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Immigrant Identity Formation, A Transnational Approach: Italian Americans in New York City, 1880-1930

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Abstract

Of the Italian immigrants arriving in America during the Great Migration (1880-1924), few understood themselves as "Italians." On paper, Italian unification took place in 1861, but the creation of Italy as a unit of politics was not the creation of Italians as a unit of nation. Even decades later, immigrants landing in New York City understood themselves in regional terms—as Calabrians, Sicilians, and Neapolitans. "Italian national identity" remained an idea confined to the imaginations of wealthy and educated Italian nationalists. In the years that followed the Great Migration, immigrants reshaped Italian-American identity as they grappled with American ideas of race and national belonging. Here, a transnational analytical framework is applied to the study of Italian-American identity formation to understand how the social and economic connections migrants forged between their hometown villages and overseas enclaves transformed experiences of identity. From the strictly regional affiliations immigrants arrived with, Italian ethnic identity was redefined by transnational experiences of nation into something truly novel, an immigrant identity that produced vivid experiences of feeling Italian-American.

Part 1: Campanilismo and Italianità

The Risorgimento

According to historian Derek Beales, the idea of "Italy" in the mid-eighteenth century "Was a geographical expression of limited significance only."[1] Indeed, from 1748 to 1796, political control over the Italian peninsula was split between eleven sovereign states. Local dialects were mutually unintelligible from region to region, trade between states was not easy, and, as in the case of Naples and Sicily, historical rivalries drove conflict.[2] For most Italians, their place-bound sense of identity and loyalty was not tied to their state or some shared "Italian" history, but to their hometowns and villages. This was known as *campanilismo,* from the Italian word for bell tower, *campanile*, and referred to the sense of solidarity shared amongst all who could hear the town church bell ring.[3] It is important to understand *campanilismo* as a strong identification with one's hometown, not simply as the absence of state-affiliated identity. Most people living on the Italian peninsula throughout the period of the Great Migration were farmers, but their lifestyles were not traditionally "rural" in the American understanding of the word.

[1] Derek Beales, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1971), 23.
[2] Beales, 21-24.
[3] Jenifer Guglielmo, *Living The Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 121.

Particularly in the south, agricultural workers lived in hilltop "agro-towns," residential communities of farmers who traveled away from their homes to work.[4] This way of life is what led to strong experiences of *campanilismo*; these were not disconnected peasants living alone in the countryside, they were town-people who formed affiliations with each other and with their place of origin. This was the state of place-bound identity on the Italian peninsula in the mid-eighteenth century: in short, the notion of an Italian nation did not yet exist.[5]

The long journey to Italian national identity began with France's invasion of northern Italy in 1796. The French occupied the Italian peninsula with varying control until 1814, building roads, tearing down trade impediments, standardizing laws, and redrawing state borders, all of which connected regions that had previously experienced little communication.[6] In 1815, the Treaty of Vienna ended French occupation and granted Austria significant control over the region, making way for "A handful of people who can properly be called nationalists," to come into being in Italy.[7] With them, the Risorgimento emerged as an ideological and literary nationalist movement that called for Italian unification. Although the Risorgimento did have a meaningful impact in Italy, Beales reveals that it was not an ideological revolution that meaningfully catalyzed unification in 1861—it was largely specific international circumstances that made way for unification by military and diplomatic means from 1859 to 1870. On the role of the Risorgimento in unification, Beales writes, "If the Risorgimento is seen as part of a European movement of reformists, liberals and nationalists, its role in unification assumes its true significance."[8] Through French occupation, Austrian control, the Risorgimento, and the military unification of mainland Italy, a nationalist movement was born. Although *campanilismo* remained strong amongst the peasantry, the idea of *Italianità*, that Italians have some shared Italian spirit, had emerged within a group of intellectuals where no such idea existed a hundred years prior.[9]

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[4] Vitantonio Mariella, "Landownership Concentration and Human Capital Accumulation in Post-Unification Italy," *Journal of Population Economics* 36, no. 3 (2023): 1712.

[5] Beales, 23.

[6] Beales 32-35.

[7] Beales 37-38, 108-11.

[8] Beales, *The Risorgimento and the Unification of Italy,* 92.

[9] Donna Gabaccia, "Class, Exile, and Nationalism at Home and Abroad: The Italian Risorgimento," In *Italian Workers of the World: Labor Migration and the Formation of Multiethnic States*, ed. Fraser Ottanelli (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 25.

