those two concepts, as Whiteness and Blackness are inherently invented – unreal, like the fantastical railroad.

The Specter of the Africanist Presence as Absurd Fantasy

Through Mabel's character, Whitehead challenges the concept of the Africanist presence by highlighting it as an absurd fantasy. Her absence from the plantation torments the racist plantation owner Randall. Functioning as a symbol for escape and achieved freedom, Mabel breaks the image of the Africanist presence as passive, inferior, and enslaved and consequently represents a threat to the White plantation owner's identity. Later, Cora's refusal to fit into the concept of the Africanist presence represents another threat to his identity and finally the reason for his death. These two characters, destroying the construct of the Africanist presence in their owner's mind, simultaneously destroy his identity, which becomes clear through his psychological and physical deterioration and final death:

Terrance Randall was dead. From all accounts, the slave master's preoccupation with Cora and her escape only deepened over time. He neglected the plantation's affairs. His day to day on the estate consisted of conducting sordid parties in the big house and putting his slaves to bleak amusements, forcing them to serve as his victims in Cora's stead. [...] Terrance died in New Orleans, in a chamber of a Creole brothel. His heart relented, weakened by months of dissipation (Whitehead 2016, 269-70).

This description reveals Randall's strategies to cope with the destroyed core of his identity. His inability to move on after Cora's escape shows how fundamental this image is in his own life. With the neglect of "the plantation's affairs," his position as slave master starts to fade, which marks the beginning of his psychological deterioration. He attempts to reaffirm the Africanist presence in his mind through the subjugation of other Black people "in Cora's stead." For example, he visits a brothel where Black women are in inferior position to him by service contract. However, Randall's attempts to reestablish the firmness of the Africanist presence, and thus his own superiority, only seem bizarre and alienating. This effect is achieved through the repetitious idiom "day to day", marking the ordinariness of the routine of the everyday, and its opposition to exceptional events like the "sordid parties" and "bleak amusements." The bizarre impression is also implied in the tension between "sordid" and "bleak" as disreputable adjectives, as well as between "parties" and "amusements" as nouns associated with joy. Furthermore, Randall's physical deterioration mirrors his psychological downfall, as the reason for his death is said to be the relenting of his heart because of "months of dissipation." The indefinite temporal indication represents the seeming endlessness of his attempts to regain his superiority in opposition to an inferior and enslaved Africanist presence, the failure of which results in his death. He not only fails to restore his White identity

but also becomes himself enslaved to his obsession to restore his self-perception as White and in control over his inferior Black property. The Africanist presence turns into the reason for his devastation, which reveals the “terrible paradox” of the White American who thinks he can “control and define Black people” but loses control over himself (Baldwin 1998, 180). This paradox is even more drastic in Mabel’s than in Cora’s case. Mabel has the power to challenge her master’s White identity, even though she did not achieve freedom but in the master’s head. He thinks she succeeded in escaping from the Randall plantation, while she actually died on her way and disappeared into the swamp. Her master’s hurt pride accelerates his own death, which discloses the Africanist presence in the White imagination as an absurd and self-destructive fantasy.

The concept of the Africanist presence is further subverted by Mabel’s portrayal as a fantastic, ghost-like character. Nobody knows whether she actually escaped to freedom; her fate is wrapped in a veil of uncertainty. Until her actual death is revealed late in the novel, she is simultaneously dead and alive, present and absent, an enslaved Africanist and a free African American presence. As a fantastic oxymoron, a spectral presence with “ghostly counterpower” (Farooq 2019, 89), she brings together those oppositional categories in an “impossible unity,” resisting such enclosed entities and thereby subverting the

White supremacist belief in an Africanist presence that is clearly distinguishable from a superior Whiteness.

However, not just the enslaved Africanist part of Mabel is questioned through this fantastic hostility to categorization. She also embodies an empowered African American presence which is undermined by her spectral status. In contrast to Cora as African American presence, Mabel is not a realistic counter-image because of one feature that distinguishes both: freedom. Although Mabel never achieves freedom, she nevertheless works as a symbol for freedom to the characters; Cora is never entirely free. The novel therefore suggests – also in the open ending – that freedom for African Americans is as much a fantasy as the existence of a naturally inferior Blackness. While promoting the possibility of African American empowerment through Cora, the novel posits freedom for African Americans as impossible – at least within a White supremacist society (Dischinger 2017, 93-94; Matín Salván 2020, 29-30).

