FEELING ITALIAN AT 22: WHAT NEW HAVEN HAD TO TEACH ACADEME IN THE 1980S

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Feeling Italian has a long complex history, in terms fungible across racial and ethnic minorities, as a delayed response to the accumulative effect of small doses of what I once called the "double curse" of the minority intellectual—who is disdained by the mainstream for being too ethnic, at least for the big leagues, and suspected back at home of fawning assimilation, at risk for excommunication from the tribe (should it pay attention). I wanted to demonstrate that its aesthetic genealogy and iconic sensibility had long impacted Americans at large, even their self-knowledge; and that an analytical history of its arts, especially its popular arts, including "invented" ethnicity, could serve Italian/American Studies, whether by sponsoring, enabling, or challenging the formulations of its emergent intelligentsia. In the broadest sense, then, *Feeling Italian* was an intuitive expression of its writer's double consciousness—"stuck in the middle, again"—yielding, it was hoped, a studied reflection upon the prodigious accomplishments of Italian-American artists, bedeviled yet exhilarated in their doubleness.

But, with 20/20 hindsight, I am beginning to sense that Du Bois's formula of double-consciousness, useful though it be, is too generic, that is, neither Italian-flavored nor intellectually soulful enough, for the materials I explored or even perhaps the way I explored them.

Feeling Italian was written for the academy in the early 2000s, therefore caught up somewhat in its debates, both enabling and vexing. Italian-American Studies proper had taken the lead, forcefully, in conceptualizing and charting how those swarthy "guineas, dagos, and wops"—contract labor from the Mezzogiorno who were once paid less even than the offspring of enslaved peoples to build and clothe and feed America

and who were once lynched, too—had "become white." Racial identity traversal was incontrovertibly true but only part of the story, I felt. I pondered the converse, obverse, inverse: Hadn't we also seen, and in huge measure, in the arts if not elsewhere, resistant forms of upward mobility, even transformative modes of "assimilation"—that is, cultural syncretism par excellence?

Already in the early 1990s, on the edges of the literary academy, scholar-writers of marked Catholic descent had "the limits of critique" in their sights; each in his or her own way, not only called out both the obviousness and obliviousness of post-structuralism—but also, as importantly, weighting show over tell, demonstrated beyond a shadow of a doubt how else art-and-culture criticism could be done. In the meantime, the new social historians were unpacking "the lived religion" of the United States from the pews, at the tables, and on the city streets—at the movie theaters and in the sports arenas, too—utterly transforming US historiography (the myriad immigrant Catholics were offered and received as exemplifications) whether the *pezzonovante* of the American Studies Association (forget the MLA!) cared to take notice, or not. By the early 2000s, younger scholars had started to probe America's Italy at its African-American edges, that thick history of Italian-black interaction and co-production, love-and-theft in both directions. I was intrigued and increasingly drawn in, learning and affirming and wondering, what then the big picture? What are the ramifications, "theorized" and "instantiated," of a century-plus of the Italian/ate imagination in America?

A long-time mentor, Werner Sollors (a forerunner in so many ways, including the literary entwinement of black-and-Italian), asked me if I might have a book in me for his new series on "a nation of newcomers." Fate had just intervened, and I don't mean only Professor Sollors, whose subsequent editing (as that of Eric Zinner) were generative nonetheless. For, despite my professed wariness of monocultural studies, I had been experimenting with a lecture course on US Italian-descent and/or Italian-themed materials, to which I brought the unrepentant Romanticism of my New New-Critical training. I contextualized the archive, synthesized the most convergent of its lessons, but above all, induced and, where necessary, performed the close reading and

listening and viewing of ethnically rooted, ethnically performed, ethnically impactful sublimity. America's Italian sons of Emerson and Melville; its Italian daughters of Hawthorne and Dickinson. Their conjuring of the universal by means of the parochial (think Faulkner, then think Puzo-and-Coppola) was as much the telos for my course as it was its donnée, to be enacted for all and sundry—or at least for the students so gathered and immersed!

What really gave *Feeling Italian* flight, and now I hope legs, was the pleasure I took from leaning into what I thought of as "the great Italian-American stuff," outing and exploring and re-enacting the knowledge and even wisdom it induced, which I found Italian-American in substance *and* in spirit, transformative even transfigurative of mainstream culture, and as often convergent in collective force as it was idiosyncratic in its disparate pieces. The overarching fact of origin-turned-telos is this: my involvement with most of these materials and my interest in sussing out their import were to a large degree formed *two decades earlier*, in what we might reasonably expect had been "another world and time." I hope you find my experience of that place in that moment instructive if not also, for you, semi-reminiscent—at the least, still worth hearing from.

Under very local, yet profoundly resonant, even wholly overdetermined conditions, a simple recognition (Italian American Studies 101!) was brought home to me: that a culture was thriving that the academy at large had scarcely recognized—even when, perhaps especially when, as in my very lucky case, that very culture was operating right under its nose. Or at least a particularly representative manifestation of that culture was operating under a particularly conspicuous university's nose—that university which found itself (through scarcely any fault of its own, it had long been telling itself, given its founding two centuries in advance of "the great migration") located in the densest Italian-descent city in North America. By culture, I mean ways of knowing and making and being, arts of ethnicity that might be studied (worked up, worked upon, worked out) within set academic protocols of evidence and import, but might also, I began to feel, in the early 1980s, illustrate and thus tutor *how* else we might

do "our work" writ large, beyond even the materials themselves, re-inflecting if not reimagining those protocols.