A Divided State

A nationalist movement of the few did not translate into a broad Italian identity for the many, and post-unification Italy remained a deeply divided state. The movements that came out of the Risorgimento were made up of bourgeois, educated, urban Italians, built on their fascination with the Italian Renaissance, and driven by their fear of the poor. At its core, the process of nation building in Italy was one of subjugation—unification meant military invasion and occupation. Historian Donna Gabaccia writes, "After 1881, about 6 percent of Italian citizens, including a very few ordinary workers, would vote; few of the other 94 percent felt much loyalty to a nation of Italians."[10] The Risorgimento was never a broad ideological revolution among Italian farmers, and to them, the notion of an "Italian nation" either remained meaningless or was met with disdain and resentment.

Unification's unpopularity was particularly apparent in southern Italy, a region integrated in 1860 by annexation, military occupation, and the installation of Piedmont-led governments.[11] In Sicily, peasants took part in violent uprisings against unification, known as brigandage, from 1860 to 1870. In contrast to Risorgimento, brigandage was a movement of peasants and their *campanilismo*, driven by anger over Piedmont nation building policies that favored the bourgeoisie—including exorbitant taxes on wheat and salt that greatly burdened poor southerners and mandatory military conscription that the rich paid their way out of.[12] By the end of the nineteenth century, taxes in Italy were higher than anywhere else in Europe, and they were brutally regressive, falling mostly on very poor farmers and day laborers.[13]

But the north-south division was more than political, it also became a defining marker of social and moral distinction. In the mid-1870s, Pasquale Villari and Leopoldo Franchetti brought forth the "Southern question," a nationalistic claim that characterized southerners as barbarian, uneducated, and violent, while calling for the North to intervene and civilize the backward South.[14] This divide intensified further with famine, disease, and natural disasters in southern

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[10] Donna Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000) 36.

[11] Giampaolo Lecce, Laura Ogliari, and Tommaso Orlando, "State Formation, Social Unrest and Cultural Distance." *Journal of Economic Growth* 27, no. 3 (2022): 454.

[12] Lecce, Ogliari, and Orlando, 458; Stephen Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End: Italian Immigration and Settlement, 1890-1910," Masters thesis, (University of Massachusetts Boston, 1994) 22; Giorgio Brosio,"Coercion and Equity with Centralization of Government: How the Unification of Italy Impacted the Southern Regions," *Public Choice* 177, no. 3/4 (2018): 244.

[13] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 24.

[14] Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 235.

Italy: the agrarian crisis of the 1870s, outbreaks of malaria and cholera in the 1880s, the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 1906, and devastating earthquakes in 1908, all paired with extraordinary population growth.[15]

The Great Migration

It was in this state of precarious Italian nationalism, split along regional and class lines, that the Great Migration took off. Italy had seen a steady flow of emigration since 1861, but the period from 1880 to 1914 saw an unprecedented increase; over thirteen million people left the country, and over four million of them came to the United States.[16] The shift was also one of demographics; most emigrants prior to 1880 were northern intellectuals, artists, or skilled workers—often political exiles of the Risorgimento.[17] In contrast, 83.9% of the emigrants between 1899 and 1910 were peasants.[18] Approximately 80% of the Italian immigrants who landed in the U.S. from 1890 to 1920 were from the south, and three-quarters of them were working-age men.[19] Broadly speaking, the Italian immigrants of the Great Migration were mostly poor, illiterate, unskilled laborers looking to escape the crushing taxes and poverty of southern Italy.

Table 1 - Italian Immigration to the United States, 1880-1914

Years	Immigration from Italy to the U.S.
1880-1889	267,660
1890-1899	603,791
1900-1909	2,154,611
1910-1914	1,265,535
TOTAL	**4,291,597**

Adapted from Stephen Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End: Italian Immigration and Settlement, 1890-1910." Masters thesis (University of Massachusetts Boston, 1994), 3.

[15] Marcella Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture: The Idealism of the Sovversivi in the United States, 1890-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2011, 7.

[16] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 3; Chiara De Lazzari, *Transnational Politics, Citizenship, and Elections: The Political Engagement of Transnational Communities in National Elections* (New York: Routledge, 2020), 28.

[17] Stefano Luconi, "Opera as a Nationalistic Weapon: The Erection of the Monument to Giuseppe Verdi in New York City," *Italian Americana* 34, no. 1 (2016): 40.

[18] Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture,* 7.

[19] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 21, 28.