The Possibility of African American Empowerment

Just as the fantastical underground railroad needs its real counterpart to articulate the novel's criticism of American race relations, so does the Africanist presence need a realistic counterpart to underline the novel's criticism of the portrayal of African Americans. To destroy the image of the Africanist presence

on which the identities of the White characters rely, the novel constantly opposes an empowered African American presence to it, embodied in the character of Cora. The detailed and realistic depiction of her character opposes the fantasy of the Africanist persona. In contrast to Mabel, Cora is not reduced to an absent “spectral presence” that hovers in between opposite categories; she is portrayed as a realistic, visible, human individual with her own agency.

With Cora as protagonist, the novel moves a Black character to the center in order to make her undeniably present, visible, and realistic. Through insights into her thoughts and feelings, the reader is not alienated from Cora, but is invited to identify with her, which undermines her position as a Hob woman, as an othered outcast. Cora is not depicted as fragile and passive as some of the other Hob women, but as strong and independent. Throughout the novel, the readers can follow her personal development as a dynamic character whose independence steps more and more to the foreground along her way to the North. Her development from a powerless, raped slave girl to a self-reliant woman starts with her resistance to Blake in defending her inherited piece of acre on the plantation. The resistance to her Black oppressors evolves into resistance to her White oppressors as well with her decision to escape the plantation with Caesar:

It was her grandmother talking that Sunday evening when Caesar approached Cora about the underground railroad, and she said no. Three weeks later she said yes. This time, it was her mother talking (Whitehead 2016, 8).

Cora's grandmother as personification of hopelessness and eternal enslavement is opposed to that of her mother, who represents hope and freedom transported through the parallelism in the first and last line. This contrast represents the starting point of Cora's development from passive subjugation on the plantation in order to survive up to her actively influencing her own destiny. With the decision to escape, her development is just about to start, as she is not yet depicted as an independent individual with own will, but as a patchwork of her grandmother and mother. She is not taking the decision on her own, but the influence of her mother drives her to it. With every station to the North, this continues to change. In the Carolinas, she comes to understand the hypocrisy of White society more deeply. In Indiana, she outwits the slave catcher Ridgeway in order to make her way alone to freedom. Tracing Cora's history and her personal development counters the projection of a simplistic Africanist presence onto her. The differentiated and detailed portrait of the African American protagonist is thus used strategically to reveal the illusionary character the Africanist presence.

While Cora is continually forced by White society to match the

Africanist presence, she does not internalize that image. Instead, she resists these attempts to appropriate her identity. In South Carolina, she serves as a living prop in the exhibition of slavery: “Her recent installation in the exhibition returned her to the furrows of Georgia, the dumb, open-jawed stares of the patrons stealing her back to a state of display” (Whitehead 2016, 125). As on the plantation in Georgia, Cora is exposed to the gaze of White people. While she had been living a relatively free life in South Carolina, being exposed along with objects in the limited space of the museum window reminds her of her inferiority and objectification in a White supremacist society. Although she has more freedom than on the plantation, her status as Black and powerless in a society governed by Whiteness persists. The metaphoric description of the stares “stealing her back” shows Cora’s awareness of the moral illegitimacy of Black subjugation by White people. She realizes the power that the White visitants exercise by looking at her and opposes it by returning their gazes: “One day she decided to retaliate against a red-haired White woman who scowled at the sight of Cora’s duties ‘at sea.’ [...] Cora stared into her eyes, unwavering and fierce, until the woman broke” (Whitehead 2016, 125). The fearful reaction of the White woman shows that this unexpected reversal of power relations attacks her self-perception because it questions her right to exercise power over Cora. Cora performs her psychological revenge “until the woman broke,” meaning until the gaze

destroyed the Africanist presence and thus the core of the White woman's identity. She is forced to be seen by Cora, as well as to see Cora as human being capable of agency: "It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you, too" (Whitehead 2016, 126). As the White woman cannot restore her superiority in this situation, she flees from it. So does Masie, the little girl of the Anderson family where Cora used to work, when she becomes submitted to Cora's gaze in the museum:

Masie's face twitched in fear. From the outside, no one could tell what passed between them, just like when she and Blake faced each other the day of the doghouse. Cora thought, I'll break you, too, Masie, and she did (Whitehead 2016, 127).