Call me a Yalie then, if you like, but recognize what that meant in the 1980s (a term restricted to undergraduates, with alienation of various sorts attending all graduate students) and ponder, with me, that in learning all I could at Yale I also aspired, increasingly it turned out, to be "graduated," as Nick Carraway once put it (though his faux humility and insider trading be damned), "from New Haven."[1]

Go back with me in time, to the very end of the disco era, when Blondie, Rickie Lee Jones, and Prince are turning the tide, and Jersey bands, including Southside Johnny and the Asbury Jukes or Clarence Clemons's Red Bank Rockers, not to mention unabashedly Springsteen clones like "Eddie and the Cruisers" (er, Beaver Brown, from Providence), were rock'n'soul-ing to overflow crowds at Toad's Place, which was a few doors down from The Hall of Graduate Studies, where a long dungeon-like corridor lit by feeble 40-watt bulbs led to the sunnier precincts of the offices of the American Studies Program at Yale University.

A 22-year-old fresh out of undergraduate college has arrived there to study for a Ph.D. He comes from a cluster of five children. His parents, of Neapolitan-Calabrian and Neapolitan-Sicilian descent, believe in education, especially professional education, but he has been raised otherwise in a home without serious books or classical music or

[1] The pages that follow were composed originally as a public address—written to an occasion, but the occasion itself spoke volumes. It constituted the first time I had been invited back to give a lecture at Yale University since taking my Ph.D. in 1988. The invitation came not from the English Department (where, disciplinarily speaking, I have landed) or from the adjacent American Studies (where I was trained) but from Italian Studies (where my linguistic as opposed to gestural skills are deservedly suspect), and what occasioned it was the first Rossini Symposium, in March of 2024, funded anonymously by, I suspect, distinguished local entrepreneurs. The annual conference established, or at least formalized, an intellectual conversation with historical bent between cutting-edge Italian/American Studies at Yale (led by the resplendent Jane Tylus, her colleagues and their students, who gathered brilliant Italian-Americanists from nearby schools—Southern Connecticut State University just down the road, New York University and Columbia and Fordham on the trainline, SUNY/Stony Brook by ferry)—and long-time denizens of what in local parlance is still called "greater New Haven" (including a former mayor and the pizza clans!), all of whom found themselves reflecting on the invidious impact of postwar urban renewal while also learning about the Italian diaspora in, among other places, far-off Brazil (where Futurist Marinetti toured in 1926) and truly far-off Wisconsin (mozzarella, asiago, and provolone, to this very day).

original art, where the only arts being practiced were his father's fondness for debate and his mother's great cooking and her adeptness at dressing up. His extended family—all of it, every single one—lives in Bay Ridge and on Coney Island, in Bayonne and Hackensack, in Great Neck and Long Beach, but he has slipped out the back door of his parents' brave distancing to New Hampshire and thrived, curiously, at an Anglican prep school and a Congregationalist liberal arts college. He has now landed not in the grand Yale English department but in American Studies, the right call if ever there were one. He is going to be at Yale, therefore, between '79 and '86, between the opening of Fitzwillies, which melted cheese on everything and baked in crocks, and the opening of L'Aventura, a so-called "Northern Italian" ristorante, where he would eat arugula with balsamic vinegar for the first time—despite being surrounded his whole life, on all sides, by wonderful American Italian cooks, for whom other bitter vegetables—escarole, dandelions, and broccoli di rape—were delectable staples.

That kid, of course, was me. Like Jack Kerouac once said, "this [story] "necessarily'll have to be about myself," which has, hitherto, never been my writing style. But the stakes I hope to explore are well more than personal and involve a bit of exaggeration, in what is my wont. That September, I arrived at Yale and was slammed, in certain ways academically and intellectually, but first and foremost socially and psychologically, and at almost every turn. In part, it was simply being at a particular kind of first-rate research university, one that gathered terrific people, insisted on the highest bars of intellect and integrity, then set them loose to learn under benign neglect, no coddling; indeed, it barely even explained, assuming prior knowledge or osmosis. But that—well—I was in fact prepared for, better than I first realized. But there were several ways in which my alienation accentuated my Italianness and kickstarted affirmation, analysis, and dissemination. In the end, I even learned what it meant that the professors were willing, at Yale at least, to hear what I had to say.

Twenty years later, I would write a book, *Feeling Italian,* that argued and acted against the grain of what academics were doing then and, to a lesser extent, what they are doing now. The book brandished archetypes rather than decrying stereotypes; it luxuriated in iconography and pop culture even as it explored their complexities and

wisdom; and it told the tale of each icon, or at least *tried* to tell it, with the Italian-American tonality and linguistic gestures of the materials themselves, most often with a combination of love and irony, braggadocio and shrugged shoulders, Catholic particularity and universal outreach. *Feeling Italian* got written in part because my students at Duke University, once upon a time mostly from either the South or the mid-Atlantic, were fascinated with the materials I had gathered. But the peculiar shape it took, its edginess legible even today (when discourses of white ethnicity are thought to be purely racial resentment and when we are near the exhaustion point of competitive victimization), *that* was because every single day for six years I made my way across the borders from New Haven to Yale and back—when and where the expressive and ritualistic cultures of Italian America greeted me at almost every turn, in happy lasting provocation.

For it was in New Haven that I learned to ask, first of Yale, and then of the academy in general: to what extent have the offspring of the Italians, third and increasingly fourth generation retained any cultural or social distinctiveness? Why are Americans at large so interested, even invested in Italian-American distinctiveness, more so at times than the hyphenated offspring themselves? What, in other words, does Italian America still have to teach us? About how, for the professors, to think and write, investigate and communicate? About how, for all us, to make art and love and life?

