Multiple inequalities in the age of transnationalization: the case of Italian Americans

Ph.D. Eva Pelayo Sañudo
University of Oviedo

Bio Note

A graduate in English Philology by the University of Oviedo in 2011, I mostly focused on postcolonial studies, particularly during my fourth year at the University of Leeds thanks to an Erasmus grant. In 2013, I completed the Erasmus Mundus MA program in gender studies (GEMMA), with a 6-month-stay at the University of Bologna (Italy), specialised in literature and postcolonial studies from a gender perspective.

I am currently doing a PhD in Gender and Diversity at the University of Oviedo about Italian American literature, supervised by Dr Isabel Carrera, and for which I got a prestigious 4-year-scholarship from my regional area (FICYT). I also participate in an international research project and group about gender, ethnic and urban studies led by my supervisor and funded by the Spanish government ("MultipliCity. Embodied Encounters and Alternative Knowledges: Inhabiting and Creating the Transnational City"). Last semester (fall 2014), I spent three months at the Calandra Italian American Institute of New York (Queens College), where I conducted research under the sponsorship and supervision of distinguished professor Fred Gardaphé; next June, I will hopefully enjoy another research stay at the University of Calabria (Italy), which is additionally holding a unique Summer School programme about Italian diaspora studies for scholars and researchers from around the world. Contact: pelayoeva@uniovi.es

Abstract

This contribution[1] is framed within the field of cultural studies and migration and ethnic relations, trying to examine how the Italian American experience has been imaginatively (re)created and received. It will entail an interdisciplinary approach about the cultural and literary analysis of the Italian diaspora in the United States, from a gender perspective that recovers the voice and historical presence of women as has been transmitted in the arts and critical methods. Focusing on the media and literary representations that deal with Italian migration to the United States since the last decades of the 19th century, their welcome or later development until our days, I make particular reference to a community mainly conceived in the masculine, as major receptions and persistent stereotypes about family relations and ethnicity attest. I will

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analyse, at the same time, the existence of other works that either contest or balance that cultural and gender stereotyping of the Italian American experience or community.

Introduction: Italian American history in light of intersectionality and transnationalism theories

This article primarily draws from the theoretical tool of "intersectionality" in order to address or explain the multiplicity of inequalities at the heart of the Italian American community, since the harsher and nativist early times of migration to the present day so-called or presumed "twilight ethnicities" (Alba, 1981). Those multiple discriminations are largely ethno-racial and gender issues deriving from the encounter with radically different notions in the host society and subsequent pressures to assimilate in the specific context of a nation that desperately seeks to define itself considering both its founding ethos (*e pluribus unum*) as its need of facing unique relatively rapid changes.[2]

A transnational perspective still complicates the matter as even if "the US continues to be regarded throughout the world as the paradigmatic nation of immigrants and as a place where transformations of identity are a routine-element of nation building and national life" (Gabaccia and Leach, 2004: 2), immigrant lives and ethnic identities are very much (in)formed across nations. Nancy Carnevale, for instance, draws from recent scholarship to confirm the transnational character of Italian migration as "second-generation youth in New York City felt the pull of Fascist Italy no less than that of Americanizing leaders within their own community" (2009: 12).

She additionally brings significant insights in accounting for the way "premigration histories" influence ethnic formation or identification; by looking at the linguistic complexities of Italians in comparison to the status of Yiddish as a "diaspora language" and so a means of strong group identity, she calls attention to the intricacies of transnational identities:

> "the different trajectories of these immigrant languages and the meanings attached to them by both immigrants and the host society reflect in part the premigration histories of each group" (13).

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[2] Language difference, for example, is one of the greatest clashes that define the intercultural encounter and subsequent identity and adaptation processes; if for Americans English figures as central to national identity since independence from Britain until our days (Carnevale, 2009: 5) and became the main instrument in the Americanization of different foreign wave migrations (10), Italians came to America already with an appreciation of language as a "racial difference mark" (4), deriving from the long-standing, colonisation-like, North and South divide in Italy. In fact, matters complicated still later with Americanization, which not simply entailed a language shift or maintenance linked to success or failure of assimilation respectively, as if this was a straight-line process, but rather a "linguistic puzzle" of dialect, standard Italian, English and Italianized English (3-16).

