THE CHEERFUL DEFENESTRATOR

Carlo Rotella
Boston College

In the 2020 census, over half the white population in America self-reported being of English (46.6 million), German (45 million), or Irish (38.6 million) ancestry, alone or in any combination. These are the Big Three white ethnicities—a term I use advisedly, recognizing all the complications that come from the American habit of blurring immigrant nationality into ethnicity. Down the rankings from the Big Three, you find Polish (8.6 million), Scottish (8.4 million), French (8 million), Swedish (3.8 million), Norwegian (3.8 million), Dutch (3.6 million), and so on down to Australian and Albanian and such.

Sitting in the sweet spot between the Big Three and everybody else, at 16.8 million, are Italian Americans.[1] It's a sweet spot because Italian Americans are much more heavily and disproportionately represented in American culture than the groups below them, while the Big Three above them have mostly merged into the undifferentiated mass of de-ethnicized whiteness and become semi-invisible. Englishness isn't really a recognizable identity in American culture anymore unless you're a first-generation transplant with an accent; the two world wars and the Nazis' obsession with blood and history took much of the vibrancy out of any lingering impulse to sustain Germanness as a living heritage in America; and while some Americans of Irish ancestry have managed to nurture a vestigial sense of Irishness, at this point it's increasingly a form of LARPing abetted by Boston-themed movies, ads, and comedy routines. That leaves Italian Americans as by far the largest white ethnic group that has

[1] Paul Jacobs, Alli Coritz, and Rachel Marks, "Over Half of White Population Reported Being English, German or Irish," United States Census Bureau (October 10, 2023): https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/10/2020-census-dhc-a-white-population.html.

managed to retain a strong and widely recognized sense of distinct identity rooted in national origins.

And they've hung onto that identity despite their distinctive success at assimilating into American life, which can be measured by how triumphantly suburban they have become. In an analysis of the 2000 census, the sociologists Richard Alba and Victor Nee found that 73.5 percent of Italian Americans who lived in metropolitan areas lived in the suburbs, a percentage that tied them for first place with Polish Americans, with Irish Americans and German Americans coming in third and fourth. And 91.2 percent of Italian Americans lived in metropolitan areas, a higher percentage than for any other non-Hispanic white ethnic group (Alba and Nee 2003, 85-87). More than a quarter of them are concentrated in and around New York City, where they form the dominant white ethnicity in the suburban heartlands of Long Island and New Jersey.[2] Put those numbers together, and Italian-Americans can make a strong claim to the title of pound-for-pound champions of suburbanization. Since the middle of the 20th century, the conventional path of least resistance to middle-class belonging in America has led outward from the inner city to suburbia, and no immigrant group has followed that path more successfully.

You are no doubt asking yourself right about now why I'm talking about numbers. Thomas Ferraro's "introduction to Italian ways of feeling and ways of feeling Italian in the United States" (7) is not a numbers-intensive book.[3] It's a belletristic inquiry into the most unquantitative of subjects—parsing a suite of feelings loosely arising from the fact that some Americans trace their ancestry to Italy—via interpretive readings of emblematic cultural artifacts ranging from Frank Stella's *Brooklyn Bridge* to Madonna's "Like a Virgin." So why start with numbers? Because they help us understand what makes Ferraro's book so lastingly valuable.

[2] Jacobs, Coritz, and Marks (2023).
[3] All quotations and page numbers from the paperback edition: Thomas Ferraro, *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America* (New York University Press, 2005).

Ferraro begins from an assumption that the numbers make inevitable: Italians have assimilated into American life, refashioning it along the way in their own image. His book, he explains at the outset, "is not an attempt to turn the clock back, to think of white ethnicity in 1970s terms, as an issue of 'us' versus 'them.' It is not about Italian American community frozen in time but rather about the century-long, often wondrous, at times discordant, Italianate remaking of the United States" (1). The drama of unbelonging—the struggle to force a way against the resistance of nativism and anti-Catholic bias and all the other usual villainous suspects into industrial America, full citizenship, and (though ethnic boosters tend not to celebrate this part) full whiteness—is over. So is the drama of contributions, in which ethnic boosters remind us that a person whose last name ends in a vowel invented or discovered such-and-such, the objective being to amass credentials for inclusion and also grounds to sustain grievance. Ferraro's subject is the far more ironic and symbolic and not so thrillingly adversarial fashioning of white ethnicity in suburbanized, postindustrial America.

Beginning from that assumption gives Ferraro an angle to make headway against the grain of identity politics, Italian American-style. Italian Americans in general, and Italian American scholars in particular, have long been hung up on the notion of Italian American exceptionalism. While German or English immigrants might shed their ethnic markers over the generations and recede into whiteness, Italian Americans accord themselves a special order of authenticity that guarantees their continuing essential Italianness even after becoming every bit as white and middle-class and suburban as those German Americans or English Americans.