I am getting ahead of myself, way ahead of myself.

Yale was, for me, at first, a place called Machine City, because that was where the grad students gathered. Machine City was an underground bunker between the Cross Campus Library and Sterling Memorial Research Library. It had old-fashioned instant coffee, aka Folgers or Nescafé, made in machines that had not been replaced in decades. It was the only place anywhere in and around the library one could smoke, and many of the grad students were compulsive smokers, since it placated stress and stimulated thought at the same time. The vending machines supplied snacks like sugared baby donuts, made of coconut oil and gobs of corn syrup.

Machine City epitomized the idea that, at Yale, you were supposed to be studying all the time; that the academic life was one of ferocious discipline and maximum self-denial, poised literally between the Yale-approved Commons of the Cross-Campus Library, where was housed the best that had been known and said, and Sterling Memorial Research Library, where was housed almost all that had been thought and written. Machine City was, also, equidistant, non-coincidentally, from two eateries that had the *chutzpah* to call themselves—in New Haven!—pizzerias, one which abutted the Hall of Graduate Studies and the other a way-station in the direction of the graduate housing ghetto. The food was below-mediocre to near-terrible, the karma scarcely better. Yet, for all my despair, indeed because of it, I intuited from the first that the most important kind of academic collaboration in the humanities, at least to me, was conversation in a booth or across a table—what interesting classmates I had and what godawful conditions we were granted to be together! What I did not know in those early years was that solving this particular puzzle—whether to eat at my apartment or elsewhere, how to learn to cook first for myself and then for others, how, after all that, to get my comrades to join me and, indeed, help pay for it—would capture a major part of my *intellectual* imagination and give it a problematic, an archive, and an agenda that would prompt me to stand up to standard-issue critical thinking.

I am not here to whine any more than to indulge in delusive nostalgia or wax triumphant—no more than necessary, anyway. And for that, "*Mi dispiace, mea culpa*," whichever works for you. But let's get it recorded. At Yale, I did not encounter a single faculty member or graduate student who was of even partial Italian descent—even if Robert Anthony Orsi, five years my senior, was out there somewhere, researching *The Madonna of 115th Street*. As importantly, though not coincidentally, hardly anyone, certainly not any in authority, seemed to have anything like my temperament, which, to reference '80s baseball, was a Tony La Russa contemplative-thinker embodied, quite literally, in a Tommy Lasorda gregarious sensualist, a good ol' Marian-Catholic Italian boy with code-shifting multicultural and observational chops. But I was also what my mother would call a "contrarian," with nary an Oxbridge technique in my repertoire.

Allen Guttmann, a scholar of American Jewish literature and a sports sociologist out of Germany who lost family in the Holocaust, pulled me into his office my sophomore year at Amherst College. With immense kindness and some degree of trepidation, he warned me that in the upper ends of the US academy, especially the Ivies (almost all my faculty at Amherst wore Ph.D. robes that were Yale blue or Harvard crimson), and especially in the humanist circles of those institutions, the deep abiding prejudice was against the Catholic ethnics, especially the older "white" ethnics: the Irish, the Italians, the Slavs. Now, I submit, times were already a'changin'. At Yale, I made friends among grad students who were of Polish, French-Canadian, Irish-Cuban, and straight-up Irish descent, not to mention black folks from all backgrounds imaginable (the Jesuit priesthood included), which tells you something about where Yale, the breakthrough Ivy, thought it should be headed at the time, at least intellectually. But at Yale, in fact, I did not encounter a single faculty member *admitting* to Roman Catholic or, for that matter, Orthodox Catholic backgrounds. Nonetheless, it was, of course, the non-Catholic faculty who made the admissions decisions that opened the doors to Ivied credentialing for us all, and that, subsequently, held everyone to the same high standards, thank G-d.

I want to be totally clear about this. On the one hand, the established faculty that was there—old stock Anglo-Protestants and African Americans out of the Black Churches and Ashkenazi Jews from Conservative to Reform to Seder-less were welcoming and supportive—even more so, the more I understood what I wanted to do. Menshes, then, one and all! As my Amherst mentor, Laura Wexler, now distinguished professor at Yale of all places, once said, "Go to Yale. You won't like it there, but you will be very glad you went." The very matter of alienation would turn out—duh—to be an unparalleled opportunity.

The cultural borderline inside Yale in 1980 was as subtly resilient, that is, resistant, as it was open-minded and on the verge of ethnic transformation—on the verge, paradoxically, from the bottom up but also from the top down. It was, after all, the '80s. That is, in 1978, the great A. Bartlett Giamatti arose out of the Yale English Department to replace Kingman Brewster and face down financial disaster. Half Italian

(grandfather from Campania, grandmother a descendent of *The Mayflower*, literally) and bearing the gravitas of intellectuals in Italy, he had nonetheless been raised in Boston, the Calvinist heart of America, and he had attended Philips Andover Academy, modeled on Eton and Harrow. Yes, Professor Giamatti was a superb scholar who had earned his appointment in English and Comparative Literature at Yale. But did you know that he was the son of a medieval lit-and-history scholar who taught at Mt. Holyoke College? and that he had been trained at Yale College and Yale Graduate School? So, in effect, to the manor of the elite academy *born*. Presumably, President Giamatti spoke Roman Italian (where he had gone to school for a year), surely he read Tuscan Italian perfectly. Yet he went always by the nickname "Bart"—short for Bartlett: Bartlett, so old New England a moniker that Aaron Sorkin brilliantly used it to slip his Catholic TV President (played by Chicano Martin Sheen!) into Exeter Academy, the New Hampshire Governorship, and The White House. Do you know, in fact, what the "A" in his formal name stood for? Angelo! In short, brandishing "Bart" while burying "Angelo" helped to reassure his mates that he was not really *that kind* of an Italian. I hail this as the cultivation of a necessary persona, importing Italian-ness in semi-disguise, but the fact remains that "Bart" Giamatti was raised in a vaguely Protestant household (his son Paul is spectacular playing an American Jew)—only to call himself, in the light of the university, a "secular humanist."