Narratives of Southern inferiority followed Italian immigrants to America. Southern Italians were frequently victims of social discrimination, denied housing and employment, and faced physical violence in the United States, particularly in the American South.[20] Viola and Verheul write of southern Italians, "On the one hand, they were "white enough" to enter the country, but on the other, they were not quite "white enough" to be fully accepted within the American society."[21] This was an era in America where distinctions between race and ethnicity did not really exist; racial conceptualizations incorporated physical characteristics and national origin but also distinctions about character.[22] As historian Matthew Jacobson describes, "It was not just that Italians did not look white to certain social arbiters, but that they did not *act* white."[23] This kind of thinking about race, and this distinction between northern and southern Italian immigrants, is well exemplified in the 1905 report from the U.S. Immigration Commission, wherein northerners and southerners are explicitly defined as distinct peoples:

> All of Italy south of the Apennines…are occupied by a long-headed, dark, "Mediterranean" race of short stature. This is the South Italian…He describes the South Italian as excitable, impulsive, highly imaginative, impracticable; as an individualist having little adaptability to highly organized society. The North Italian, on the other hand, is pictured as cool, deliberate, patient, practical, and as capable of great progress in the political and social organization of modern civilization.[24]

The vast majority of Italian immigrants in the U.S. were from southern Italy, and as such this description reflects both how north-south distinctions were transplanted across the Atlantic, and how most Italian immigrants were characterized and perceived by Americans: as a group of people unfit for modern, urban, organized society.

These racialized distinctions of north and south in the United States, coupled with southern resistance to unification at home and the disconnected rural backgrounds of most Italian immigrants, complicated the idea of Italian national identity in America. "Immigrants in this

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[20] Bencivenni, 8-9; Luciano Iorizzo, "The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution," In *The Italian Experience in the United States*, ed. Silvano Tomasi and Madeline Engel (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1970), 50; Peter Vellon "Italian Americans and Race During the Era of Mass Immigration," In *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, ed. Willian Connell and Stanislao Pugliese (New York: Routledge, 2018), 216-217.

[21] Lorella Viola and Jaap Verheul, "The Media Construction of Italian Identity: A Transatlantic, Digital Humanities Analysis of Italianità, Ethnicity, and Whiteness, 1867-1920," *Identity* 19, no. 4 (2019): 296.

[22] Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture,* 8; Vellon "Italian Americans and Race During the Era of Mass Immigration," 212-214.

[23] Matthew Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 57.

[24] United States Senate Immigration Commission, *Dictionary of Races or Peoples*, Document no. 662 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1911), 82-83.

period hardly thought of themselves as Italians," write Viola and Verheul; instead they would describe their identities with regional or provincial terms.[25]

Part 2: The Transnational Italian Emigrant

Chain Migration

In emigrant communities, *campanilismo* was reproduced through the process of chain migration: a mechanism for emigration in which migrants are provided with the opportunities, resources, and support necessary to migrate through their connections with people who have already emigrated.[26] John and Leatrice MacDonald separate chain migration into three kinds of migrant relationships. First was the *padroni*, a group of prominent men who had immigrated to the United States prior to the Great Migration and had since accumulated significant money, power, and influence. The padroni shaped Italian emigration by running exploitative labor brokerage organizations that provided work, food, shelter, and transportation for the Italian immigrants coming to New York.[27] Their influence was broad; by the end of the nineteenth century, it spanned two-thirds of the Italian laborers in New York City.[28]

The second relationship was the serial migration of workers: men who came to America to earn money and raise their social status with the intention of returning home. Repatriation was very common during the Great Migration, from 1891 to 1900, 34% of Italian immigrants returned to Italy, and between 1901 and 1910 that increased to 57%.[29] This repatriation was not motivated by nostalgia or hardship in the U.S., instead, the majority of migrants had planned to return to Italy before they even left.[30] After 1901, Italian emigrants were required to disclose whether they intended to leave the country temporarily or permanently when applying for a passport, and on average less than 25% declared their intent to stay permanently abroad.[31] It was the act of staying, not returning, that marked a shift in the immigrant's goals. Furthermore, many Italians migrated seasonally, coming to America in the warmer months for outdoor seasonal employment and returning to Italy each winter. These serial migrants, disparagingly called "birds

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[25] Viola and Verheul, "The Media Construction of Italian Identity," 296.

[26] John MacDonald and Leatrice MacDonald, "Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks," *The Milbank Fund Quarterly*, 42, no. 1 (1964): 82.

[27] MacDonald, 85; Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture,* 37-38.

[28] Iorizzo, "The Padrone and Immigrant Distribution," 58.

[29] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 40-41.

[30] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 47-48.

