

Chapter 1

The Southern Answer *Making Little Italys*

Intellectuals develop slowly, much more slowly than any other social group, by their very nature and historical function. They represent the whole of the cultural tradition of a people, seeking to summarize and synthesize all of its history. This is especially true of the old type of intellectual, of the intellectual born of the peasantry. To think it possible that such intellectuals could, en masse, break with the entire past and situate itself wholly on the terrain of a new ideology is absurd. . . . It is certainly important for the proletariat that one or more intellectuals, individually, adhere to its program and its doctrine, become enmeshed with the proletariat and become and feel an integral part of it.

—Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*

Given the proletarian character and general illiteracy of the Italian immigration, it was not to be expected that the “Little Italies,” would nourish intellectual pursuits. Educated persons were regarded with mistrust.

—Rudolph J. Vecoli, “The Coming of Age
of the Italian Americans: 1945–1974”

In 1927, shortly after the United States had severely restricted immigration from southern European countries, Antonio Gramsci published *The Southern Question* in which he attempted to explain the failure of southern Italy to generate a revolutionary force. But years before Gramsci’s article the southern Italians were answering the southern question in their own direct way by leaving the impossible socioeconomic situation that a unified Italy had produced for them. One of the effects of this emigration would be the development in the United States of intellectuals who, under different circumstances, might have become provocative instruments of a southern Italian-led revolution.

Gramsci saw the relationship of northern and southern Italy as a one of the dominant over the dominated, one in which the culture of the north created an hegemony over the culture of the south. Cultural critic Pasquale Verdicchio in *Bound by Distance: Rethinking Nationalism through the Italian Diaspora*, discusses the role Italian nationalism plays in the identities and

cultural productions of the descendants of the Italian Diaspora and uses Gramsci's article to examine reproductions of Italian culture outside of Italy. With Verdicchio's help, we can see how emigration from Italy was one of the ways the southern question was answered.

Gramsci posited that the intellectuals in Southern Italy played a mediating role between the peasants and those who owned the land on which the peasants worked. For Gramsci, the intellectuals (local lawyers, doctors, and clergy), comprised a rural middle class whose role was to centralize and dominate both political and ideological trends. The role that intellectuals played in this process of mediation between the lower and upper classes, according to Gramsci, easily allowed the capitalist and industrial forces of northern Italy to become dominant in the country during Italy's unification period (1860–1870) at the expense of the southern peasants. Unification, supposed to make Italy a modern European nation, began about 1780, lasted until 1870, and was directed primarily by the minds and the monies of those who lived in the northern regions of the country. Verdicchio reminds us that northern Italian culture represented Italy long before the *risorgimento*. Dante saw Florence as “the new Rome that would again unify Italy” (*Bound* 33); Florentine culture soon became the benchmark for national culture. The goal of the *risorgimento* was the integration and standardization of institutions so that the resulting Italy, under a newly appointed king, could become a genuine nation-state. True integration was never achieved, and northern culture soon assumed a hegemony that exists to this very day. As the Italian state economy was capitalized and industrialized, the north exploited the south, some would even say colonized it. This colonization would have an impact on the creation of the Italian American intellectual.

As we will see, the work of immigrant Italian American intellectuals was largely focused on working-class issues and reflected the alienation that Jack Goody and Ian Watt refer to in their essay “The Consequences of Literacy”:

From the standpoint of the individual intellectual, of the literate specialist, the vista of endless choices and discoveries offered by so extensive a past can be a source of great stimulation and interest; but when we consider the social effects of such an orientation, it becomes apparent that the situation fosters the alienation that has characterized so many writers and philosophers of the West since the last century. (21)

Just as the immigrant was, for the most part, alienated from the mainstream economy—forced as most new immigrants are to take the work given to them or to make work for themselves—the second generation, the children of immigrants, became social immigrants searching for acceptance in the larger society, something that would be easier for them once they lost the alien trappings of *Italianità* and mastered the means of obtaining power in U.S.

society. Not until the third generation, then, can we see any mass movement into the cultural mainstream. The irony here is that to be successful culturally, they would have to accept or return to what their parents had to reject.

