

TWENTY YEARS OF ART OF ETHNICITY: A RETROSPECTIVE HOMAGE TO THOMAS J. FERRARO'S *FEELING ITALIAN*

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In May 2005, NYU Press published Thomas J. Ferraro's *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* as part of its "Nation of Nations: Immigrant History as American History" series co-edited by Matthew Frye Jacobson and Werner Sollors.¹ By exploring how Italian American cultural production stroke the right chords at the right time across twentieth-century America, Ferraro's second monograph built on the tradition championed by Sollors of recasting the boundaries between American Studies and Ethnic Studies, reshaping both fields in the process—as Sollors wrote shortly before *Feeling Italian's* publication, "joyfully formulating its heretical provocations, this book turns the tables on traditional acculturation studies by pursuing the question of what it is that has attracted the world's largest 'host' population so thoroughly to the culture of a relatively small European immigrant group."²

Across its ten case studies, Ferraro focuses both on the usual suspects of Italian Americana (*The Godfather* and Sinatra, of course) and the lore of cultural icons that, by the late twentieth century, had largely receded from mainstream visibility. In doing so, he makes visible the porosity of America's structure of feeling, while convincingly making the case for employing ethnicity as a hermeneutic to read the nation's cultural imaginary. Ferraro's ten vignettes are all but self-contained—answers posed in one chapter seep into another, as do his evocations of honor, aesthetics, spirituality, food, gender, sexuality, and race. Likewise, the subjects of his inquiry are never presented in

¹ NYU Press catalogues list the series as "Nation of Newcomers" in 2005; since 2014, it appears as "Nation of Nations."

² Werner Sollors, "Rationale for *Feeling Italian*," unpublished, 2005, shared with the author on October 24, 2024.

a vacuum but rather serve as launching points for reverse engineering America's systems of signification and the intertextuality of Italian American cultural production. By framing tradition and modernity dialectically rather than dichotomously, Ferraro's comparative readings yield unexpected parallels, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson with Lucanian-American painter Joseph Stella—a pairing as improbable and generative as Martino Marazzi's recent juxtaposition of Giuseppe Gioacchino Belli's sonnets with Bob Dylan's lyrics (2022, 11–30). Ultimately, Ferraro's ways of engagement with the subjects of his study—which, as often happens with popular culture, aren't just attuned to his sensibilities, but also constitutive of his identity—strike an exemplary balance between affective investment and scholarly inquiry. As Mitchell Breitwieser writes in this issue, “Tom's talk on Joseph Stella helped me to see that one might bring one's engagement into one's writing without sacrificing objective argumentation” (204).

In light of the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *Feeling Italian*, I invited five scholars from various spheres of literary studies to consider the legacy of and their relationship with the book. Their contributions are complemented by Ferraro's own retrospective, presented here as a masterclass in identifying “texts” worthy of scholarly investigation within our lived experiences. Publishing this critical homage in *JAm It!*, a journal oriented toward approaching American Studies through an Italian sensibility, intends to highlight how Ferraro's work challenges facile understandings of how a national culture constitutes and exerts itself in domestic and global hegemonic struggles. It also compels us to reconsider not only how Italian (American) culture has contributed to America's self-understanding—suggesting a reciprocal if uneven exchange—but also how Italians may “feel” Italian as a mediated experience, shaped through a dialectic between lived realities and the consumption of American cultural artifacts imbued with Italian (American) sentiments. This last point remains relevant in light of recent studies on the forces at play in transatlantic cultural transfers, and the multi-directional exchanges at play in the making of (trans)national cultures at different iterations of modernity (Marazzi 2022; Averna et al. 2023; Bonsaver 2023; Carocci et al. 2023; Conte and Dantini 2024; Cinotto and Iuli 2024; Iuli and Cinotto 2024; Iuli and Morello 2024; Iuli et al. 2025). Well before those interventions, *Feeling Italian*

anticipated the imperative not only to examine the paradigmatic shifts that facilitate transatlantic exchanges but also to probe the iterative sedimentation of cultural undercurrents, including those generated by the Italian diaspora in the United States.

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