[31] Dino Cinel, *From Italy to San Francisco: The Immigrant Experience* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982) 46.

of passage" by Americans, acted as agents of chain migration by accumulating and sharing information that helped family and friends immigrate.[32]

Table 2 - Average Annual Number of Emigrants Returning to Italy from the United States*

Years	Average Annual Repartrition from the U.S.
1887-1891	5,371
1892-1896	20,075
1897-1901	26,992
1902-1906	88,012
1906-1911	149,979

Adapted from Robert Foerster, *The Italian Emigration of our Times,* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 30.

*Data is compiled from Italian records of third-class passengers disembarking in Italian ports, and does not include repatriates who re-entered Italy over land or traveled first or second class by sea.

This group of lone working men eventually brought on the third migrant relationship—delayed family migration—in which men moved their families to the United States after a number of years working there.[33] As the Great Migration progressed, millions of Italian immigrants decided to stay in the United States permanently, largely for economic reasons; remittances had brought about rapid inflation in an already impoverished southern Italy and the American labor market provided greater opportunities for women to make money.[34]

For Italians during the early twentieth century, the social connections that facilitated chain migration were primarily familial and secondarily regional. Support could mean financing a family member's trip or offering them a place to stay once they arrive. More broadly, it could mean reliable advice from *paesani* (other individuals from someone's hometown) who had repatriated.[35] Data from the U.S. Immigration Commission makes the importance of this support clear; in 1908 and 1909, 98.7% of southern Italian immigrants who arrived in the U.S. were joining their friends or family.[36] Approximately one in six of them reported having been in the

[32] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 38.
[33] MacDonald, "Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks," 88.
[34] MacDonald, 89; Simone Cinotto, *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 10.
[35] Samuel Baily, *Immigrants In the Lands of Promise: Italians In Buenos Aires and New York City, 1870-1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999) 48.
[36] Baily, 49.

United States previously.[37] These social connections constitute what Samuel Baily calls an informal network: a set of connections spanning multiple emigrant colonies that gradually evolved from existing village-based networks in Italy. In *Immigrants in the Lands of Promise*, Baily writes:

> Immigrant networks developed because they performed important functions. They helped individuals do specific things. Potential migrants needed to know where it was most advantageous for them to go, how to get there, how to find a job and housing, and if there was a community of familiar paesani with whom they might interact socially. Where networks were in place, they both facilitated migration and influenced the decisions the migrants made. Established networks at the point of origin, linked to specific destinations abroad, created important parameters within which most migrants operate.[38]

These functions of the informal network enabled Italian emigration at the incredible scale seen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, and as Baily points out, they created influential parameters for that migration. This is seen most clearly in emigrant residential patterns. Emigrants who moved in with their family members, or moved to neighborhoods recommended to them by *paesani*, formed localized urban enclaves where nearly everyone in a neighborhood was from the same region or city in Italy. As Patrick Gallo writes, "In the crowded cities one could see the transfer of an entire village within a three or four-block area. In some cases there was a block-by-block separation of Neapolitans, Calabrians, and Sicilians."[39] These patterns appeared in New York City, where Midtown was home to Sicilians from the town of Cinisi, East Harlem to Italians from the town of Avigliano, and Mulberry Street to Italians from Calabria.[40] In this case, the informal network created residential parameters for migration to New York City, where it is more-or-less prescribed where the migrant will live based on their village of origin. Furthermore, as more *paesani* move to a common neighborhood, the enclave forms a positive feedback loop with the informal network that created it. As the enclave grows, its connections to the village—in the form of correspondence, remittances, and repatriation—in turn grow stronger. This was *campanilismo* in Italian New York City.

Researchers have used a multitude of terms to describe these international social connections. Baily calls it an "informal network," Gabaccia uses the phrase "village-based

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[37] Betty Boyd Caroli, "Italian Repatriation From the United States: 1900-1914," Doctoral dissertation, (New York University, 1972) 64.

[38] Baily, 13.

[39] Patrick Gallo, *Ethnic Alienation: The Italian-Americans* (Cranbury: Associated Univ. Press, 1974) 60.