Class, age and ability constitute yet other significant sites of inequality for Italians particularly. Immigrants brought to America rigid notions of class hierarchy and deference which were the product of regional differences in Italy and which continued to develop through language use (dialect and standard Italian) and (intra)ethnic racialization of Southerners (Carnevale, 2009; Mangione and Morreale, 1992). As for age and ability, they are most clearly perceived (in intersection with gender) if seen from the transnational perspective above mentioned. As Saskia Sassen has argued, migration needs to be understood not only as a personal choice but as "the intersection of a number of economic and geopolitical processes that link the countries involved" (1999: 1). Her theories are especially useful to signal the contradiction between immigration policies and racist attitudes of receiving countries and their actual demand, and subsequent call, for workers, as was the case of Italians for American burgeoning industrial and urban development. As for Italy's involvement, it extends beyond the more accepted view that Unification triggered immigration in a South previously impoverished but after 1861overwhelmed by disproportionate tax burdens and further unequal Northern abuse such as "the imposition of the 1848 Piedmont Constitution", military conscriptions or fierce repressions with occupying armies (Mangione & Morreale, 1992). It was also caused by several inner political interests:

> "the left-wing press explicitly linked emigration to social revolution, characterizing it as a viable substitute for the revolution that the Risorgimento had failed to achieve. It predicated that when the rich woke up to find their fields abandoned by the farm workers, they would finally be compelled to come to terms with the peasants, to grant them a fair share of their profits-unless they were willing to till the fields themselves. […] The Italian political leadership found it expedient to adopt a *laissez-faire* stance toward the issue-which, after all, would neatly eliminate the most restless and potentially dangerous elements of the population" (72).

In fact, Italian migration to the United Sates could also perhaps well figure as an early case of "current forms of transnational economic activity" (Sassen, 1999: 151), through the *padrone system*, for instance, in charge of recruitment for the "business of supplying unskilled labourers for American landowners or managers of mines, railroads, or factories" (Mangione and Morreale, 1992: 71).

Mobility, gender regimes and their effect on ethnic formation and identification

Apart from discrediting racial prejudice and legislation by refusing the so-felt invaded nations as "passive bystanders" (1998: 136), Saskia's focus on transnationalization and cross-border mobility also helps us to understand the production and reproduction of inequalities involved in the process. She argues that "the interactions and the interrelations between sending and receiving countries" are responsible for or explain both the routes and profile of migrations (2). The fact that male young Italians were the ones to migrate in major numbers is better understood in light of labour provisions for the United States, which enhanced "legislation that excluded immigrants for reasons of advanced age and physical infirmity" (Magione and Morreale, 1992: 98). The gendered pattern was not limited, however, to the need for workers that required 'able-bodied men'. Women's subordination continued to reproduce in later processes of migration and transnational relations. Emotional lures, for instance, replaced the *padrone system* in encouraging further emigration (friends and relatives left behind by early immigrants). This is usually referred to as the phenomenon of 'chain migrations' whereby families are brought over once settlement in the host country is envisioned. Less is said however of the pull exerted once again across nations, beyond individual choices: "only through the nurturing provided by relocated women were immigrant families imagined to integrate and put down roots in new lands and so develop new homes and communities with emotional attachments to receiving nations" (Baldassar and Gabaccia, 2011: 4). This need for 'nurturing-bodied women' thus explains the two major types that describe the experiences of Italian women and migration, *white widows* and *war brides*, to assist for male Italian immigrants and also as "the manual labourers in the reproduction process, those who would participate in the melting pot, and eventually make more Americans" (Anderlini: 1998, 369).

The transnational lens also serves as a useful methodology to account for the Italian American experience or development after migration as this is generally attributed the paradigmatic feature of constituting the so-called "urban villagers" (Gans, 1962), which places this community's life organisation around multi-local models. Italian communities, institutions such as the mutual aid societies, and cultural heritage are worldview assumed to have been transplanted, with the spaces of Little Italies as the clearest examples of the high "degree to which the *contadini* succeeded in

reconstructing their native towns in the heart of industrial" societies (Vecoli, 1964: 408 [italics original]). Gan's category of urban villagers becomes more adequate as it also identifies the specific role played by the host country as Italians not simple transplant or replicate but "adapt their non urban institutions and culture to their urban milieu" (1962: 4). A focus on transnational social spaces actually provides a better understanding of the intersection of inequalities and power relations that ensue.