The comparison of a White child with Blake, a rapist, underlines the violence performed on Black subjects by White Americans. As the rape did, the institution of White supremacy makes Cora a victim of unjust violence, psychologically as well as physically. Masie being a representative of the White community, Cora sees herself again subjected to an oppressor and again resists. After she succeeded to "break" Masie, she realizes that she made a child victim to her power, having focused on escaping her own subjugation and her plan of breaking White supremacy. As a child, Masie is insofar innocent in that she is unconscious of her promoting the racial divide between White and Black, infiltrated

into her mind by the White supremacist environment in which she was raised. Instead of most White Americans, Cora feels ashamed by her behavior of subjugating an innocent individual, proving not only her agency but also her humanity to the reader.

The Africanist presence is again confronted in the chapter on Cora's stay in North Carolina. As Black people are banned from the state, the station agent Martin Wells needs to hide Cora in the attic. This intertextual reference to Harriet Jacobs, who also had to live in an attic, aligns the novel with slave narratives and their spirit of resistance (Dischinger 2017, 88; Li 2019, 11; Mellis 2019, 3). By being hidden, Cora is assigned her role as powerless and invisible Africanist presence. Instead of silently complying to this image, Cora educates herself and thus "turns the tomb into a womb, a source of life and learning" (Groba 2019, 265), contradicting the Africanist presence as submissive and irrational by her representation as an intelligent and inquisitive African American persona. Furthermore, the African American presence is portrayed as powerful in that Cora uses her position in the attic to observe the visitants of the park unnoticed. The knowledge she thereby gains about the White inhabitants of the town is simultaneously her power over them: "Cora did not immediately notice an important feature of the park: Everyone was white. [...] In North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the end of ropes" (Whitehead 2016, 156). Observing the customs of everyday life

in North Carolina, she attains knowledge over the state's harsh execution of its race politics as well as over "the politics of white identity construction" (Dubek 2018, 76). This knowledge is the major tool for her to survive, as she learns to whom she has to stay invisible. Following the Foucauldian link of knowledge and power (1980, 93), Cora's lead in knowledge, compared to the White people who are unsuspecting of being observed, puts her into the powerful position of the gazer:

Looking down over the universe of the park, she saw the town drift where it wanted, washed by sunlight on a stone bench, cooled in the shadows of the hanging tree. But they were prisoners like she was, shackled to fear. Martin and Ethel were terrified of the watchful eyes behind every darkened window. The town huddled together on Friday nights in the hope their numbers warded off the things in the dark: the rising black tribe [...]. Better to hide in attics than to confront what lurked behind the faces of neighbors, friends, and family (Whitehead 2016, 179).

She observes how the White inhabitants of the town are "cooled in the shadows of the hanging tree", a metaphorical description referring to the White people's reassurance of their superiority in face of dead African Americans, their tool to confirm their power. A reversion of that power distribution is questioning their identity, thus "shackles" them to their fear of the "things in the dark: the rising black tribe." This fear makes them "prisoners," encaged in their own imagination of an Africanist presence, referring to Baldwin's "terrible paradox," as they are dispossessed

from the control over their own identity (Baldwin 1998, 180). Cora's analysis of the observed situation as no merry gathering of the townspeople but of people imprisoned by their own fear of a "Black uprising" also highlights her competence in critical reflection, adding another element to her depiction as realistic, human African American presence in opposition to the debased Africanist presence.

The White supremacist conception of the Africanist presence is again challenged through Cora's final escape from Ridgeway's "American imperative" (Whitehead 2016, 303). While descending into the last station of the underground railroad, she takes the decision to actively fight Ridgeway a last time: "Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. [...] She spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron" (Whitehead 2016, 302). Her agency in this scene becomes apparent through her appropriation of the motifs of the dance and the chains. On the Randall plantation, dancing, a central part of the slaves' cultures, was used by the White plantation owner as means of control and power. These appropriations performed in the dance scene on the Randall plantation, as well as later in the play in North Carolina, refer to the equally appropriating minstrel shows as common form of entertainment during the nineteenth century. As Phiri suggests, "minstrelsy's chaotic dramatization of 'blackness' was symbolic [...], disguised white anxiety about black subjectivity [...] [and]

functioned as both a celebration and denigration of blackness” (2011, 91-92). Counteracting Randall’s cultural appropriation and “denigration” of Blackness, Cora re-appropriates the dance again as a tool to resist the power exercised on her by White Americans. The comparison of her arms with a “chain of iron” has the same function. The chains that were keeping her enslaved are now used metaphorically by herself to resist enslavement. Furthermore, as Groba argues, the underground railroad as her vehicle to freedom becomes replaced by herself moving a handcar through the tunnel: “Was she traveling through the tunnel or digging it?” (Whitehead 2016, 303). The agency of the African American presence is expressed through Cora becoming her own vehicle to freedom (Groba 2019, 267-268). African American agency is thus depicted on story level as well as through the novel’s symbolism.