Italian Americans have insisted on this exceptionalism so vigorously that lots of non-Italian Americans acquiesce and join them in recognizing it. Growing up in a black neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, I got used to other kids feeling that they were cutting me a break by appending an asterisk to my whiteness because I was "Italian," which they regarded as a special category. Actually, my father was Sicilian and my mother is Catalan—so, like Columbus's voyage, I'm a Spanish-Italian co-production—but American culture offers little to nothing in the way of equipment for being Spanish American. Who would I have emulated? The creepy ventriloquist Señor

Wences? The New York Mets first baseman Keith Hernandez? Charo? In contrast, as Ferraro persuasively demonstrates, there are many widely available and generally recognized ways to feel Italian. Black kids in South Shore were aware of those ways and had no trouble using them as a template to assign a special identity to me, whether I wanted them to or not. (Sometimes I did. That asterisk could come in handy.)

Italian Americans across the ideological spectrum share an investment in the ongoing life of such exceptionalist thinking—from harrumphing Sons of Italy types detecting anti-Italian bias in the eternal popularity of Mafia narratives or the peaking of Mario Cuomo's political career short of the Oval Office (an *infamia*!) all the way over to equally outraged cultural critics who imagine Italian American identity as a site of resistance to late capitalism and whatever else you got. They all subscribe to some version of a model of culture in which bias and stereotypes and other external forces combine with the upwelling of unquenchable ethnic soul from within to shape an ethnic identity that's proof against the homogenization that has processed other immigrant groups into whitebread sameness.

Ferraro's introduction cheerily defenestrates this whole way of thinking without malice or dudgeon. He does it, rather, with the air of a cousin getting himself a beer from your refrigerator, noticing a carton of milk in there that's weeks past its use-by date, and doing you a favor by tossing it. Then he sets out, chapter by chapter, to offer a far more nuanced, ironic, and humanely historicized model of how it works and what it means to feel Italian American. The choice of verb is essential. You can't just somehow magically *be* Italian American because it's in the blood; rather, there are many ways to *feel* Italian American, an identity you can put together not just from equipment for living handed down from Italian ancestors but also from wonderfully recombinant lego pieces freely circulating in the culture where anybody can get hold of them. The lego pieces are all you need, it turns out. All kinds of people, including plenty with no Italian American ancestors at all, know how to put them together.

A beautifully concise sequence of topic sentences—really, half-sentences—in the conclusion of *Feeling Italian* summarizes the cultural history that produced those

lego pieces and put them into such vigorous circulation. "Once upon a time, feeling Italian was the unlooked-for fallout of social history" (202) captures phase one, the struggling-immigrant phase in which feeling Italian is thrust on newcomers as an unavoidably necessary identity. "At mid-century feeling Italian became increasingly a lesson in attitude" (203), the crucial element of what we might call the Sinatra phase, in which assimilation goes hand in hand with the Italianizing of American culture. Finally comes the postmodern phase: "As a self-conscious regime, acknowledging the lessons of experience and adopting the attitudes of art, feeling Italian is now a chosen identity" (203), and all sorts of people can choose to engage it by doing something as easy as, say, obsessively rewatching *The Godfather*. In 2008, when Barack Obama was running for president for the first time, he told Katie Couric that his favorite movies of all time were *The Godfather I* and *II* ("It's all about family")—a politic choice for a middle-aged American man of any ethnic or racial background trying to connect with all kinds of voters.[4] The proprietor of Boston's largest black megachurch told me that *The Godfather* was one of his two favorite movies, noting that he especially liked how everybody brought an envelope filled with money to the wedding.[5] And years ago, when I told Boston College's then-Dean of Arts and Sciences, who is of Irish descent, that I was writing about *The Godfather*, he pointed at his own bespectacled eye and said, "Best scene of all time—when Moe Greene …" There was no need to say more. *The Godfather*'s climactic baptism sequence is the "Stairway to Heaven" of movie scenes, perennially ranked at the top of all-time lists.

Feeling Italian features a chapter on *The Godfather*, of course, and the book's conclusion kicks off with an extended riff on *The Sopranos*, which was in mid-run and all the rage twenty years ago. *The Sopranos* exemplifies Ferraro's argument because it "is at once breathtakingly specific to the Jersey mob *and*, paradoxically, reflective of ordinary (non-Italian) lives in the Prozac/Viagra new millennium" (201). That's the

[4] Brian Welk, "President Obama's Favorite Movies and TV Shows in Office," *The Wrap* (January 19, 2017): https://www.thewrap.com/president-obamas-favorite-movies-and-tv-shows-photos/.
[5] Carlo Rotella, "The Kingdom and the Power," *Boston* (August 16, 2006): https://www.bostonmagazine.com/2006/08/16/the-kingdom-and-the-power/.

exacta *Feeling Italian* keeps betting on, and both horses keep finishing one-two, paying off handsomely. And the pitch-perfectly *suburban* comic melodrama of *The Sopranos*—compressed to haiku-like density in Tony's morning ritual of fetching the newspaper from his driveway, his bathrobe affording a majestic view of his water-tower physique as he scans his placid cul-de-sac for incoming threats—makes it a particularly fitting endpoint.