An observation by Margaret Mead, recounted in that Goody and Watt essay, sheds light on the effects that an American education might have had on heightening the alienation the Italian American experienced: “Primitive education,” she writes, “was a process by which continuity was maintained between parents and children. . . . Modern education includes a heavy emphasis upon the function of education to create discontinuities—to turn the child . . . of the illiterate into the literate” (336). This experience in U.S. schools created division and difference; in essence the child became the teacher to the parent, the guide, the translator, and this became a notion that challenged the traditional structure of the Italian concept of family. *Italianità* became an obstacle to the entrance into American mainstream culture. Leonard Covello, who with the help of novelist Guido D’Agostino wrote his memoirs entitled *The Heart Is the Teacher*, recalls his experience in the American school:

During this period [1900s], the Italian language was completely ignored. In fact, throughout my whole elementary school career, I do not recall one mention of Italy or the Italian language or what famous Italians had done in the world with the possible exception of Columbus, who was pretty popular in America. We soon got the idea that Italian meant something inferior, and a barrier was erected between children of Italian origin and their parents. This was the accepted process of Americanization. We were becoming Americans by learning how to be ashamed of our parents. (43)

Covello’s words help us to understand why so many first- and second-generation Italian Americans sought economic and popular cultural paths on the road to becoming American. These choices enabled success without strong identification with what was considered a sometimes anti-American immigrant culture.

Assimilation used to be thought of as a melting-down process, a process by which each immigrant group reached the same common denominator: the American citizen. As early as 1922, John Valentino wrote an essay encouraging assimilation: “Immigrant children may yearn for freedom to live untrammelled American lives; but they can do so only by abandoning, physically as well as intellectually their own households” (355). Going to college required such an intellectual abandonment; attending any American institution, be it the military, the library, or even the insane asylum, enabled such a physical abandonment. But by asking immigrant children to abandon their cultural foundation or at least exchange it for one that was “American,” those

who longed for a single American culture were denying the utility of cultural diversity. Whether because of a need to find more economically secure work or pressure to avoid identity with *Italianità*, few early Italian Americans ventured into the field of literature as writers or critics.

Early twentieth-century immigrants from Italy to the United States did not at once refer to themselves as Americans. Most of the early immigrants were sojourners or “birds of passage,” primarily men who crossed the ocean to find work, make money, and return home. This experience is well presented in books such as Michael La Sorte’s *La Merica: Images of Italian Greenhorn Experience* (1985). In addition to language barriers, these immigrants often faced difficult living conditions and often encountered racism. In *Wop! A Documentary History of Anti-Italian Discrimination* (1999), Salvatore LaGumina gathers evidence of this racism from late nineteenth- and twentieth-century American journalism appearing in the *New York Times* and other major publications.

In response to this treatment, many of the Italians referred to Americans as “merdicani” short for “merde di cane” (dog shit). Italians also used the word as a derogatory reference by Italians to those who assimilated too quickly and readily into American culture. Most novels published prior to World War II depicted the vexed immigrant experience of adjustment in America: Louis Forgione’s *The River Between* (1928), Garibaldi LaPolla’s *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), Valenti Angelo’s *Golden Gate* (1939), Guido D’Agostino’s *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940), Mari Tomasi’s *Deep Grow the Roots* (1940), and Jo Pagano’s *Golden Wedding* (1943).

In spite of a substantial presence in literature Italian Americans had little visibility in American popular culture other than the Rudolph Valentino romantic exotic types and a few gangster films. Norman Rockwell paintings and illustrations, considered in the 1930s and 1940s to be typically American, never included images of Italians. Even the works of Italian American artists themselves were conspicuously void of direct references to the immigrant experience. Filmmaker Frank Capra, who emigrated from Sicily with his family in 1903, managed to include the Martini family in *It’s a Wonderful Life* (1946) as a marginal reference to the poor helped by George Bailey. In the literary arts, becoming an American is the focus of much of the early artists such as John Fante, whose “The Odyssey of a Wop,” appeared in H. L. Mencken’s *American Mercury*, a popular magazine of the 1930s and 1940s. Fante, a self-proclaimed protégé of Mencken, wrote novels and became a Hollywood screenwriter. His *Full of Life* (1957), a mainstream Hollywood comedy starring Richard Conte and Judy Holiday, was based on his novel of the same title, which helped bring this experience into the American mainstream.