The destruction of the Africanist presence through the embodiment of a realistic counter-image makes the artificiality of an inferior Blackness in opposition to a superior Whiteness visible and thus raises consciousness about the imaginative character of White superiority. That the submissive Africanist persona does not exist but in the White mind is proven by the novel’s continuous affirmation of an active and powerful African American presence; a presence that persistently estranges Whiteness by showing its reliance on a socially constructed racial fantasy.

Conclusion

A theoretically situated close reading of the contemporary novel has shown that it uses historical fantasy's hybrid nature between real and imaginary to resist the clear-cut opposition between Whiteness and Blackness inherent in the discourse of American Africanism. The novel's hostility toward generic categories raises awareness about the absurdity of America's racial dichotomy between Black and White as part of an accepted regime of truth governed by a White hegemony. The Africanist presence, as well as Whiteness and Blackness as the racial concepts it relies on, are disclosed as fantasies that have the power to structure US-American reality. Unlimited in its capacity to combine elements in an "impossible unity," like in the oxymora of the railroad and the character Mabel, the fantastic can highlight this absurd condition of "real-life-fantasies" in a way that historical novels cannot. As *The Underground Railroad* shows, fantasy can deliberately switch between image and object, between the impossible and the realistic end of the paraxial area (Jackson 1981, 19): The Africanist presence as alien other is revealed as an absurd and imagined construct of a White supremacist society through the opposition to a realistic African American presence as visible, empowered, and familiar counter-image.

The novel's antastical elements release its critique from any temporality, setting its depictions into an alternate, atemporal space to point towards the persistence of the parasitical relation of Whiteness to a Black Africanist presence across time. It presents this relation as part of the "afterlife of slavery" (Hartman, 2007, 6) that continues into the contemporary US-American condition and possibly as well as into the future. While the novel does not fully subscribe to the Afropessimist claim of an eternal "social death" of African Americans without hope for betterment (Wilderson 2020, 16), it still portrays African American freedom as impossible to achieve in a White supremacist context.

The way how American narratives today deal with the constructs of Blackness and Whiteness is indicative of racial imaginations in twenty-first-century American society, as "for both black and white American writers, in a wholly racialized society, there is no escape from racially inflected language" (Morrison 1992, 12-13). The public praise that Whitehead's novel has received shows that the reign of a hidden White hegemony is slowly being challenged by a growing critical awareness concerning Whiteness. In this respect, the historical fantasy of *The Underground Railroad* indeed "works [...] as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today" (Saldívar 2011, 595). Those covert social dynamics are most crucial for an

understanding of society in all its complexity and literature is one way to make the invisible visible (Roche 2004, 20).

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Endnote

I In this article, I capitalize “White(ness)” and “Black(ness)” to highlight the social constructedness of both concepts. In contrast, “black” and “white” written in lower case refer to the actual colors. Further, “US-American” is shortened into “American” for purposes of readability.

Cedric Essi, Heike Paul, and Boris Vormann, eds. "Common Grounds? American Democracy after Trump." Special issue, *Amerikastudien* 66, no. 1 (2021). (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter. <https://amst.winter-verlag.de/issue/AMST/2021/1>)

This special issue of *Amerikastudien*, a German-based American Studies quarterly, examines and problematizes aspects of American democracy in the Trump and post-Trump era. Principally, the authors in this issue seek to answer one underlying question: what problems plague contemporary American democracy and what, if anything, can be done to alleviate these problems? To frame this special issue's discussion, the editors present the notion of "common ground," the prominent idea that participants in a democracy must maintain some semblance of similarity for that democracy to function. In their introductory essay, the editors acknowledge that the notion of "common ground" has historically been used as a hegemonic tool to exclude and disenfranchise certain portions of the American population

(10). In other words, wealthy elites have intentionally constructed the “common ground” of American democracy on a narrow understanding of Americanness that is exclusively “White, able-bodied, cis-heteronormative, and patriarchal” (10). As such, the editors invite their authors to examine “common grounds?”—the modified and often pejorative term they use to describe the plural, shifting, and ultimately questionable basis on which American democracy operates. At its core, this special issue seeks to determine if the basic assumption of “common ground”—that commonalities are necessary for democracy to function—is legitimate, or if the invocation of supposed commonalities merely serves to further harmful American mythologies (11).