On the one hand, the cultural ties as well as the job opportunities that mainly informed the initial settlement pattern in urban areas (Gans, 1962) created the conditions for interracial clashes through the formation of slums, which rather than being associated to the American economic system and urban planning became mainly recognised as the product of a supposedly social tradition, delinquency, transplanted (Hall, 2002). Italians concentrated in areas where jobs were available and crowding was the result of housing design such as "the notorious dumbbell tenement [that] allowed 24 families to be crowded on to a lot 25 feet wide and 100 feet deep, with 10 out of 14 rooms on each floor having access only to an almost lightless (and airless) lightwell" (38).

Sociologists' concerns for what was perceived as the "enduring slum" (427), however, rather echoed eugenic American anxieties of the time about social inadequacy and hereditary determinism (Vecoli, 2013: 190); while disorganization, especially of the second generation, took into account the above mentioned adaptative process , product of a transition or accommodation from rural to urban environments (Hall, 2002: 434), the simultaneous accent on immigrant incapabilities and equation of foreign slum to "Gangland" or "Little Hell" (435) seems to stress also the transplantation of cultural values of the socially or biologically unfit. The outcry that immigrant children were infecting the cities with crime or creating social disorder is seen as the evil par excellence of the ethnic enclave and as the inadequacy of ethnic families, more specifically mothers. Thus, other factors such as the pressures to Americanize or sites such as schools are left outside as creating or contributing to the problem:

> "Some social critics were aware of the consequences of sudden assimilation. Mary McDowell, a social worker wrote: 'The contempt for the experiences and languages of their parents which foreign children sometimes exhibit…is doubtless due in part to the overestimation which the school places upon speaking English[…]' She attributed the lawlessness of some of the immigrant children to their disrespect for their parents and therefore for all authority. Frank Costello and Charlie 'Lucky' Luciano were not the only children from poor-working class families terrified of ending up, as Luciano said, like their 'crumb bum' fathers" (Mangione and Morreale, 1992: 222-3).

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Additionally, curiously enough, criminality is not only a simple (unidirectional) consequence of abuse or anger (less a cultural trait or even the more common poverty-related trope) but a conscious means to actually catch up with the host society, with "the spirit of the new country" (Mangione and Morreale 1992, 231). Self-esteem recovery and full acceptance pass through the distinctive values of wealth and power that can be acquired through crime (223):

> "Italian American cinema classics share several common features: the representation of Italian American anger of the 1960s after years of isolation and marginalization. […] "angered youngsters" in search of redemption and social promotion […]in the *tenacious, proud and stubborn search* of a success that makes them finally enter the American *mainstream* and be accepted without any connotations of inferiority. Even though this inevitably requires a physical and mental detachment from the birthplace- a flight from the ghetto, from the ethnic neighbourhood of their childhood, from their roots, almost another migration" (Di Biagi, 2010: 46 [personal translation; first emphasis mine]).

On the other hand, women's ambiguous position comes also from transnational pulls which exert pressure on their role or effect on migration, assimilation and urbanization. As "embodiments of the collectivity" and "cultural reproducers" (Yuval-Davis, 1997: 23), women are in charge of transplanting the home community and face additional pressures of not conforming to the standards of the host country. Ethnic women thus become a major focus of different national projects, policies or concerns: from being brought over to physically and emotionally nurture the lonely male immigrant to simultaneously being the means of assimilation as well as the scapegoat for its failure or other civic problems. Michaela di Leonardo's study of *kinship work* reveals that gender optics is essential to Italian immigration history as women's "informal neighbourhood and kin networks", disregarded in traditional research or history accounts, are indeed a solid basis in the establishment and maintenance of ethnic communities (Stahl et al., 1992). The need to look at kinship work is not only important then because it is more typically related to ethnic identities who "may feel bound to emphasize particular festivity occasions" or because "it is largely women's work" (di Leonardo, 447: 443); it also may broaden the understanding of the way in which Italian communities were allegedly transplanted into urban America.

At the same time, pressures to Americanize and national ideals are also deeply gendered. Socialization-of-the-immigrant programs such as Hull House in Chicago or hundreds more in cities around the country were not simply "dedicated to saving the immigrant from his (and, especially her) own errors and excesses, socializing him into

American folkways and adjusting him to city life" (Hall, 2002 42); these mainly targeted women or young girls also because of their cultural-bearer role in shaping the nation. Thus, reformers (mostly women) provided training in

> "what was considered modern and proper [Western, Victorian] forms of domesticity […] because creating the correct home was seen as integral to creating good, moral citizens, teaching immigrant women how to be "good" housekeepers empowered them as important shapers of US democracy […] Middle-class notions of domesticity were often considered essential to the 'Americanizing' project" (Domosh and Seager, 2001: 20-1).