The *Godfather* movies and *The Sopranos* offer a reminder that some of our favorite stories about Italian Americans raise serious doubts about the meaning of the journey to suburbia and the assimilative success it implies. The *Godfather* movies, the most canonical of immigrant narratives, are all about what is gained and lost in the Corleones' journey from Sicily to Little Italy to a family compound in suburban Long Island. An isolated mansion on the shore of Lake Tahoe comes next. By then, they're as far away as they can get from the old neighborhood, that place of festas, aspiration, and tribalism, and from its connection to the old country. As much as the *Godfather* movies fantasize about the generationally sustained potency of Italian American gangsters, they also retell a familiar story in which immigrants must compromise themselves in the name of making it in America. Detailing the damage and bad faith on the dark side of assimilation, they treat the atomization of suburbia as very dangerous business. By the end of *Godfather II*, Michael has made it by the standard American measures—he owns a big house and his kids can have any material thing they want—but at the cost of divesting himself of any vital bond to other people, including his own family. He's a man without a tribe.

The Sopranos picks up the story right there, with Tony and Carmela anxiously marooned in their suburban McMansion, but restores their tribal affiliation by presenting them as typical not only of Italian Americans but of Americans, period. She lunches and shops and dabbles in real estate, wondering if it's evil to enjoy the good life provided by her successful husband. He pines for a nostalgically idealized old neighborhood and yearns for connection to an even more idealized old country but faints at the sight of capicola (okay, fine: *gabagool*) in the refrigerator. And by this point

most of the gangsters in Tony's cohort are getting most of their equipment for living as gangsters from the movies, not deep ancestral lifeways.

You still hear the occasional ethnic booster complain that mafia stories perpetuate stereotypes that do harm to Italian Americans, but I think they get it exactly wrong. Those stories have been a boon to Italian Americans in at least two ways. First, the *Godfather* movies and their many imitators have filled our cultural toolboxes with ways to imagine what it means—how it feels—to be of Italian descent, to be an immigrant, to make it in this country. Because they invite us to brood over assimilation and suburbanization, among other things, they afford us opportunities to consider whether it has been worth it to accept the offer of American belonging that so many immigrants have been unable to refuse. Second, like pizza, formulaic stories about Italian-American gangsters have helped Italianness sustain its cachet as a dominant ethnic identity in this country. I never have found much use for Columbus, but "don't ever take sides with anyone against the family" is handy equipment for living that anyone can pick up and put to use. Just ask my Chinese-German-Spanish-Italian American kids.

When I think about what books to class *Feeling Italian* with, John Gennari's *Flavor and Soul* comes to mind first.[6] Above all, in its hilariously insightful chapter on college basketball coaches, it's the other book on Italian Americanness I would point to as an exemplar offering a better model of culture than what's offered by ethnic boosters, the identity police, critique-wielding theorizers, and other usual suspects. But for me, the more resonant analog might be Philip Deloria's books on Native American history, which similarly sweep aside conventional ways of thinking about peoplehood and culture and propose much more interesting ones to replace them. *Playing Indian* (1998) is all about the possibilities and limits of feeling Indian as demonstrated by the long tradition of non-Indians dressing up like Indians, from the Boston Tea Party to Mardi

[6] John Gennari, Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge (University of Chicago Press, 2017).

Gras. *Indians in Unexpected Places* (2004) shows how extremely adaptable and creative Indian car enthusiasts, moviemakers, barnstormers, athletes, and musicians helped shape the leading edge of modernity, rather than playing their usual role as noble victims of its inevitable encroachment on their traditional lifeways. *Feeling Italian* makes similarly revisionary moves, with similarly field-redefining implications.

I met and befriended both Tom Ferraro and Phil Deloria when I was in graduate school. Tom was an alum, already a celebrated professor well-launched on his career, who returned for a visit. There weren't many Italian Americans at Yale, and I took note of his success and of the distinctive mix of intellectual firepower and flashes of regular-guy affect evident in the style of academic selfhood practiced by Tom (and also, in a different mix, by my atavistically Jersey Irish mentor, Jim Fisher). Phil was a classmate. In my boundless ignorance, I had never heard of his father, the outspoken Indian activist Vine Deloria Jr., nor did I know anything about the generational weave that embeds the Deloria family so deeply in Indian history in general and Sioux history in particular. Honestly, just going by Phil's vowel-rich last name, the way he carried himself, the fact that he was married to a woman with an Irish name, and the feeling of immediate mutual affinity that sprang up between us, I assumed he was Italian American too. And, just by virtue of being American at all, I guess he sort of was.

WORKS CITED

Alba, Richard and Victor Nee. 2003. *Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and the New Immigration*. Harvard University Press.

Deloria, Philip Deloria. 1998. *Playing Indian*. Yale University Press.

_____. 2004. *Indians in Unexpected Places*. University Press of Kansas.

Carlo Rotella is a professor of English, American Studies, and Journalism at Boston College. His next book, forthcoming in September 2025, is *What Can I Get Out of This?: Teaching and Learning in a Classroom Full of Skeptics*. E-mail: rotellca@bc.edu