The special issue is split into two major sections: one that investigates democratic issues in America’s past and one that scrutinizes American democracy vis-à-vis contemporary Trumpian politics. Unlike normal issues of *Amerikastudien*, which contain several long-form peer-reviewed articles, this special issue contains over forty short-form essays that examine America’s political climate generally. These essays were written by a wide array of scholars from numerous disciplines and take many different forms, ranging from Melba Joyce Boyd’s poem discussing 1967 Detroit to Donald E. Pease’s reflections on the implications of the 2020 presidential election and Vanessa E. Thompson’s conversation with Cedric Essi (17, 143, and 241). The breadth of

perspectives presented in this special issue is undoubtedly one of its strengths. This issue's transnationality also serves it well, as non-American perspectives on Americanist topics can provide a much-needed fresh viewpoint for a discipline often rooted in American universities. Perhaps this special issue's greatest strength, however, is its conspicuous relevance to everyday life. Humanities scholars are consistently criticized for producing scholarship that does not directly address real-world issues. This critique cannot be levied against this special issue—its focus on contemporary political issues makes its contributions undeniably applicable to societal problems in need of solving. Given the large number of essays in this issue, it is impossible to discuss each contribution in this review's limited space. As such, this review examines themes present throughout many of the issue's articles and discusses several examples.

The first of these themes is a focus on race, particularly how American society excludes members of certain groups based on their racial identities. Siri Hustvedt, for example, contributes an analysis of Confederate statues in the United States, in which she demonstrates the links between the coded term "heritage"—often used to justify the existence of these statues—and "White glorification of an antebellum past founded on a racial hierarchy" (37). Following Hustvedt's essay, Michael Weinman argues that America's statue politics are inextricably linked with ideals of

American exceptionalism that prioritize White Americans (48). Laura Bieger's essay also focuses on racial issues, using the pertinent words of African American author Jesmyn Ward to illustrate the "structural conjunction of racial injustice and social inequality [in the United States]" (73). In an essay criticizing the "racial fantasies" of White American liberals, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva discounts a number of liberal American talking points, like the notion that America's racism is an exclusively Republican problem and that Trump's presidency exposed America's "real" racists—implying that those who did not support Trump do not contribute to America's racist social structures (57). As Bonilla-Silva writes, these conclusions obfuscate American society's racialized underpinnings, which, as many authors in this special issue demonstrate, fundamentally privilege White Americans over people of color. This is the primary topic that concerns many of this special issue's authors: the narrow "common ground" on which American democracy operates. Bonilla-Silva leaves us with an apt warning: he is afraid that in "post-Trump America, White liberals will exalt America as 'the exceptional nation' that returned, against all odds, to normality" (57). As Bonilla-Silva and other authors in this special issue demonstrate, Americanists must continue to interrogate the United States' racialized power structures, even as the country's political winds have shifted.

A second prominent theme present in many of this special issue's essays is whether academics should legitimize political opinions that are not rooted in reality by presenting these opinions as politically relevant. In other words, many of this issue's authors discuss controversial political topics and make explicit their belief that certain political perspectives should not be entertained. The main political perspective these authors discuss is that which led to the January 6, 2021, attack on the U.S. Capitol, an attack that the authors rightfully criticize. For example, Barry Shank writes that "[t]he maniacs who were planning to invade Congress and hang Mike Pence and Nancy Pelosi are beyond redemption... they are cancerous cells that must be surgically removed" (64). The prevalence of these political views has led some of this issue's authors to conclude that Americans with opposing perspectives represent two sides of a deeply divided country. Indeed, Craig Calhoun writes that "Americans do not just disagree; they live in different realities" (140). The implications of America's ideologically divided populous on notions of "common ground" are not lost on the authors. For example, Richard Sennett and Boris Vormann conclude that Americans need to come to the realization that "[Americans] aren't one country"—in other words, once Americans stop believing in the "fantasy of common ground," they can "hold people morally and legally responsible" (35). Indeed, Sennett writes that it is incumbent upon Americans to recognize the deep divides that have existed in the country since the times

of slavery and that Trump's presidency exposed. According to Sennett, Trump's presidency did not create America's political divides, but rather made those divides easily visible—a reality that must be accepted if the United States is to enact positive social change (36). Other authors present the implications of America's political divisions in a different light. Calhoun argues that for democracy to thrive in the United States, the country will need to undergo a social transformation that requires “working together” despite differing political perspectives (141). These are the camps into which many of this issue's authors are divided: those who believe America's political differences effectively destroy the myth of democratic “common ground” and those who believe America's political differences must be overcome to establish a “common ground” on which democracy can be fostered.