[40] MacDonald, "Chain Migration Ethnic Neighborhood Formation and Social Networks," 92.

diasporas,"[41] and within the analytical framework defined by anthropologists Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller, and Cristina Szanton Blanc, these kinds of migrant connections are called "transnational social fields."[42] In *Nations Unbound,* Basch and her co-authors define transnationalism as "A process by which migrants, through their daily life activities and social, economic, and political relations, create social fields that cross national boundaries."[43] Transnationalism emerged as a framework for studying migration in the 1990s, and has largely been applied to contemporary migration movements where technology has made cross-border travel and communication easier, cheaper, and faster. Basch et al. acknowledge the argument that transnationalism is not a new phenomenon but an old one that is accelerated and transformed by technological advances, although they conclude that "Current transnationalism marks a new type of migrant experience."[44] It is without a doubt that technology has radically changed the experience of international migration, and perhaps that transformation is severe enough to warrant a change in vocabulary. However, the connections Italian immigrants maintained with their kin and *paesani*, and the ways these connections impacted their lives at home and abroad, fits much more closely into a transnational model than an assimilationist one. In "Juggling Jargons," Gabaccia considers informal networks in the context of Italian *campanilismo*, writing:

> If Italy's migrants lived simultaneously in two places, and if their mental maps encompassed two spaces on opposite sides of the Atlantic, those spaces were most assuredly not coterminous with national territories; it might even be more accurate to refer to the translocalism or transregionalism of Italy's mobile millions, rather than to their transnationalism.[45]

It is a model of so-called "translocalism" that explains a social context where someone living in the northern Italian province of Biella has stronger connections to their kin living across an ocean than to their fellow "Italians" living in Sicily.

In the prologue to *Italians in the Lands of Promise*, Baily shares the stories of Ida and Oreste Sola, cousins who moved from Valdengo, Biella to different cities across the Atlantic in the early 1900s. Ida came to New York City and Oreste to Buenos Aires; they traveled with

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[41] Gabaccia, *Italy's Many Diasporas,* 107.

[42] Linda Basch, Nina Glick Schiller and Cristina Szanton Blanc, *Nations Unbound: Transnational Projects, Postcolonial Predicaments, and Deterritorialized Nation-States* (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Overseas Publishers Association, 1994) 29.

[43] Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 27.

[44] Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, 24.

[45] Donna Gabaccia, "Juggling Jargons: 'Italians Everywhere,' Diaspora or Transnationalism?" *Traverse* 12, no. 1 (2005): 55.

friends, family members, and veterans, they joined uncles and godfathers in existing Biellese enclaves, they worked at businesses owned by Biellese friends, and they exchanged communication and aid with the people they knew in all three cities.[46] The correspondence between Ida in New York, her cousin Oreste and brother Abele in Buenos Aires, and her father Giacomo in Valdengo, is evidence of a Biellese social network that spanned three continents. In the words of Baily, "The terms *assimilated* or *unassimilated* inadequately describe the complexity of this experience."[47] This was what it meant to be a transnational Italian emigrant. Despite important differences in contemporary migration movements, the transnational framework remains a useful tool for understanding how Italian national identity evolved during the Great Migration because it reveals how transnational social fields affect negotiations of ethnicity at home and abroad.

Italians Living Abroad

The nationalist movement in Italy was acutely interested in emigration and the colonies Italians formed abroad. While informal social networks connected emigrants to family and *paesani,* Italian immigration policy during the Great Migration sought to expand Italy's social and commercial influence by keeping emigrants connected to a nationalist view of home.[48] Italian emigration was advantageous for the Italian state for two reasons. First, in a period of both immense population growth and brutal poverty, emigration "reduced the number of mouths to be fed in Italy."[49] Second, were the substantial remittances that emigrants sent home. While in America "birds of passage" were treated with disdain for their perceived failure to assimilate, in Italy it was permanent migration that was seen as a threat. Periodic migration was considered hugely beneficial, even necessary, for the Italian economy.[50] The Italian politician Paolo Falletti went so far as to recommend the Italian government build schools in the United States to teach emigrants better Italian and "Strengthen their attachment to the mother country," but no such policy was put in place.[51]

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[46] Baily, *Immigrants In the Lands of Promise,* 6.
[47] Baily, 11.
[48] Marco Soresina, "Italian Emigration Policy During the Great Migration Age, 1880-1919: The Interaction of Emigration and Foreign Policy," *Journal of Modern Italian Studies* 21, no. 5 (2016): 723.
[49] Andrew Rolle, The Italian Americans: Troubled Roots (New York: Free Press, 1980) 50.
[50] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 34.
[51] Puleo, 49.