It would be five more years, by the way, before we would have a real "Guido" in the senior administration at Yale, an ethnically complex tale I will, out of respect and self-preservation, leave Bianca Calabresi to tell. Two more years thereafter, President Giamatti himself became Commissioner of Major League Baseball, the greatest appointment ever, for which we from Yale (united at Modern Apizza, much greasier back then) rooted like hell (the Red Sox-Yankees divide notwithstanding).

All of this social difference might just have been a matter of personal adjustment, a bit of purgatory on the way to a soul-satisfying job for me at, say, Villanova or SUNY Binghamton, if it weren't, curiously enough, for the academic research initiatives of the period. At exactly this time, Yale English had taken the lead in that intellectual movement informed by French anti-philosophers, ideology-historians, and discourse-

Freudians called Literary Theory. The early 1980s version of Literary Theory was an extremely abstract meditation on extremely self-referential forms of poetry and fiction, a method and set of presumptions that transformed any story or poem into a commentary upon its failures to control meaning. In the meantime, the group called "The New Social Historians," housed majorly at Yale, had refocused attention of their discipline from the ideas and politics of white male elites, to the lives under protest of rural and industrial working classes, of women and racial minorities: the method was statistical, their focus extremely local, and the lessons were romanticized and righteous. To put this in terms of Italian American Studies: the historians were already interested, believe in or not, in mapping the damage done to New Haven by urban renewal, but there was no interest in any form of Italian American arts or expression. Period. In Italianate shorthand, that meant either Antonio Gramsci/Umberto Eco or the construction/garment industries, but no food, no music, no immigrant novels or Hollywood blockbusters or charismatic athletes. At the end of the first semester at Yale, I was told I *must* choose: literary theory or social history. Otherwise, no job, no support, no future.

A funny thing happened, however, on the way to feeding body and soul.

Recall my quiet desperation in Machine City. What was a sad and disconcerted boy to do, who didn't yet understand his occupation but also didn't know how he could stand to "get to work," as it were, without real food and companionship? So I began to look right in front of me, at Yale University itself—where, lo and behold, the Italians of New Haven (with African Americans from congregations in the Carolinas) kept the university in business, working almost every kind of support job with skill and pride. I made acquaintances, made friends, among them New Haven informants. I mean the secretaries in the kinder quarters of the University Administration, the gardeners planting the bushes, the masons repointing walls built by their ancestors. I mean the barbers at the university store, who were brothers from Amalfi and grew real vegetables together on a small farmstead in Chesire. And I mean, especially, one Gary Garibaldi, whom I met in a way that is worth pausing over, as it illustrates how these other "Yalies" supplemented my otherwise superb formal education.

Fall 1980, one year in. Three days running, for an art history course, I hunkered down in the Special Collections suite of the Yale Art Gallery researching Winslow Homer sketches. Each day of research, I would get up and go out to stretch, right hand sore from pencil scribbling, and walk into the Museum proper—which happened to be featuring a postwar photographic exhibit by Robert Frank. Black-and-whites of industrial streets and urban crowds, rallies, protests, and festivals, colorfully and intriguingly multi-cultural. The exhibit was kitty-corner yet open to the elevator, and on the near side of the elevator, a security guard stood, well-groomed, back erect and attentive. On the third day, reaching the limit of my ability to decipher the photos, I asked the security guard what he thought of the photographs. Bristling, he gave me a brief look of irritation—what, is this a nerd-asshole pulling my chain?—then he walked me around the gallery, photo by photo, granting me one of the best spontaneous lectures in US Social History—even that Yale kind of Social History—I ever received. Born and raised in New Haven, Gary Garibaldi was a former ward healer for the Republicans (the Irish controlled the Dems) who was, at the time of our meeting, the President of the Service and Maintenance Workers, Yale Union 35. I was taken by him, surely; and he and his family took me in. Every month or so for years, especially in the summers when it was easier for me to get around, I joined the family after Mass for Sunday gravy in their triple-decker—two brothers with their families, also their parents, out towards West Haven. We talked New Haven history, varieties of Italian American family life and culture, and of course, *la cucina*, including where to go to make it and eat it.

