

FEELING *FEELING ITALIAN*

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*F*eeling *Italian* first captured me for its promise to meditate on the making of “ethnic” feelings. It was 2005 when the notion of ethnicity as choice and feeling—not rarely seen as fleeting and floating on the surface of identity—continued to shape the conversation about a new form of individualized identification among the third and fourth-generation descendants of southeastern European Americans. Linking ethnicity with art and the poetics of cultural identity—“[f]rom ethnicity comes art comes the art of ethnicity” (208), as the author puts it—the book engages with the role of the arts in mediating the making of feeling Italian. “The determination,” Ferraro writes, “is to analyze ethnicity-in-transition, warts and all, but also to mediate it, to play it up and run with it” (6). For those of us “outside” Italian American studies, the calling to grapple with processes of feeling ethnic, identity as a choice, and ethnicity as cultural shifting is irresistible.

Asking why and how Italian-inflected art matters in the United States, *Feeling Italian* advances the discussion beyond ethnic identity toward the domain of post-ethnicity, namely how this art has been moving non-Italians, consciously or unconsciously, toward feeling Italian. “The pun in *Feeling Italian*,” Ferraro notes, “harbors a double meaning: to ‘feel like an Italian’ means, first, to feel the way Italians feel, to have Italian or Italianate types of feelings, whether recognized or not; and, second, to feel that one’s identity is Italian or Italian-like, no matter the ancestry” (3). Linking the generative power of the arts with both Italian and non-Italian demographics places *Feeling Italian* at the center of American cultural production rather than at the periphery of ethnicity.

Questions about cultural dissemination, retention and reinvention, continuities and ruptures, Old World transplantations, and New World transformations drive the project of American Ethnic Studies. Understanding ethnicity involves confronting enormous complexities associated with (a) multidirectional cultural flows and

transmissions—transnational, intergenerational; (b) the contact zones that animate interactions and exchanges—cross-cultural, interracial, and intra-ethnic; and (c) reinvention connected with redrawing cultural, gender and sexual boundaries.

Ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions punctuate this landscape. Engaging with this terrain diachronically, from the era of early 20th-century mass migration to the present, *Feeling Italian* undertakes one of the most challenging assignments regarding the past meandering through the present: probe those cultural pathways, interplays between the old and the new and cross-fertilizations which are the least visible in their form of expression, difficult to trace and articulate, even unrecognizable to many. While the notion of “usable pasts” often entails explicit references to narratives and practices that engage the past to selectively advance or disrupt its ideological work in the present, *Feeling Italian* excavates undercurrents linking the yesterday with today in ways that might elide attention while simultaneously challenging existing analytical categories.

The book inevitably adopts a historical, transnational, transcultural, and transgenerational perspective to trace the conduits of feeling Italian and its dissemination beyond Italian America. Bringing these processes into representation requires reading attentiveness, interpretive virtuosity, sociological imagination, and narrative fluidity—qualities Ferraro performs admirably. It involves deep and broad knowledge of Italian rural culture and religion, American history, cultural studies, the history of US popular culture, and Italian American studies. It requires dexterity in analyzing the philological and semantic attributes of a multitude of languages and idioms: the vernacular of Southern Italy, the diction of working-class Italian immigrants, the vocabulary of street and workplace registers, the language of vocalization and non-verbal exchanges, the lexicon of visual modernism, the theatrics of acting in film and performing on stage, the words of scholarship, the terminology of cultural studies and, given the author’s aspiration “to bridge the gap between the academy and serious readers” (247), narrative poetics (alliterations and internal rhyming abound in the text) to animate the cultural corpus.

Ferraro's investment in language is not merely making it an object of inquiry—see, for example, his analysis of Pietro di Donato's syntax in *Christ in Concrete*: the author “[e]lided sentences with squeezed-out articles ... enact[ing] the bodily loss of individual personhood, one man crushed unto the other like the sentences themselves” (61). He also selectively adopts the idioms he analyzes in his writing style, crafting a heteroglossic text interspersed by scholarly, national, vernacular, immigrant, and ethnic accents.