In 1888, law 6866 granted Italians the freedom to emigrate and form emigration agencies, although the policy was largely inadequate at its goals of protecting migrants from exploitation and expanding the state's influence. Massive demand made the emigration agencies and padroni impossible to regulate, yet the padroni created a unique opportunity for diplomatic cooperation between the United States and Italian governments, both of whom wished to eradicate the recruitment system that they struggled to control. This led to the creation of the Bureau of Information and Protection for Italian Emigration in 1894, the only such agency on Ellis Island to be run by a foreign government.[52] In 1901, Italian emigration law was reformed, establishing a contract between emigrants and navigation companies, making ship owners legally responsible for the safety of emigrants during their voyage, and creating the Commissariato dell'Emigrazione, which each year after 1901 published bulletins called *Bollettino dell'Emigrazione*.[53] These bulletins were concentrations of knowledge that helped emigrants in a similar way to the informal networks. In addition, they were a mechanism for the Italian government to encourage repatriation and remittances, both by projecting an ideology of long-distance nationalism and providing direct instructions about how to transfer funds and travel home.[54] In a 1905 bulletin, the Italian Foreign Minister said, "We sincerely advise Italians who go to search for work in the United States that, if they return, the mother country will never refuse to recognize them as its sons."[55] This sentiment was reinforced by a law in 1912 which made renewing Italian citizenship very easy.[56]

Throughout this period, nationalism remained at the forefront of emigration policy in Italy. The emigrants' sense of national identity was a metric of how much control the Italian state had over its emigrant colonies, and as such both the nationalists and the government had a vested interest in portraying emigrants not as Italian-Americans but as *Italians living abroad*. Marco Sorensia describes the forces behind this investment, writing:

> It was a question of culture, but also a political and economic question; in Italy the assimilation of emigrants in the United States was viewed with suspicion, linked to the fear of a loss of influence over these communities by the homeland, and also a dwindling of the finances being sent back in that valuable US currency.[57]

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[52] Soresina, "Italian Emigration Policy During the Great Migration Age," 727-729.
[53] Soresina, 729; Caroli, "Italian Repatriation From the United States," 72.
[54] Caroli, 78.
[55] Caroli, 102.
[56] Caroli, 102.
[57] Soresina, "Italian Emigration Policy During the Great Migration Age," 729.

These cultural, political, and economic stakes of assimilation fueled the elite's interest in maintaining a form of long distance nationalism, and this manifested itself in the language they used to describe emigrants. According to Gabaccia, by the beginning of the twentieth century Italian elites had adopted the term *italiani al estero* (Italians abroad) for emigrants, a phrase that is still widely used today.[58] For strategic cultural, political, economic, and nationalist reasons, leaders in Italy continued to concern themselves with this group of Italians living abroad, and made a clear point to integrate them into notions of national identity.

Part 3: Transforming Ethnic Identity

New York City

The city was one of the most significant changes Italian immigrants experienced when they moved from agro-towns in the south to crowded neighborhoods in New York City. The proximity of the city—undeterred by forces of chain migration that had created regionally segregated enclaves—brought Italian immigrants from all over the peninsula together, and mixed processes of American assimilation with intra-Italian contact and exchange. As Humbert Nelli notes, "Because the city prevented isolation, neither the community nor its institutions were fully Italian in character; nor were they American. They served an interim group, the immigrant generation with its old world traditions and new world surroundings."[59] This closeness had a profound effect on Italian ethnic identity.

The U.S. Immigration Act of 1924 made immigration from Italy very difficult by introducing annual visa quotas, and by the 1920s the population of U.S.-born Italian Americans had overtaken that of their parents.[60] For second-generation Italian youth in New York City, *campanilismo* was challenged by what Giorgio Bertellini calls "A multidimensional sense of Italianness."[61] American culture, while reproducing north-south distinctions, did not recognize highly localized distinctions of ethnicity the way that Italian culture did. While children of immigrant parents occupied regional identities in their households, they occupied a much broader "Italian" identity in the city, all the while striving for social acceptance through identity

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[58] Donna Gabaccia, "Juggling Jargons." 56.

[59] Humbert Nelli, "Italians in Urban America," In *The Italian Experience in the United States,* ed. Silvano Tomasi and Madeline Engel, (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1970), 88.

[60] Cinotto, *The Italian American Table,* 9.