Immigrant struggles, beyond trying to make a living and feed self and family recounted in such novels as Pietro di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete*

(1939), John Fante's *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini* (1938), Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), Julia Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), and autobiographies such as Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1943), included coping with the prejudice and discrimination that reached extremes in the 1891 New Orleans lynchings and later with the trial and 1927 executions of Sacco and Vanzetti. The literature produced during this period provides great insights into the shaping of American identities and into the obstacles that these immigrants faced in pursuing their versions of the American dream.

A history of the Italian American intellectual is yet to be written, but when it is, one of the stories it will tell is the tension between what Antonio Gramsci has identified as the organic and the traditional intellectual. It will present a gallery of rogue scholars whose voices are vulgar and vital and whose place in American culture has never been stabilized by political lobbies, cultural foundations, or endowed chairs. It will tell the tale of the pre-Christian paganism of Italian culture that has resurfaced in popular culture through the antics of Madonna and the controversial cultural analyses of Camille Paglia. While both of these American women of Italian descent seem to be innovators in interpretation, they are in fact, popularizers of ideas that have long remained submerged in the shadows of Italian American culture. One need only look to Diane di Prima's *Memoirs of a Beatnik* (1969) or the cultural criticism of Luigi Fraina and Robert Viscusi to find their antecedents. The major problem facing Italian American intellectuals is not a lack of preparation for or sophistication in their critical methods, but a lack of self-confidence that the culture they come from can be used to express themselves to the American mainstream audience. The lack of this self-confidence is one result of the immigrant experience.

In these days, when cultural differences are exploited more than similarities are explored, when the idea of working-class unity is clouded by the competition for leisure time and credit card possibilities, imagining that there was a time when what happened to the working class mattered to intellectuals is difficult. But these days, as increasingly radical intellectuals are reclaiming their working-class backgrounds, we must remember the cultural work done by those immigrant intellectuals who dedicated their lives to the working-class cause. The earliest voices of Italian America heard publicly were those of political and labor activists such as poet-organizer Arturo Giovannitti, Frances Winwar, journalist-organizer Carol Tresca, and Luigi Fraina. Following is a brief look at some of those immigrant intellectuals.

Although Luigi Fraina did not develop an identity that strongly connected to his Italian ancestry, he certainly stayed true to his working-class origins. Fraina was born in Galdo, Italy, in 1892 and came to America with his mother at age three to join his father, a republican exile. An early participant in the DeLeon socialist labor movement, Fraina was involved in

the founding of the American communist party after experience in both the socialist labor party and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). In the early 1900s Fraina was one of the earliest to publish Marxist literary and cultural criticism in the United States. By age thirty, he had disconnected himself from any political group, changed his name to Lewis Corey, and became a leader of the anticommunist liberal movement. Working as a proof-reader and editor as Charles Skala, Fraina began writing as Lewis Corey. During this period he was a union activist and a prolific Marxist critic and journalist; despite never having been formally educated beyond grammar school, he wrote several books about U.S. capitalism. His *The House of Morgan* (1930), *The Decline of American Capitalism* (1934), and *The Crisis of the Middle Class* (1935), helped fuel the radical movement of the 1930s.

In one of his few directly antifascist articles, "Human Values in Literature and Revolution" (1963), Fraina speaks out against fascism and argues that the only good literature is that which concerns "itself primarily with consciousness and values, with attitudes toward life" (8). Of the literature of his time that does this, Fraina notes three types: (1) "the literature of capitalist disintegration," (2) "the literature of fundamental human values and defense of those values," and (3) "the literature of conscious revolutionary aspiration and struggle." Fraina sees fascism as "the final proof" that "in any period of fundamental social change, particularly as the old order decays, there is an increasing degradation of human values" (8). Fraina points to the writing of Ignazio Silone as truly revolutionary:

In one of his short stories Silone (whose *Fontamara* combines the understanding of theory and the sweep of life into a magnificent symphony) tells of a group of radical workers who are destroyed by a fascist spy because of their sense of decency. The moral is: you cannot be decent against the indecent. But Silone conveys more: that it is terrible to abandon decency, even necessarily and temporarily, because our fight is to make life decent. (8)

Fraina dedicated his entire life to theoretical analysis of the impact of capitalism on U.S. democratic culture and to the search for a new social order that would respect and reward human labor. His words in the 1930s were prophetic:

We must learn to appreciate the underlying unity of events, the logic of historical development. The threat of fascism, of new world wars and a new barbarism, arises out of the class necessity of entrenched interests which cling, at all costs, to the old order. This menace to all other classes can be met only by a struggle for a new social order

capable of creating a new and higher civilization, for capitalism in decay is now capable only of creating reaction and death. (*The Crisis of the Middle Class* 12–13)

Those words have yet to lose their relevance. Fraina believed that the struggle would require education, especially of the middle class as to its historical role in the propagation of the traditions of the ruling class. Only through education, he believed, could “the dispossessed elements of the middle class” (19) understand their role in creating a new national order. But Fraina was not one to advocate revolution from an office. He also worked on the front lines.