Ultimately, this special issue is intentionally unclear in its conclusions regarding the legitimacy of “common ground” as an underpinning ideal, instead electing to present a variety of perspectives on the topic. Something the issue does make clear, however, is its disdain for political views generally attributed to American conservatives. Shank's characterizations of the January 6, 2021, crowd as “maniacs” and “cancerous cells that need to be surgically removed” are relatively common descriptors used by many of this issue's authors to describe those who hold this political belief. These descriptions left me with a question: do

explicitly politically driven academic projects like this serve to bolster conservative arguments that academia is illegitimate because of its left-leaning perspectives? Ostensibly, academics discussing political topics are creating scholarship because they want to effect change, and oftentimes the scholarship they produce concludes that America's political conservatives should alter their beliefs and practices. Academic projects like this, though, that are explicitly left leaning in their approach, may serve to further ostracize academics from the conservative communities on which their scholarship focuses. By no means do I raise this issue with the intent to legitimize the political perspectives that allowed for the events of January 6th or continued racial inequities in American society. Instead, I present these ideas to illuminate a key tension in modern academia: how to portray political perspectives that are explicitly racist or unaligned with reality; that is, *harmful*. Should academics engage with perspectives that intentionally ignore fact? Furthermore, how do scholarly representations of political groups affect public opinion of academia generally? This *Amerikastudien* special issue leaves readers with these important questions, making it a valuable contribution to growing scholarship on America's contentious political environment.

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Jacob Breslow. *Ambivalent
Childhoods: Speculative Futures
and the Psychic Life of the Child*.
(Minneapolis: University of
Minnesota Press, 2021. vi+280
ISBN 9781517908225)

In *Ambivalent Childhoods: Speculative Futures and the Psychic Life of the Child*, Jacob Breslow, Assistant Professor of Gender and Sexuality at the London School of Economics, approaches childhood as a contested site in the American imagination.

Breslow engages in a comparative study of disparate American childhoods that draws upon psychoanalysis and queer and feminist theories in his exploration of the “psychic life” of the contemporary child. The book explores “the question of who gets to occupy childhood” in America, paying close attention to the experiences of racialized, queer, and/or migrant children (3). Breslow argues that the child is not a simple metaphor for futurity or progress, but rather that childhood is an ambiguous discursive category that selectively includes or excludes certain individuals or populations for socio-political expediency. The author invokes the psychoanalytic concept of “ambivalence” to describe a new perception of childhood that tolerates its many contradictions and ambiguities. Ultimately, Breslow presents ambivalence as a

productive mode of “reading” the child that disrupts discourses contributing to oppressive power relations, such as anti-Blackness, homophobia, transphobia, or xenophobia. Breslow separates his study into four case studies, or as he describes them: “identity-based sites of contestation over national belonging in the first two decades of the twenty-first century” (4). Throughout his book, Breslow demonstrates that the American children find themselves at the heart of almost every national debate about aspects of identity such as race, gender, or citizenship.

Chapter One concerns the circumstances of and media response to George Zimmerman’s murder of Black teenager Trayvon Martin. Breslow’s powerful argument that Trayvon Martin was denied access to the realm of childhood by virtue of his Blackness is especially resonant in the wake of the 2020 protests against the police killings of Black people including George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor. Here, Breslow identifies the media’s arguably racist contestation of Trayvon’s boyhood as an act of Freudian disavowal, in which “Black humanity, Black citizenship, and Black childhood” are rejected (29).

Chapters Two and Three describe the lives of real and fictional queer girls: Coy, a transgender six-year-old, and Aviva, the protagonist of Todd Solondz’s 2004 film *Palindromes*. Breslow’s discussion of the queer child is more speculative than his previous

chapter on police brutality, focusing on the implications of non-normative sexuality and gender-presentation as embodied by children. Breslow's discussion of contemporary "bathroom bills" is especially nuanced in its exploration of how the queer child has influenced the American state and federal court systems.