I became, with the guidance of Garibaldi and others, a "walker in the city." I was on a mission, for all the welcome distractions that New Haven per se provided. I found, in exhilaratingly short order, where to get sublimely cut veal (my mother would approve), out on the left side of Grand Avenue, where there was also an excellent selection of the macaronis and spaghettis and pastine that I was learning to call "pasta." I found a deli with store-made sausage and huge barrels of dried beans nestled in an alleyway near Yale Medical School—so embedded in the old Oak Street neighborhood that the store didn't even have a sign! I found a summer veggie stand on lower State

Street which sold gorgeous red peppers for 25¢ (the non-Italians were afraid they were hot!), and my best friend found Pete de Rosa's first veggie stand on Upper State Street. Chattering nonstop, Pete never weighed anything, just looked at your bag and assigned you a reasonable price while entertaining with endless patter; then, after a life-transformative visit to Zabar's in the city, he went from local to international, including—yes!—arugula and balsamic vinegar. Meanwhile, the best bread was way up Dixwell, just before the Merritt overpass, at a bakery called Venice. And for the eateries, we began exploring farther afield. When my parents came to town, we tried a wonderful family-run trattoria in downtown Fair Haven that became our favorite. When I got a girl who got a car, we would set out for the ravioli factory in Derby, which served stracciatella and square spaghetti, and was so reasonably priced it was worth the gas—not to mention the picturesqueness (rural and post-industrial) of the ride and the big boxes of frozen ravioli I came home with!

One place in particular, though, must serve for what I was finding throughout greater New Haven. Very close to the university was a den of relaxation and seeming escape that increasingly became a stimulus to thought and research: a place for debate, an object of study, a challenge to the reigning academic models of art, culture, and society. Just beyond the literal and figurative walls of Yale, on the north side of York Street a couple of storefronts towards Crown, after the iffy not-so-underground sex shop, was a bar-restaurant called The Brass Button. I don't know when the building was built, in the late '70s, I would guess, but despite the angularity, hanging plants, and heavy furniture of the era, it had a slightly Art Deco jazzy feel. My friends and I usually sat in a long dark area on the first floor, towards the back, feeling a bit under-dressed and wallet-light. We had walked less than one block from Yale proper, and we were away for a while. It was one of many places that spurred the book I would later write, but in several ways it might symbolize the whole process.

At the Brass Button, I felt really, really Italian. It engaged my personal interest in the social history of the Italians in New Haven, but mostly it got me thinking about the arts of Italian America, the art of Italianness in America, its achievements, both past and ongoing, and why so many non-Italians were utterly involved in its *gestalt*. The

Brass Button was a site of Italianness near Yale, to get good food and experience camaraderie, but also as a site where Yalies, this Yalie in particular, got to think about the history, the nature, the force of Italianness—thoughts largely against the grain of standard academic wisdom then, later, and even now. Increasingly not a retreat from the library but an alternative site, figuring out what to ask of my studies, the classroom, the university system at large.

I remember the mussels best, whether by themselves or over linguini, the key being to cook the garlic just right, just enough pep, a dry white like Pinot Grigio, and only a few tomatoes. From the scampi and the orecchiette, the ossobuco and the zabaglione, came several immediate lessons. Point 1 was just Italian Identity 101. Point 2 was food and drink as objects of study—why do the rituals here and especially in Italian homes (my family's and those I had been visiting) feel religious, and how is it that Italian identity claims you, reclaims you, as if participating in a rite? So I learned to ask: ought there be a study of food and foodways? There was a more general point 3, moreover, and it had to do with *collaborative* thought. I loved taking my grad-school friends there. See, this is where I come from; I am not making all this Italian stuff up. I also started asking larger questions, a bit more abstract but involving ideas—of the communal and the collective—not much in abundance: Isn't the table where we best enact the togetherness of hospitality, indeed "inclusivity"? Don't Italians, and they are not alone in this, comprehend breaking bread as unofficial sacrament? Doesn't the ritual of eating together harbor a non-catechetical rite of Communion, one in which the quality of the food and the inclusion of the table count mightily?

Most of the time, I didn't have enough money for eating out. But a bottle of Rolling Rock or glass of Montepulciano d'Abruzzo was cheap, the whole restaurant, but especially the downstairs bar, was wonderfully atmospheric, and, well, the jukebox, back of the staircase where we most often drank, was magnificent. Recently crafted to insinuate, to simulate, to stimulate that it had "always" been there, the jukebox was an education in itself. I loved listening to Sinatra, even the early stuff, to his friends and rivals, including his most important mentor, Billie Holiday, who was—tellingly—well represented in the selections. Ella and Louis (especially in duet), Peggy Lee, and dozens

and dozens of Italian American pop singers, from Jerry Vale and Dean Martin to Dion DiMucci and the Rascals, for reasons that seemed both to run in the blood and to call out to almost everyone in reach. Just listen to *this*!

Here is an issue that will resonate with the elders of our profession even if it seems to most of you commonsensical, even banal. Literary Theory, which was all head and no heart, was tone deaf and to my ears massively Protestant, even Judeo-Protestant, in its disdain for the material, the visual, and the theatrical (which were, to my senses, vessels of the sacred). The jukebox at the Brass Button sounded a particular cultural heritage, that of Sinatra and His Fellows, but it also drew out general questions, enabled by Theory but directed against the metaphysics of Theory, its understanding of what art can do, for whom and why. Why doesn't the university care about singing like this, I bluntly wondered. What is the academy not hearing, not primed to hear; not explaining, not able to explain? Isn't this poetry set to music, addressed to the problems of the heart, as English and Scottish and Irish ballads of yore, strengthened by underlying African-American rhythms, Jewish-American minor-key melodies and audacious wit, and most importantly, the luscious yet subtle voices of Italian American urbanity, the guys especially? There was no way then, with the analytical tools then available, that an English prof could justify professionally caring about any of this, never mind explicating and enacting and acting from it. Still, I wondered, Why can't departments of English and Cultural Studies explain the power of the language when "vocalized" with both swing and an uncanny note bending, yielding tonalities of power and nuance? Where is there an attitude anything like that in the literature and arts we take as canonical? It is there, only eluding us because of the approach we are trained to take? New Haven was teaching me questions that would dog me into the digital era, even as I got better and better at figuring out what could and should be done. In particular, the combination of all-in and tongue-in-cheek, love and irony, bravado and vulnerability, that emerged so brilliantly in the Sinatra of the fifties was itself an attitude, an "aesthetic," a way of knowing and being in the world that had NO correlates I could find in the official academic proceedings that eschewed sensuality, performance, conviviality as the object of inquiry, even if they snuck such things into their best writings, sotto voce, despite

themselves. (For the record, the near conservatory quality of Yale Music was cognizant of Sinatra, his composers and arrangers and instrumentalists; while Art & Architecture was aware, too, of Joseph Stella and Robert Venturi.)