Ethnic and gender reductionism in cultural representations

The analysis of media and literary representations focuses on that main ethno-racial and gender intersection to explain how Italian American experience has been imaginatively (re)created and received. Thus, preliminary examinations show that imaginary about Italian Americans has been mostly shaped both in the masculine and the negative, as either womanizers and temperamental/irrationally passionate, when not directly antisocial/criminal, or melodramatic victims, deriving from major artistic archetypes (sometimes by male Italian American themselves[3]) such as the *latin lover*, the *gansgster*, the *cafone* (silly) or the *suonatore* (organ player) (di Biagi, 2010; Gardaphé, 2006). Larger visions, therefore, need to be brought forward and discussed to counteract such cultural reductionism and gender constructs that fail to account for transnational Italian experience as a whole, and very notably, women's presence and (creative) contributions.

Further common contemporary ethnic conceptions about family and community life such as *amoral familism* or women's domesticity and submission would also add to such a reductionism. These are also in need of being readdressed for being ahistorical (di Leonardo, 1984), deriving from early and racist interpretations influential in academic and political circles for decades; during Nixon's Urban Affairs, notably, Banfield's fieldwork *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (1948) cements the

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[3] Not surprisingly as this is a common feature in minority groups exposed to a variety of cultural values and expectations on the part of the dominant society, which they may come to internalise (Gardaphé, 2006; Laurino, 2011). Nonetheless, it is also important to notice the role played ultimately by mainstream culture in receiving these archetypes and promoting them, as is proved by the strikingly differentiate reception of Mario Puzo's works *The Godfather* (1969) and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1965), which speaks volumes of the gender and cultural imaginary of this community: one is a fictive account of the milestone gangster story that fits the old stereotype of the Italian immigrant (there are plenty of mafia narratives and films prior to Puzo and Coppola), the other is an autobiographical narrative that recreates the author's mother and her migratory and family-raising struggle.

negative stereotype of the Italian American family (Laurino, 2001), with their distrust of outsiders and such family-centered ethics rather than preoccupied with self-advancement. The influential notion of *amoral familism* becomes a major contested site which obscures a variety of inequalities and problems: from the structural, larger political and economic responsibilities and exploitation of immigrants (di Leonardo, 1984: Laurino 2001) to domestic, intergenerational and gender struggles rather than the "house as haven" thesis commonly associated to ethnic and/or marginalised groups (McDowell, 1999; Sibley, 1995), as well as minorities' (public) agency, civic organization and right to self-representation.

A historical, political and transnational study may counteract that cemented vision that results from looking at ethnicity (and gender relations) as givens, as static or "normative behavior" (di Leonardo, 1984), which victimizes and responsabilizes them at the same time. One major form of agency, for instance, consisted in the work by school reformers such as Leonard Covello, who tried to easy children's process of assimilation while still trying to retain, recover or enhance ethnic traits/community (Carnevale, 2009, 137; Meyer Forum, 2014: n. p.) and who simultaneously targeted a change in the American school system as such (Fass 1989). Intergenerational conflicts thus intermingle with intercultural clashes of a very specific time period and politics; as mentioned before, much of the lawlessness and disrespect toward (parental) authority was infused through feelings of shame, stereotyping and language use enforcement on the part of the dominant society, especially during Americanization and through school policy (Carnevale, 2009; Mangione and Morreale, 1992). That common rage towards parental culture is largely a product of the need to dissociate from images projected onto their parents as well as of feelings of foreignness in their land of birth. The experience of chief Italian American community leader and school professional Leonard Covello himself perfectly gathers such extremely interrelated influences: "We were becoming American by learning to be ashamed of our parents" (qtd. in Mangione and Morreale 1992, 222).

Another contesting example is UNICO, a self-proclaimed "service above self" organization created in 1922 to prove Italian American loyalty to US and advancing Italian Americans through higher education, anti-defamation campaigns and attempts to bring the host country a clearer understanding of Italian American contributions. While they "placed service to the community before and above fraternity", their "civic minded[ness]" is not limited however to an ethnic or national group; UNICO raised

funds for Italy's recent earthquakes and also for American September 11th and national health-concerned research and institutions (website).