During the Great Depression he worked as an economist for the Works Progress Administration (WPA) and then became educational director of Local 22 of the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) from 1937–1939. In the early 1940s, as a result of the German–Soviet Pact of 1939, Fraina broke from his belief in Marxism and struggled to find ways of creating a more democratic economy and expressed his thoughts in *The Unfinished Task* (1940). He went on to teach from 1942–1951 at Antioch College, and from there became the educational director of the Amalgamated Butcher Workmen, American Federation of Labor (AFL) in Chicago. From this experience came his *Meat and Man: A Study of Monopoly, Unionism and Food Policy* (1950). The U.S. government attempted to deport him for being in the country illegally and for having been a communist. Two days after Fraina’s death in 1953, the U.S. Department of Justice issued him a certificate of lawful entry.

The rise of fascism in Italy in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s had a tremendous effect on the identity and behavior of Americans of Italian decent, and this effect became a prime subject in their literature. Jerre Mangione captured this experience in his memoirs *Mount Allegro* (1943) and *An Ethnic at Large: A Memoir of America in the Thirties and Forties* (1978):

In my years of becoming an American I had come to understand the evil of Fascism and hate it with all my soul. One or two of my relatives argued with me on the subject because they had a great love for their native land and, like some men in love, they could see nothing wrong. Fascism was only a word to them; Mussolini a patriotic Italian putting his country on its feet. Why did I insist on finding fault with Fascism, they asked, when all the American newspapers were admitting Mussolini was a great man who made the trains run on time? (*Mount Allegro* 239–40)

Trapped between two countries (their parents’ homeland and their own), Italian American writers tended to stay aloof of the current international political

situation. Not until after the fall of Mussolini did Italian Americans, in any significant way, address fascism in their fiction and poetry. The earliest antifascist writings dared to contradict the pro-fascist posture the U.S. government assumed as well as leading figures of the American literary scene such as Wallace Stevens, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot, who as proponents of modernism were also, interestingly enough, if not outright pro-fascist, at least sympathetic to Mussolini's fascism (Diggins 245). Those Italian Americans who opposed Mussolini from the beginning did so at the risk of being attacked or labeled communists by the larger American public as well as their own pro-Mussolini countrymen.

One of the earliest Italian Americans to voice his opinion of Italian fascism in his poetry was Arturo Giovannitti, who with Joseph Ettor, organized the famous 1912 Lawrence Mill Strike. In his poem "To Mussolini" he accuses the Father of Italian Fascism of winning "fame with lies." And he tells il duce that:

No man is great who does not find
 A poet who will hail him as he is
 With an almighty song that will unbind
 Through his exploits eternal silences.
 Duce, where is your bard? In all mankind
 The only poem you inspired is this. (72)

In "Italia Speaks," Giovannitti depicts the United States as a child of Italy who can rescue its mother from "The twin ogres in black and brown [who] have polluted my gardens" (76). Giovannitti composed poems that echo Walt Whitman's patriotic odes during the American Civil War. In his "Battle Hymn of the New Italy" we find a synthesis of Giosue Carducci and Whitman, as Giovannitti calls for the Italian people to rise up against Mussolini and Hitler.