[61] Giorgio Bertellini, "Duce/Divo: Masculinity, Racial Identity, and Politics among Italian Americans in 1920's New York City." *Journal of Urban History* 31, no. 5 (2005): 689.

as white Americans.[62] In *The Italian American Table*, Simone Cinotto discusses how conflicts about assimilation and identity played out over the dinner table in New York City. Second-generation Italian Americans were drawn to American culture and assimilation, both because of its shiny outer shell of consumerism and because it looked like a way to escape stereotypes of cultural inferiority. Cinotto writes of young second-generation Italians, "Their hostility toward Italianità harbored significant shame and self-hatred, feelings derived from personal insecurity as well as the recognition that an Italian identity damaged their prospects for upward mobility and self-realization."[63] In this way, cultural assimilation and the explicit rejection of Italian national identity was seen as a way of belonging in white society, but this was far from the only response to discrimination. In fact, the impulse towards Americanization (particularly in US-born Italian youth) motivated others to fiercely resist it.

In contemporary studies of immigrant identity formation this phenomenon is called reactive ethnicity: a process where ethnic identities are strengthened in response to discrimination, or "Rejection by the host-national group."[64] Applying the theory of reactive ethnicity, the development of *Italianità* can be understood as a product of New York City's context of reception; Italian immigrants perceived themselves, and were perceived by New York, as culturally different, and thus developed a broader sense of ethnic identity as a means of understanding their place in a city and country full of immigrants.[65]

Conflicts of Assimilation

The extraordinary repatriation rates of the Great Migration informed emigrants' attitudes towards assimilation and their perceptions of home. In her doctoral dissertation, "Italian Repatriation From the United States: 1900-1914," Betty Boyd Caroli cites the observations of Gaetano Conte, a university-educated Italian emigrant who spent ten years in Boston working with poor Italian workers. She writes, "Conte noted that many of the workers expressed a close attachment to both the country they had left and the one in which they had found work," calling

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[62] Marcella Bencivenni, *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture: The Idealism of the Sovversivi in the United States*, *1890-1940* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 689; Luconi, "Discrimination and identity Construction," 297.

[63] Cinotto, *The Italian American Table,* 29.

[64] Seth Schwartz et al., "Identity Development in Immigrant Youth," *European Psychologist* 23, no. 4 (2018): 344.

[65] Schwartz et al., 340.

this duality "divided patriotism."[66] In 1903, Conte wrote of a conversation he had with an Italian worker who said: "I love Italy…but I love her as my mother, the cause of my existence, and this does not prevent me from loving America as my wife, the cause of my present happiness."[67] This experience of divided patriotism is a transnational state: the migrant with their feet in two worlds. Many years of repatriation had left behind a cultural legacy in America, one marked by disinterest in assimilation and a love for the Italian homeland.[68] As delayed family migration took off and relative repatriation rates slowed, immigrant families began the process of forging permanent lives for themselves in New York City. This idealistic view of home, as informed by the birds of passage and ongoing *campanilismo*, would underscore the ensuing intergenerational conflict over assimilation.

Narratives of inferiority, be it that Italian culture *is* inferior or that Italian culture must be kept behind closed doors because of its *perceived* inferiority, were taught to Italian-American children in New York City public schools. Public schools in the early twentieth century were designed to be machines of American assimilation; immigrant schoolchildren were taught the Pledge of Allegiance and the national anthem, taught to speak English, and lectured on proper hygiene, proper nutrition, and proper ways of keeping house.[69] Cinotto writes of East Harlem public schools, "Italian American students would hear daily criticism of family habits and be singled out as antipatriotic and un-American, which deepened a sense of nonbelonging."[70] In response to these circumstances, many young second-generation Italian Americans sought to discard everything Italian about themselves. Some children would not respond to their parents when they spoke in Italian or would not eat food when it was called by an Italian name.[71] Ideas of assimilation and inferiority drove conflict among Italian-American families by undermining first-generation views of home and threatening the authority of the immigrant parent. This motivated parents in Italian Harlem to fiercely try to preserve their Italian culture, particularly their Italian food and the traditions surrounding it, leading to the construction of Italian American ethnicity through construction of the family unit. Cinotto writes:

> Italian Americans in East Harlem redefined the boundaries between the public and the private in their lives, concepts and values that often held little meaning in the rural

[66] Caroli, "Italian Repatriation From the United States," 104.
[67] Caroli, 105.
[68] Puleo, "From Italy to Boston's North End," 51.
[69] Cinotto, *The Italian American Table,* 33.
[70] Cinotto, 34.
[71] Cinotto, 29.

> societies from which most immigrants came. In building a family ideology—which in turn created an Italian American ethnicity—they abandoned the solidarity of the paese, which often collapsed individual and family into the community. In its place, they began to embrace the contemporary middle-class ideal of the family as a distinct cell of social life.[72]

In the public sphere, articulated through public education, narratives of Italian inferiority were taught to and enforced for Italian-American children. First generation parents who detested the Americanization of their kids came to accept assimilation when it was kept outside the household, and found a way to preserve their ties to home through the construction of a private ethnic sphere: the family.