Finally, it is also important to account for self-representation in light of the intersection as well as tension between feminism and multiculturalism as even if minorities are themselves gendered, resistance and reform from within needs to be acknowledged (Ponzonesi, 2007). As Nira Yuval-Davis has argued, concern for women's rights may not be more indeed that a "device for ranking men according to the extent of deviation from the Anglo model" (1997: 58). Thus, Italian American scholars and writers have approached ethnicity and gender relations not as a given but as constructs which vary according to very precise historical, political and social events: the transition from a conception of inadequate motherhood on the part of Italian American women during the progressive era to the use and stereotyping of domesticity as a reaction to second-wave feminist achievements in the United States (di Leonardo, 1984); or the American fascination for the Italian male mob due to a shift in power relations, specifically as a way to deal with the decline of American patriarchy (Gardaphé, 2006). Further depictions and interpretations have been suggested by contemporary revaluations of family and materno-filial relationships, as well as explorations of traditionally-stigmatised gender and ethnic values informing feminist concerns (DeSalvo, 1996; Laurino, 2009).

Italian American female experiences of migration, assimilation & cultural negotiations

In short, when looking at works that (re)create the Italian American experience, I try to outline the cultural, religious, intergenerational and gender conflicts and see the extent to which these may intersect and constitute multiple sites of discrimination for some subjects. At the same time, I look at the opposite process and determine the manifestation of factors potentially liberating of the intercultural process and migratory experience. That is to say, on the one hand migration entailed an encounter with a radically different life organization and society; mostly an agricultural people ruled by faith in *destinu* rather than free will or individual's power, to mention a few, "in comparison with other immigrant groups, there was hardly an aspect of the Southern Italian tradition that did not contrast with existing American patterns (Mangione and

Morreale, 1992: 224). And later development in urban villages continued to set this community uniquely apart from all-known standards:

> "Up until the 1960s Italian American neighbourhoods were full alive and characterized: defined as 'street corner societies', they represented a peculiar ethnic and sociological model for Anglo-Saxon culture. People lived in the streets, making use of outside space, the neighbourhood, as an extension of the overcrowded and narrow tenements" (di Biagi, 2010: 50[personal translation]).

On the other hand yet, we may find major advancements from a gender perspective, for instance. Maddalena Tirabassi (1990) has suggested a greater freedom in movement, decision and independence after migration that was impossible in Italy at the time. As for the later assimilationist experience, otherwise presented as the sad experience of rejecting the culture of origin and creating feelings of shame, she has read the encounter of the immigrant women with social workers as one whereby the former emerge as social subjects beyond the single domains of the family and community.

My literary analysis will consist in researching key works that present significant or new contributions of the Italian American experience in terms of ethnic and gender representations. Thus, novels such as Melania Mazzucco's *Vita* (2003) and Pamela Schoenewaldt's *When we were strangers* (2011) may be useful to offer a wider account of the history of migration, which has been mostly recorded and acknowledged as masculine due to the fact that Italian women migrated in a lesser number, an estimated 20% during the peak years of mass transoceanic exodus (Sassen, 1999: 70), mainly dependent on chain migrations and men for doing so. Nonetheless, although an undeniable gender pattern, that was not always the case, and so the works by Mazzucco and Schoenewaldt are fundamental in trying to recover that silenced or overlooked history, in keeping with recent scholarship that has signalled the "difficulty in imagining women as long-distance movers. [in] Traditional models of stages of labor migration" and how "immigration policies often reflected, reinforced, and shaped this gendered ideas about migration processes" (Baldassar and Gabaccia, 2011: 4). Additionally, they signal the gender difference as paramount in Italian American understanding, as far as the migrant stage is concerned at least, for shaping from the basic ability to improve one's life, for a start, to later success, as respectively illustrated in the female characters' subordination to and abuse by patriarchal structures both in the family and wider American society.