Along with Giovannitti, those most prominent antifascists whose writing appeared most frequently in U.S. publications were the *fuorusciti*, Italian intellectuals who left Italy and found refuge more often than not in U.S. universities: Gaetano Salvemini at Harvard University in Cambridge, Max Ascoli at the New School for Social Research, Giuseppe Borgese at the University of Chicago, and Lionello Venturi at Johns Hopkins in Maryland (Diggins 140). These *fuorusciti* were responsible for several influential anti-fascist publications. Their presence made "the universities one of the few anti-Fascist ramparts in America" (Diggins 261). Constantine Panunzio, a professor at the University of California at Los Angeles and author of *The Soul of an Immigrant*, one of the earliest book-length autobiographies by an Italian American, contributed to the understanding of the plight of Italian Americans in this period through his article "Italian Americans, Fascism and

the War” published in 1942 in the *Yale Review*. Panunzio explained the relationship between Italian Americans and the Italian government, arguing that although Italian Americans might have nibbled the bait of fascism “as mainly a diversion or a means of escape from the feeling of inferiority which the American community imposed on them” (782), they never swallowed the hook, and “now that the test of war has come, there is no question as to where almost one hundred per cent of our Italian immigrant population stands” (782).

The fiction of Mangione contains similar antifascist sentiments. Mangione’s interactions with activist Carlo Tresca became the material on which he would build his second novel, *Night Search* (1965). Based on Tresca’s assassination, *Night Search* dramatizes the experience of Michael Mallory, the illegitimate son of antifascist labor organizer and newspaper publisher Paolo Polizzi, a character based on Tresca. Through investigating his father’s murder, Mallory learns to take action, and in doing so comes to understand contemporary politics. Mallory very much resembles Stiano Argento, the main protagonist in Mangione’s earlier and more strongly anti-fascist novel, *The Ship and the Flame* (1948).

Although immigration to the United States from Italy slowed between the 1920s and 1940s due to political maneuvers such as the 1924 U.S. quota restrictions, several Italian intellectuals were allowed to immigrate to the United States to flee fascism. Most prominent among those included scientists such as Enrico Fermi, who has come to be called father of the atom bomb, and writers Arturo Vivante, P. M. Pasinetti, and Nicolo Tucci. Vivante, a physician, contributed frequently to major publications such as the *New Yorker*. His fiction includes a collection of short stories, *The French Girls of Killini* (1967), and three novels, *A Goodly Babe* (1966), *Doctor Giovanni* (1969), and *Run to the Waterfall* (1965). Pasinetti came to study in the United States in 1935 from Venice and first published fiction in *The Southern Review*. He earned a Ph.D. at Yale University in New Haven in 1949 and went on to teach at the University of California at Los Angeles. Pasinetti published three novels, *Venetian Red* (1960), *The Smile on the Face of the Lion* (1965), and *From the Academy Bridge* (1970); his work earned him an award from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in 1965. Tucci, who came while a student, published two autobiographical novels, *Before My Time* (1962) and *Unfinished Funeral* (1964), using European settings to depict a liberation from the history that the emigrant experiences. For these writers, their sense of the literary was significantly shaped by the prominence in 1930s Italy of *Americanisti* such as Elio Vittorini and Cesare Pavese, both translators and influential editors who helped introduce American literature to Italian culture.

So what has all this to do with the Italians in America? The myth of Italian America was founded at this time by immigrants from southern Italy

who did not wait for others to answer the southern question for them. Those who immigrated to the United States eventually created a myth ritualized each October on Columbus Day. Robert Viscusi's booklength poem, *An Oration on the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus*, helps us to see the establishment of early Italian American identity in relation to the creation myth of Italian America.

the fact is columbus day will go the way of the dinosaur
 along with everything else
 meanwhile what about garibaldi
 who was fighting for the poor in italy
 but after the revolution
 lives to see the rich steal italy
 and starve the poor
 selling them to labor gangs in suz
 shipping them to new york to dig subways
 in return to cheap american grain
 they brought back in the empty ships
 the italians went to america in steerage
 that means they slept down below
 all in one room seasick for weeks
 another room would carry wheat the other way
 the italians didn't know where they were going
 when they got there the people spit at them
 and garibaldi lived to see all this begin to happen
 which was his reward for helping the rich steal italy
 he should have come to new york to fight in the civil war
 and march in the columbus day parade (1-2)

One of the great answers to the southern question was the creation of Italian America, which Viscusi has suggested was founded on the myth of the rich throwing the poor out of Italy, and it was inside the Little Italys of Italian America where former Italians became the very intellectuals that Gramsci had hoped would lead his country in a revolution ("Literature Considering" 270). And although Italian immigrants wasted no time in making physical Little Italys, much time would pass before they would create a self-conscious cultural notion called Little Italy, for that, they would have to invent Italian America.