This process is well exemplified in testimony from an Italian-American college student reflecting on his experience navigating conflicts of assimilation in elementary school:

> I felt that I needed milk in the morning more than anything else. But my mother, and so my father, insisted that this was not according to the good customs; that American milk was poison. "These teachers of yours are crazy," they told me. I realized that everything I learned at school was met by my parents with disapproval. So I did not bring up such things any more for I did not wish to be accused of being a disobedient son and cause troubles between myself and my other relatives. The family came first…I loathed the Italian customs with all my heart but I would never let anything stand between me and our family…I managed to become American without upsetting the peace of the family.[73]

This account reveals how distinctions between private and public spheres, paired with the ideology of the family, resolved conflicts of assimilation in the Italian-American household. To "become American without upsetting the peace of the family" reconciles the conflict inherent to the transnational emigrant's divided patriotism. In the private ethnic sphere, ethnic traditions were created by families who selectively drew from their experiences of home to preserve their Italian identity in New York City's context of reception.[74] Italian Americans had created their own sense of *Italianità*, a feat that post-unification military occupation and Italian emigration policy had repeatedly failed at.

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[72] Cinotto, 22.

[73] Leonard Covello, *The Social Background of the Italo-American School Child: A Study of the Southern Italian Family Mores and their Effect on the School Situation in Italy and America,* ed. Francesco Cordasco, (Leiden, Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1967) 341-342.

[74] Cinotto, *The Italian American Table,* 21.

Conclusion

Immigrant Italianità

"Milan is just like New York, only there aren't so many Italians," goes the common turn of phrase.[75] How can one integrate such a characterization of New York City with the history of precarious Italian national identity? During the Great Migration, most emigrants who arrived in New York City did not imagine themselves as "Italians." In the context of post-unification southern Italy, the notion that New York City would become a place 'more Italian than Italy' is almost unimaginable. Over the next half-decade, these emigrant identities would be transformed, brought together by processes of reactive ethnicity, to create the robust understanding of immigrant *Italianità* that exists today.

From the agro-towns outward, Italian *campanilismo* formed transnational social fields that connected migrants to idealized notions of home and brought forth parameters for chain migration. The resulting urban enclaves were stages for negotiating assimilation and constructing identity across generational lines, ultimately creating the Italian-American ideology of family. In the private ethnic sphere, ethnic traditions were created, preserved, and passed on—identity was made. Thomas Ferraro writes, "It was not until [Italians] had dealt with nativist suspicion and wonder in the United States…did they think of themselves as a unit, and it was not until they had committed to stay and acclimated to the urban working classes did they *feel* they were, in truth, Italians."[76] Paradoxically, it was acts of leaving home, clinging to *campanilismo*, and exiling ethnic tradition to the private sphere, that made *Italianità* for the Italian commoner.

By approaching the question of Italian identity formation from an angle of transnationalism, it becomes clear that the transnational social field shapes migrant identity. The fourth premise of Basch, Schiller and Blanc's framework for the study of transnationalism states:

> By living their lives across borders, transmigrants find themselves confronted with and engaged in the nation building processes of two or more nation-states. Their identities and practices are configured by hegemonic categories such as race and ethnicity that are deeply embedded in the nation building processes of these nation-states.[77]

For Italian-Americans, ethnic identity was configured by the north/south and rich/poor hegemonies of Italian nation building and by the assimilated/unassimilated and white/non-white

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[75] Thomas Ferraro, *Feeling italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2005) 28.

[76] Ferraro, 3.

[77] Basch, Schiller, and Blanc, *Nations Unbound*, 34.

hegemonies of American nation building. The transnational approach, developed to better understand migration in an era of globalization and technological development, can also explain the informal network created by Italian repatriation and the underlying forces of Italian-American identity negotiation. In the end, the myth that 'immigrants used to leave everything from their homelands behind and come to America to become American' is just that, a myth. Before the age of the internet and widely accessible air travel, migrants managed to build and maintain economic and social connections to home. Studying these connections within the transnational framework, despite their technological limitations, uncovers elements of Italian-American life and self-conception that are obfuscated by the immigrant story. The search to better understand migration is a search to better understand people, belonging, and ethnic and national identities. In the pursuit of knowledge through the transnational analytical framework, looking back at the great migrations of the past remains valuable in our ongoing effort to understand the great migrations of the present.

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