The end product, created by an author enjoying an eminent academic pedigree, offers a superb testament to the power of Italian American scholarship. Ferraro's work contributes significantly to the esteemed tradition of Italian American scholarship. In this capacity, it demonstrates not simply the value of Italian American studies for ethnic self-understanding, but it performs the value—the agency, in fact—of this academic field to contribute answers to broader issues confronting the nation. This scholarly practice defines the book, an example of which foregrounds the cultural valence of Madonna: “What could feminism look like if it came, instead, from a culture where mothers ruled, as everyone knew, behind the scenes, where what the women valued was that *everyone* valued despite or rather *because* of the long-standing division of (sexual) labor? What might female self-making look like, in short, if it were to put femininity back into feminism?” (146-47). To put it bluntly, *Feeling Italian* enhances the currency of Italian American scholarship in the academic marketplace.

This placing of Italian American material in the academy underscores the desire to balance the power distribution between a field of ethnic studies and dominant academic disciplines. Proving the value of Italian-inflected scholarship, *Feeling Italian* makes the case—in fact, demands, albeit implicitly—that academic renderings of Italian America require intellectual and affective critical engagement with Italian histories and cultural transmutations if one wishes to move beyond canonical academic topoi of ethnicity—the neat and convenient categories—and in turn do justice to their complexity.

Because representations of ethnicity matter supremely in shaping the understanding of difference and its significance, Ferraro repeatedly takes to task cultural critics who conveniently revert to existing categories, miss cues, details, meanings,

ambiguities, and relations through time and across space due to narrow analytical probing. The continuity between the agonistic communal performativity of Italians in the American northeast—which Herbert Gans strove to elucidate in connection to Boston’s West End—and its reproduction by Sinatra in performances “for a national marketplace”—which Ferraro charts—“has so far escaped description and understanding” (101). Hence the praise of critics who go “where no critic has gone before” (188).

Ferraro’s superb work demands that American Studies researchers who happen to venture into the domain of ethnicity do so with deep knowledge and attention to historical and cultural nuance. This extends a call for reciprocity, echoing a central thesis in Ferraro’s work, the two-way assimilation between the Italians and the Americans: “As the Italians have gotten more American, so the Americans have gotten more Italian” (204). So should Americanist scholars, *Feeling Italian* asserts.

Ferraro’s brief yet precious autobiographical disclosure offers a departure point to reflect on the question of ethnicity as a function of choice. A fourth-generation Neapolitan-Calabrian-Sicilian American, Ferraro is removed from the circumstances of the immigrant experience—working class and a foreigner’s anguish and toil. With “no direct household connection to Italy” (72), growing up solidly middle class and enjoying first-class education, he nevertheless feels “viscerally familiar” with Mario Puzo’s *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, a novel about “immigration and settlement set in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s.” This autobiographical fiction is more “emotionally immediate or relevant” to him than any other text or artifact he discusses in the book. Consistent with his practice of prefacing each chapter with a puzzling question, Ferraro feels the powerful pulling of ethnic attachments, asking, “How could this be?” (73).

In this framing, feeling Italian for the third and fourth generation presents a question of the how and why of this sensibility, requiring critical probing. Far from being self-evident, the coveted notion of “choosing to being and feeling ethnic” in post-modernity is entangled with processes mediating both this choice and individuals’ agency to fashion or refashion it. And if, in the case of Sinatra, it is the strong immigrant and second-generation habitus which shapes the feeling of his performance, it is the third-generation background experience in “a large close-knit middle-class family” (145)

that partially enters in Madonna's spectacular Italian/American power. Thus, if "feeling Italian is now a chosen identity" (203), this is a mode of identification calling for analysis of the cultural, family, social, class, and historical layers shaping "choice." Otherwise, one risks the trap of consenting to the culturally embedded ideology of the self-determining individual operating outside the social milieu.

In capitalist postmodernity, where ethnicity functions as a commodity and spectacle as well as a form of belonging and site of performing identity, the combining and (re)assembling of identities—partially anchored and creatively imagined—mass-mediated ethnicity reigns supreme as a "map for educating desire and (re)conceiving relations" (7). It propels cross-identifications. In this respect, a major contribution of *Feeling Italian* lies in its foregrounding of the arts as a powerful force in mediating feeling and being "ethnic."

