BEING ITALIAN (WHEN YOU'RE NOT)

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For someone who's not even remotely Italian-American, but who spent much of her girlhood in a largely Italian-American community in northern New Jersey: How to think about Tom Ferraro's book, now celebrating its twentieth birthday? For someone who considered taking Italian in high school but given that she said she wanted to go to college, was strongly encouraged by her guidance counselor to take French instead? And who only after college finally acted on her high school inclination and took NJ Transit to Hoboken and then the Path to Greenwich Village three nights a week after work to take Italian classes at the New School?

Yes, I wanted to feel Italian back in the '70s, when my non-Italian parents played Sinatra on the brand new stereo in our living room, when my father talked about *The Godfather* (the book, not yet the movie; I stole the copy out of his closet and read it when my parents weren't home), when my brother started dating (eventually marrying) a De Benedetto girl and marveling over the food he had at her home, when a guy in not-so-far-away Asbury Park named Bruce became an overnight rave. But as it turned out, it took a trip to Italy to make it all, really, happen. And I wonder if what happened to me was a hint of a future that may have seriously kicked in with Frances Mayes' *Under the Tuscan Sun* and has been ritualized (and mocked) in the second season of *The White Lotus*. Or, as my former colleague Alex Cuadrado suggested, given the increased amount of travel and commodified tourism to Italy in the last few decades, perhaps we're no longer as interested in feeling Italian, as in *living* Italian—getting away from the US, even if briefly, to experience what it's like to actually *be* Italian?

What is the pull of Italy, that country that so many members of Tom Ferraro's family left, along with millions of others—some to return, many of them not? And how did Italian-American culture prepare me for that pull, if it did? I wonder about the last part of this last question. Undoubtedly, class distinctions were still very much in the

works in the '70s. Italian was not for the college-bound, but for those Italian-Americans who wanted to stay connected to the land and culture of their *nonna,* even if their grandmother knew only dialect, even if her culture had already undergone enormous changes since she had arrived in the 1910s or '20s. Like Tom, I was an English major in college, writing not about Emerson but Spenser and the so-called English Renaissance, and so gravitating to the earlier side of the chronological spectrum. My graduation present from my parents was a ticket to Europe, and I traveled to Florence and Rome to bask in the art of the Uffizi and the Vatican. But it was only on a train to Brindisi en route to Greece that I realized I had to learn the language the four women sitting with my friend and me in the 4th-class car were speaking to one another: not so much for its energy and musicality as for the fact that these women hadn't known one another when they boarded that car. (It didn't occur to me at the time that they were probably speaking dialect.) One had a basket of chicks on her lap, another a bag full of freshly-baked goods and fruit, which, by the end of the ride, she was sharing not only with her three new friends but with the two Americans. I'll never forget the comradery that emerged in the course of that long ride south and east to the Adriatic—and I promptly signed up for Italian classes when I returned.

But without Sinatra, Puzo, my brother's girlfriend, and the close-knit nature of those large Italian families I came to know growing up, would I have been so drawn to that conversation of which I understood nary a word? Reading Tom Ferraro's book when it first came out—and then rereading it shortly before he came to Yale last year to give his wonderful, closing talk to a crowd made up of students, faculty, and New Haven's Italian-American community at our inaugural Rossini Symposium —I was, and am, struck by his transparency and utter modesty as regards his work. It's not an easy project. If anything, it has become more difficult over the years to write thoughtfully and sensitively about ethnicity writ large. On the one hand, Tom's ten keywords (from "Honor" to "Table") still provide suggestive ways for thinking about how we might characterize Italian identity, whether in Italy or in the western hemisphere. On the other, Tom's provocative subtitle—"The Art of Ethnicity in America"—suggests that his gameplan isn't limited to Italians. There's much that overlaps with other immigrant

cultures that gravitate, necessarily, around the figure of the Mother, that need to find Jobs in new worlds and so tend to cluster in Cities, that bond through their Songs and around the Table.

For two decades, Tom's lexicon has offered us a powerful starting point for thinking about what separates and brings us together, particularly when considering the many differences within what might be assumed to be a single ethnic identity. As we all know, Italy was a fragmented entity for a millennium and a half, cities and villages separated by mountains and perennial hostilities; hence the still thirty-some dialects spoken today, far down from much larger numbers a century ago (or even four and a half decades ago when I rode that train to Brindisi). At the same time, Italy has begun to recognize itself (and sometimes not) as a home for immigrants from elsewhere, some of whom then go on to places like "America." Can the ever-expanding expansiveness of Italian ethnicity become a way of thinking, expansively, about ethnicities in the plural, with Tom as our guide? Might it not lead us to recognize that what we strive to feel, or "be," constitutes part of who we already are, especially when we dig down deep enough to consider our roots: Somalian, Ukrainian, Irish, Colombian, whatever they might be? And while, as an "Italianist" if not an Italian or Italian-American, I insist on the specificity of my discipline and will defend the autonomy of my department of Italian Studies as long as I'm in the profession, in this precarious political moment it's crucial that we acknowledge what binds us together via our separate stories of immigration and exclusion, and how those shared stories can make us all feel, and be, more included: more Italian.

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