Vita, for instance, depicts the plight of the immigrant worker from a female perspective often absent in the core of Italian American representation(s)[4]. 7-year-old- Vita is called over by her father Agnello, who has been in the United States before the 1900s, in order to provide him with household care and (unpaid) work in the boarding-house he runs, which is "always full, never an empty bed because his woman -his American woman, Lena, that is- is a hard worker, and slaves away for eighteen hours a day without complaining" (2003: 24). She arrives at Ellis Island with a sign in her mouth so that he can recognise her, "GOOD FOR FATHER" (17), which allows for the double interpretation of being long awaited, positively expected, and of her value as a mere useful instrument, as is rather shown by the exploitation and little love or affection that ensue in their relationship. In contrast to Agnello's old wife, Dionisia, who is additionally rejected entrance in the country because she suffers from trachoma, an eye ailment caused by polluted water conditions in South Italy (Mangione and Morreale, 1992: 75), Vita constitutes a well-suited young, nurturing body to provide for (unpaid) reproductive labour. Nonetheless, this role is not simply a transplantation or continuation of Italian patriarchal values; if so, it is exacerbated by the America setting, which will explain why "in the years to come, she would not cross the border of Houston Street again" (33). She will be confined to the domestic realm, in keeping with capitalist ideology of separated spheres that became even "more entrenched with industrialization in Western Europe and North America" (Domosh and Seager, 2001: 5). Other works dealing with second- and third-generation Italian Americans such as Helen Barolini's *Umbertina* (1979), Tina de Rosi's *Paper Fish* (1980) or Josephine Gattuso Hendin's *The Right Thing to Do* (1999) may also prove useful for alternative gender representations of female protagonism, familial relationships and cultural negotiations. These constitute examples of the genre *bildungsroman*, a literary constant which scholars such as Rocio G. Davis (2000) or Silvia Caporale (2009) attribute to ethnic literature as a whole and the difficulty to reconcile or accept a culturally divided identity, while others such as Patrizia Ardizzone (2003) relate it to writing by women in particular, with the recurrent figure of the grandmother as *leitmotif* to recover a cultural tradition but also of gender, due to a lack of referents. In this respect, examination of the position or recognition of Italian American women creators becomes equally necessary,

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[4] The plight of the (male) immigrant worker is another of the major representations of Italian American experience, with the case of Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete* (1939), thus called because of the protagonist's death during work as bricklayer, as an unanimous reference work in Italian American writing.

possibly defining here another point of intersectionality in "the ghetto" (Giunta, 1986; Sibley 1995).

Concluding remarks and futures lines of investigation

Another major strand of female Italian American experience to be researched is the one corresponding to the critical period of cross-border nationalism as exercised by Mussolini's government and later WWII events. Mussolini's concern for his colonies or for the image of Italy abroad especially targeted the United States, the Italian American community as well as the new emigrants as main elements to disseminate Italian influence (Finkelstein, 1988). Italian American early adherence to fascism was not, however, a matter of communion with its politics or ideology as it was a much needed ethnic pride after long discrimination (Filkenstein 1988; Mangione and Morreale, 1992). In other words,

> "For diaspora communities […] participation in the national struggles in the homeland […] can be done primarily as an ethnic rather than a nationalist discourse, as an act of affirmation of their collectivity membership" (Yuval-Davis 1997, 18).

Paradoxically enough, historical circumstances of what Fascism came to mean and these transnational pulls that pressured on Italian Americans had the opposite outcome: neither Italians, neither ethnics; they would become Americanized. In fact, WWII has been acknowledged as one of the most effective assimilationist measures. Late rejection of fascism and implication in Italy's liberation ensued once they realised Mussolini's ends, speeded by American profound distrust and even prosecution of perceived disloyal citizens spying for the foreign enemy[5]. Additionally, entry in the army became especially welcomed to second-generation youth as a way to clean the stain of past discrimination or finally gain acceptance by proving their allegiance to their birthplace. Male narratives are however the main trope, particularly in films, where "the rich presence of Italian-American soldiers confirms […] that the tribute of loyalty has been widely executed" (di Biagi, 2010: 33 [personal translation]).

Finally, gender optics will also be applied to the analysis of urban spaces, particularly to a more focused item such as the street, taken as a microcosm that may offer a more precise account of the Italian American experience; generally regarded in light of their

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[5] See "Una storia segreta" (http://www.segreta.org/), a travelling exhibition since 1994 to bring awareness about wartime violations on Italian Americans due to suspicion of fascist allegiance.

constitution and life in the paradigmatic Little Italies, which may assume a coherent and cohesive ethnic identity, this community's life organisation heavily depended (especially at the time of migration) on the immediate experience of *a particular street,* as reflection of the regional identities in play. In addition, focus on this micro-space becomes also relevant in relation to the gangster imaginary of the *mean streets* that has prevailed in popular representation and conceptions of Italian Americans. It becomes necessary, therefore, to examine and research alternative representations about the historical presence of women alongside men as street-vendors, in charge of business, or running or sustaining tenements and street life. Likewise, occupation, negotiation of space and learning of street codes (*wiseguys*, *street wise*) also seem profoundly gender-differentiated in Italian American (youth) representations.

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