"Performance Studies" hadn't nearly been invented yet, but I was hearing and, around me, seeing and even tasting (I mean this literally) a compound achievement, in the bar as on the jukebox: the effect of full presence, the persona that is more theirself in the music, turning microphone into instrument and bending notes into both lyrical enactment and personal style. Of course, the Italianitá of The Brass Button in the 1980s was already multi-generations along and mass-mediated, but knowing that made it no less effective, I began to think, perhaps even the contrary. For the Brass Button was not just a restaurant with a bar; it was a scene, not *my* scene exactly, but one almost out of the movies yet palpable too. From the black fedoras and shoulder-padded suits, from the curve-accentuating, skin-complimenting, color-forward dresses, I started to ask: why do the faculty and grad students dress so badly? More importantly, why is no one talking about dress style as anything other than the hood-winking of the masses? Doesn't performance matter; doesn't *la bella figura* make things happen?

For I also intuited that not only style per se but a particular style was at stake in the clothing and the atmosphere it supported: the bar felt like "a mafia bar," not the scary type where real siddowns in traditional organized crime organizations were presumably held (history tells us that), though there may have been a couple (what did I know?), but of the showy sort that Sinatra made possible in Vegas, where it was requisite that criminality of all sorts be left at the door. It was only good manners, you see, to fellow patrons and to il Padrone, George Montano, owner and grand host of the Brass Button. Why did I like the idea of being in the presence of mobster and moll, whether actual or play-acting or a bit of both, as if for the duration of being in The Brass Button I could rival my very, very Sicilian cousins, especially those in Long Beach, Long Island.

We, the Yalies stepping-out, experienced there a form of media-mafia aesthetic. Certainly, I had no idea whether it was a gathering place for the quietly real or the devoutly wanna-bes, but just as surely mafia typology was at least one of the dimensions

of Italian-ness at play. The lessons were strong and would prove to have legs. From Mario Puzo's book and Francis Ford Coppola's movies to George Montano's trattoria—mob-supported Leon's went untorched in the 1967 riots, yes?—were burnt into my consciousness several things: the interplay of ethnicity and entrepreneurship, ethnicity and the media, ethnicity and self-fashioning, all of which followed from self-knowing that parodied as much as it glorified.

So once again, food and music and style—life as movies, movies as life—at The Brass Button. It engaged my interest in the social history of the Italians in New Haven AND it got me thinking about the arts of Italian America. What I learned at The Brass Button was to take the power of words and images and gestures more seriously; to think of the claim to the universal as rooted in the ethnic, even the parochial; to think of style as content, performance, not as fakery or cover-up but as *made presence*, and the self-parody of stereotype as inseparable, or at least nearly inseparable, from the conjuring/mythic power of archetype. I also learned to take seriously the curiosity, the participation, and the semi-conversions of those not born into cultural codes. I was beginning to understand that while we Americans are all half Protestant, practically no aspect of American culture outside of actual Protestant churches was as Puritan as the Professoriate.

With an advanced mission, I returned to the library. I designed and documented and defended a course for Yale undergraduates, Italian America in Theory, History, and Artifact, with Alan Trachtenberg as advisor and the logistical support of one of the undergraduate film societies (they screened all the movies I wanted to teach in 35 mm, on Sunday nights in the Law School), and another guardian angel caught wind of it, and, before I knew it, I had a very rare opportunity for a Yale graduate student: I was teaching my course, and variations thereof, every summer for the Yale Summer Program and getting paid, too. Amazing things followed. A 23-year-old undergraduate showed up, a Jewish kid with real street smarts, who commuted up two evenings a week from NYC to finish his Yale degree because, in his day job, he was helping the US Attorney for the Southern District of New York (where have you gone, Rudolph Guiliani?) to prepare the case against one John Gotti, the Gambino boss from Howard Beach who styled himself

(shades of The Brass Button!), with Armani's help, after the movie mobsters. For every high school junior who went to Hopkins or Choate Rosemary Hall in my summer classes, there were a dozen grownups, including a postwar ex-Mayor, Irish, of course, and the weather lady at WTNH, who was as smart and generous as she was camera-friendly, and who was the great, great-granddaughter of Enrico Caruso. I kid you not. Italian New Haven, in astonishing variety, teaching me at every turn, even when least expected.