Finally, Chapter Four features a discussion of various children impacted by the DREAM Act (The Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act) as well as multiple art installations by Mexican-American artist Carmen Argote. Breslow highlights intriguing connections between the American Dream, the "innocent" undocumented children of criminalized migrants (colloquially known as "dreamers"), and psychoanalytic dream-work. Breslow's approach to numerous forms of expression, including journalism, film, and visual art allows him to critique successfully these ambivalent representations and evocations of childhood from diverse perspectives.

Indeed, each of Breslow's chapters is anchored in a broad facet of psychoanalytic theory, including (dis)avowal, the Oedipal complex, the death-drive, and dream-work. Breslow's marriage of sociology and psychoanalysis enables him to engage with childhood as a twofold social and psychological phenomenon. His engagement with Freud may come as a surprise to his readers given that queer theory is often regarded as a point of departure

from psychoanalytic understandings of psychosexual development. Nonetheless, Breslow's invocations of Freud, Lacan, and Melanie Klein prove to be illuminating. He asserts "power takes a psychic form, the proliferative life of power must be understood and analyzed at the level of the psyche" (15). Throughout his case studies, Breslow is more interested in spectators' ambivalent psychological *responses* to racialized or queer children, as opposed to the psychology of actual children. Foundational studies of subversive American childhoods such as Kathryn Bond Stockton's *The Queer Child, Or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (2009, Durham: Duke University Press), and *Erotic Innocence* by James R. Kincaid (1998, Durham: Duke University Press) loom heavily over Breslow's work. *Ambivalent Childhoods* is equally informed by works of queer theory such as *Gender Trouble* (Butler 1990, New York: Routledge), "Infantile Citizenship" (Berlant 1993, Durham: Duke University Press), "How to Bring Your Kids Up Gay" (Sedgwick 1991, Durham: Duke University Press), and *No Future* (Edelman 2004, Durham: Duke University Press), which converge in his analysis of the child as a subject either avowed or disavowed by the dominant culture. Breslow's project is an exercise in theoretical bricolage, in which seemingly incongruous modes of thought find a tenuous unity.

Consider Breslow's opening of Chapter Three, entitled "Desiring the Child" (99). The author begins with an uncomfortable

anecdote that recounts a gay twelve-year-old's unwelcome (and unwitting) provocative dance moves on public display. Rather than immediately intellectualizing or theorizing the young boy's behavior, Breslow pauses to situate himself within his scholarship, remarking:

I find myself caught up in exhilarating waves of memory, identification, and desire: a wish. A wish that I could have been this boy (or that this boy could have been me), a hope that this boy will have and will be all that I desire for him, and a desire for him himself. To be next to him and, maybe, to dance with him. A memory emerges of a past self—myself at twelve: reclusive and closeted—that I longingly place into this moment ... I wish I could have been), and we are two kids dancing together (100).

Here, Breslow enacts the speculative nature of his project, engaging in a reparative reading of his own childhood. The suddenly self-reflexive nature of Breslow's writing gestures towards the ever-shifting boundaries of who is considered a child.

However, this bold authorial move also signals greater issues of discontinuity and equivalence at hand in *Ambivalent Childhoods*. Breslow himself notes "I struggle against the impetus to easily separate out the 'figure of the child' from the 'real' lives of 'actual' children ... I do not assume that 'real children' precede 'the idea' of childhood" (5). The indistinct separation between these two "modes" of childhood appears to contribute to Breslow's arguably discontinuous selection of social injustices. Indeed, the significant leaps between matters of race, gender, sexuality, and migration

drew a (certainly unintentional) false equivalence between each case study. To that end, Breslow's analysis is merely intersectional to the degree that all such issues of identity are included in one book: his chapters, which focus on different degrees of violence and difference, often fail to resonate as a whole. The experience of reading Chapters Two and Three, which focus on queer topics and draw upon queer methodologies, felt as though they were drawn from a separate text entirely when read alongside narratives of anti-Black police violence and the inhumane captivity of migrant children at the US-Mexico border. Breslow's comparative approach fails to provide meaningful linkages between identities; rather, the political urgency of each chapter is diminished by the author's juxtaposition of injustices.

Nonetheless, *Ambivalent Childhoods* successfully delineates the shifting boundaries of childhood in the contemporary United States. Breslow's hope for a speculative future where childhood signifies differently, or not at all, attends to both the discursive and material challenges faced by marginalized American children.

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