Ferraro reconfigures the structure of feeling Italian along political lines, wishing to expand the scale of belonging across racialized boundaries. Tracing with appreciation the historical moments of such crossings, he charts the prevalence of Italian/Black cultural exchanges and mingling in (a) "the contact zone of pop music" and romance—he hails Madonna as "the most accomplished Italian-to-black crossover artist" (177); (b) histories of interracial solidarities—he admires Sinatra's support of Black people in the music industry; and (c) living with biracial identities. This mapping leads Ferraro to cast "cross-racialism [as] a dissenting mode of feeling Italian in the age of post-ethnicity" (179). Recognizing these crossings entails neither "ethnic self-rejection [nor] racial wish projection," he writes, but a "genuine interethnic race work, including, necessarily, the remaking of Italian America" (179). This aligns with Ferraro's interest "in pursuing the interplay between ethos (lived values) and ethnos (sense of belonging)"—of which he advocates its expansion to integrate multiplicity (7).

This gesture toward opening the cross-racial remaking of the Italian American "ethnos" must consider, I believe, the corresponding ethos mediating his envisioned fluidity of boundaries. To this effect, "we" stand to benefit from a critique of whiteness across Italian America as it operates in the present, and, in turn, interrogate those assumptions and ideologies that might obstruct multi-racial acceptance and erecting

boundaries of belonging, reproducing, explicitly or implicitly, racial hierarchies. Ferraro meditates on Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* to enter the conversation about 1970s and 1980s urban "white ethnic" politics, when sizable sectors of the working- and low-middle class descendants of southeastern European American immigrants, feeling alienated and abandoned (by the state and the liberal WASP elites), objected the civil rights gains by African Americans—sometimes expressed as virulent ethnic racism.

When presented with the question, "Have the Italians become white?" Ferraro views the question as misplaced, responding "that's not it. The Americans get to "feel Italian" (204). This has been seen by critics in post-racial terms, as a move "beyond white ethnicity." Yet, whiteness—as a cultural system (re)producing racial hierarchies, often expressed implicitly in race-free language—also connects with the movement of "white ethnics" to the segregated white suburbs in the 1970s, 1980s and beyond.

In an amply told story, middle-class European American ethnics joined the post-civil rights backlash against racial minorities by embracing the proverbial ideology of self-propelled bootstrap mobility—rejecting the power of the social structure and racialized hierarchies to mediate or even determine it—cashing in through this manner admittance to suburban whiteness. Where and how does this mode of whiteness operate within Italian America today? Particularly *today* when a sizable sector of American European "ethnics" embraces anti-immigrant views while sanitizing their own immigrant past. How does whiteness meander in voting behavior, opinions on immigration policy, or interracial marriage? The *Rocky* multimedia franchise, a cultural phenomenon giving voice to white ethnic and racial resentment and animosities in the 1970s and beyond, could serve as a point of departure to chart a genealogy of Italian whiteness in US multiculturalism, tracing its permutations in the suburbs and the feelings it generates now.

Feeling Italian decisively moves the analysis of ethnicity in connection to cross-cultural and interracial contact zones where writers, film producers, performers, intellectuals, painters, and artists cross-fertilize cultural expressions, identify across differences, reanimate and reconfigure the past, cross racial and cultural borders aesthetically, socially, romantically. Defying the ethnic identity border police, these practices

open social spaces for “race-blind casting” (175), “living poly-ethnicity” (174), moving ethnicity beyond birthright, reinventing and mixing identifications in the cosmopolitan polity.

Ultimately, *Feeling Italian* demonstrates the value of art “as an equipment of living” (205)—the kind of art that enhances the intensity of lived experience and adds depth to it, texturing it. Its immediacy is felt; its power matters when it “counsels and consoles, challenges and enriches people day-to-day” (206). Such art creates sensibilities and attitudes, pulling the next generation and people from all walks of life into feeling Italian, generating Italian American identifications, and inflecting Italian sensibility to non-Italians. In closing, I can do no better than reproduce the final lines of this astonishing book: “The art of ethnicity in America is imagination for everyday life, and feeling Italian is one of its great achievements” (208).

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