I was beginning to think that instead of debunking stereotypes (whether negative or positive or both), they needed to be contextualized and explicated, re-enacted, even put into action. Lean in rather than disavow. I started writing, with a draft chapter on Mario Puzo's *Fortunate Pilgrim* and an invited essay on *The Godfather*. It was a lion-haired, lion-hearted patriarch of Anglo-Yale and the first generation of American Studies, R.W.B. Lewis, who told me one night at HIS house over dinner that "if I had any *coglioni* I would write the *whole* dissertation on Puzo." By the time I did get around to *Feeling Italian*, the rise of Cultural Studies meant the dominant issue in Italian American Studies was the all-ideology question, *Are Italians White?* The timely books were subtitled, *How Race is Made in America*. I thought, "If you must, but oi, veh, what opportunities you miss!" At Werner Sollors' invitation, I decided to take my damn stand, to the consternation of both center and margin, and so I worked to demonstrate, as fetchingly as possible, in the manner of the arts themselves, not "how the guineas got white" but "how America was becoming Italian." I wanted to suggest that, for all its pop mediation, even partial invention, the lived diaspora was somehow still with us and gathering disciples. I wanted to supplement the established histories of victimization and victimizing. And I wanted to show how much more aesthetically compelling, sociologically smarter, and philosophically wiser these Italian-American arts were than credited, each in itself, yes, but also constituting together what I came to call "the Art of Italian America."

At my wife's suggestion—she is one of those converts, not to Catholicism exactly but to Italian-Americanness—I would focus each chapter on a particular icon, its special moment, and the text/performance that gave each respective icon its transformative

force (however many I had the stamina for). I procrastinated as usual on finding a cover image, but when I found it, I knew I had it (Figure 1). For the record, I am commenting upon its applicability here in public for the very first time. A cover can't do everything, sometimes it can barely do anything, but I have always believed you should be able to judge *something* of a book by its cover. It captured several things that I wanted to convey in the face of p-c assumptions and generic thinking: to embrace iconography and archetype, in order to contextualize and explicate; to take the senses seriously, even when it is entrepreneurial or consumeristic; and to capture performance as both affirming and self-parodying.

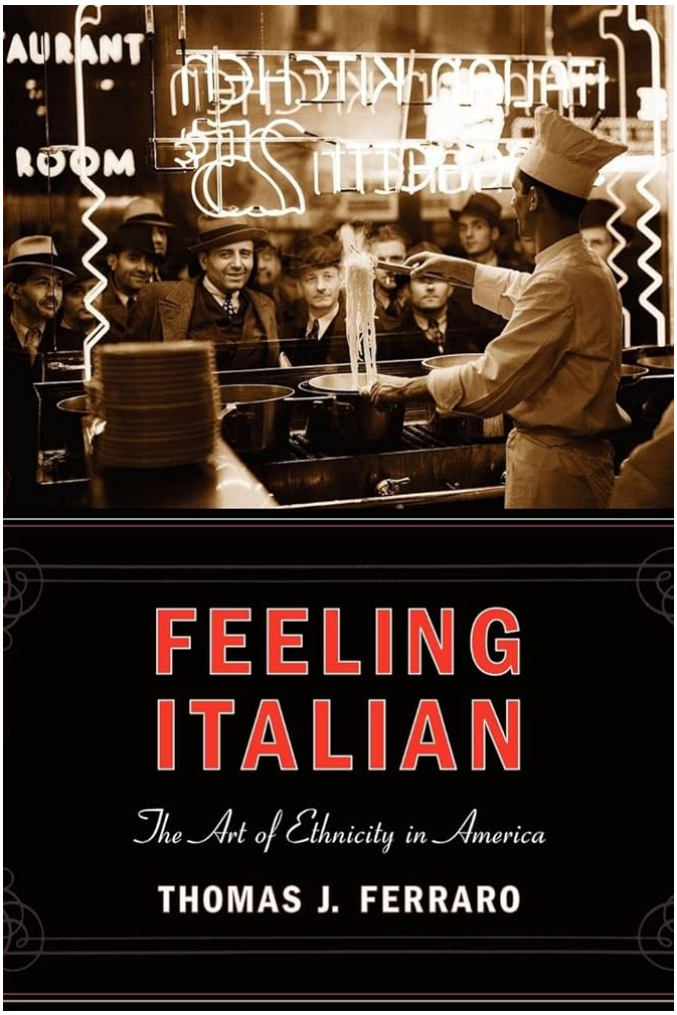

Figure 1. Cover of Feeling Italian (NYU Press), reproducing the 1937 Bettmann/CORBIS photograph "Pedestrians on Broadway look through a restaurant window to watch a cook prepare a pot of spaghetti."

This photo embodies an attitude. It is not frightened by market enticement or consumer success: pasta is being offered here in a hospitality that evokes communion: the gift of an exotic yet particularly yummy and taste-accessible food, the potential for the felt collectivity of the Italian table, a rite of grace in God's name for all comers, not just the pre-select. See here, this is a shadow—or should I say, lighted, even enlightened—version of the priest in the post-Vatican II mass, facing the congregation, out of church and before his time. Of course, the pasta has not been pre-cooked and held indefinitely, until ordered, for a finishing stir fry or, an *infamità*!, a dip in hot water. And it matters that the pasta on offer is good ol' spaghetti. My grandmother's non-Italian classmates bullied her for "eating worms" (she was born in 1901), but look where New York is getting to, in the 1930s, before The Depression started to wane! Stanley Tucci's early foodie movie, *Big Night* is wonderful, so exhilarating and so sad, but the dichotomy between the two restaurants, authentic regional cooking vs. the bastardized cuisine of the migrant South, leaves Italian-American home cooking out of the picture. Indeed it leaves New Haven out of the picture, for I ate at Pepe's, Leon's, and Sorrento's too often to think that there wasn't brilliant Neapolitan American cuisine EVEN in the restaurants. So, bring on the calamari fra diavolo! What is being offered here, then, is a consumer's access to identity, a rite of consuming participation, which was then and remains now a helluva different way of conceptualizing multicultural interplay and the transfiguration of the mainstream.

I didn't know at the time that in Naples (Italy, not Florida) the elementary school system teaches all of its kids, so now Italians and Ethiopians and Albanians alike, to sing by heart the infectious ditty, "That's Amore," which is, after all, a "fake" Neapolitan canzone that was composed by the Italian-American Harry Warren with lyrics by an Anglo-American Jew, made popular by Dean Martin in 1953, then put to resplendent use in that female-focused pitch-perfect fakery, Norman Jewison and John Patrick Shanley's *Moonstruck*.

So, *mamma mia*! look what is STILL going on, around the world, even in *Italia*. Stanley Tucci is back in the Italian "food movie" business, composing brilliant little culinary lessons all over Italy with quiet social and political commentary, once again

embodying love and irony—which is how you gotta respond to his line of pots and pans, $999.95 a set at Williams-Sonoma. The global food industry in Naples (however taxed and terrorized by the Camorra) has gathered up the young men of the Campania countryside with little future (as once they were contracted to Sargent's factory in New Haven), teaching them to make pretty darn good pizza in the tough air and rough supply conditions of the Euro-American diaspora, sending them to set up shop almost everywhere. "The Bear" captures the imagination of the multitudes, as do a dozen brilliant populist Italian cooks on TV or in books, as do the first-rate Italian restaurants run and staffed by Koreans, Mexicans, and Middle Easterners—more "authentic," the food writers say, than the trendy spots in Italy. In the meantime, despite the damage done by MP3s, and the tonally challenged literalness of those running Siriusly Sinatra, there is surely not a singer in creation—not the Beatles, not Ray Charles—who receives more attention these days than Frank: a larger CD and concert DVD catalog, but also dozens upon dozens of contemporary pop stars covering his songbook, of course, the jazz singers like Diane Krall and John Pizzarelli, and of course Tony Bennett with K. D. Lang or Lady Gaga, but also records from Bob Dylan (he gets better and better) and terrific entries from Van Morrison, Rickie Lee Jones, and the late Lou Rawls. No Library of America Volume yet, but several less haughty publishers have finally installed *The Godfather* in their great American novel series, accompanying *The Great Gatsby* and *Huckleberry Finn*. Doctor Anthony Fauci, tells us that his philosophical bible is *The Godfather*, Van Zandt does too, by which they mean Puzo's novel. Despite the history of critical reception, in which the mainstream movie critics averred that it was Coppola and his technical crew who turned a piece of trash into cinematic genius, the facts are several: not only did plot, character, and dialogue come directly from Mario Puzo, so did the book's acute visuality; the recent exhibit in LA showed, beyond a doubt, how Coppola worked not from his screenplay (co-written with Mario), but from the novel itself (annotated to the point where it would give a teacher beautiful dreams), warts and all; and it was the later makers of *The Sopranos* who leveraged another round of (in)genius storytelling from the parts of the novel that were thought too "trashy" to make it into the 1970s films, constituting (with all due respect to Martin Scorsese, Abel

Ferrara, and their mates) the most empathetic and insight debunking of mob masculinity America has ever known! (*White Lotus*, I am told, here we come!)

Feeling Italian began by noting, in its first sentence, in 2004: "One would think, on the face of it, that the Italian Americans whose ancestors came to the United States en masse a full century ago must be coming to the end of their social and cultural distinctiveness." So let me end in the now, 20 years later, when just the other day, a Jersey boy who had always wanted to be an NFL quarterback (first name, Tommy, of course, which is what the Italians and my intimates always call me), who lives at home with a family out of casting central and an agent whose fashion is still the Brass Button, unexpectedly became the starter for the New York Giants—in which capacity, after touchdowns, a gesture with his fingers became the shot seen around the world. I don't care, mind you, whether it was spontaneous or camera-friendly, as so the glorious show of his Jersey family at the tailgates (oh, those chicken cutlets) and in the stands (men smooching men)—after all, among the Italians of the new millennium, what's the difference? Five generations and counting, the good, the goods, of Italian America, are still with us, practically New Haven style!

Feeling Italian *ancora*, everyone? An open question, to each of you individually, but also a rhetorical one, writ large. Michael Corleone averred, in the flawed but spectacularly interesting *Godfather III,* "Just when I thought I was out, they pulled me back in." But it was the vernacular genius of Yogi Berra, more New Haven-Brooklyn-Jersey than Hollywood, who coined the gloss that the stories I have shared today really warrant. Forty years after leaving Yale, twenty years after writing my book, guess what: "It's déjà vu all over again!"

Or, as an audience member intoned, "It ain't over til it's over!"

Thomas J. Ferraro, Professor of English at Duke University, is a teacher-critic of US literature and the media arts, with long-standing interest in the interplay of ethnicity, religion, and aesthetics. *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (NYU Press, 2005) received an American Book Award from the Before Columbus Foundation; *Transgression & Redemption in American Fiction* (Oxford University Press) was published in 2021. If, admittedly, *Feeling Italian* addresses the iconography of Italianess from the point of view of a traditionally trained Romanticist, *Transgression &*

Redemption can be said, only half-facetiously, to return the favor, reading the American novel canon like a paesan from Southern Italy. His recent essay, "It's G-D's Bloody Rule, Ma!" was composed for the American Fragility issue of *JamIt!*, treating the difference the invocation of Hebrew Scripture makes to the Freudian-and-Marxist memory work in E. L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel.* E-mail: ferraro@duke.edu