

After Identity

Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture

Peter Carravetta

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"GEOGRAPHY" BY CONSTANTINO BRUMIDI,
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For Robert Viscusi, Anthony Tamburri, John Paul Russo
critics, teachers, friends

*Quando la nova gente alzò la fronte
Vèr noi, dicendo a noi: "Se voi sapete,
Mostratene la via di gire al monte."*

Purg. II, 58-60

PREFACE

The allegory of Geography on the cover painted by Italian exile Constantino Brumidi in the Capitol in 1858 (a lunette in the Lyndon B. Johnson room, formerly the Senate Library) suggests that even pictorial representations of social history are basically palimpsests marked for location, temporality, and inevitably by re-interpretation. Geography is looking to her right at a map featuring “the new world,” as if invited to reconsider whether it confirms what was already on the globe to her left, a gesture that would fit in with an early XVI century iconography, when the likes of Amerigo Vespucci and Giovanni da Verrazzano were drawing new coastlines and soon made globes unusable for navigation purposes. However, though trained in classical painting in Rome and having worked at the Vatican before fleeing the failed 1848 revolution to the United States, Brumidi adds to his glorification of the Americas not just the by then over three century old myth of origin of his adopted country, but the actuality of time and place in which he was painting, the spirit that, notwithstanding the drums of impending civil war, would inform the great Westward expansion. Notice in fact that the angel on her left is holding a steam locomotive, the iron horse whose tracks at the time were furrowing the land on the backs of immigrants and minorities, becoming the glory of transportation, commerce, and banking moguls who amassed great wealth with these vital arteries that soon linked coast to coast. In the contested terrain of social and cultural interpretation, whether we are dealing with a painting, a performance, or a written text, there needs be a convergence of methodologies and ideologies in order better to focus upon and probe an elusive construct, a layered product that embodies instances of languages, memories, emotions, and politics.

The studies and essays gathered within these covers have been written over a period of twenty years, nearly always prompted by a conference, a book project, or an invited lecture. The links they try to establish between academic disciplines and cultural domains required continued effort to review and rethink the very assumptions of what we consider a stable cultural marker, as well as impose revision of the tools of analysis deployed. The chapters are thus meant to be read at least on two levels at the same time. First, they bear textual witness to an uneven, often conflicted personal journey into an amorphous field called Italian American Studies. And, second, and perhaps as a consequence of the first level, they are typically, and technically, of an *exploratory nature*, and turn out to ask more critical questions than they can possibly answer. For in analyzing different nooks and sites of Italian American culture, these writings seek and attempt to enlarge the scope of a criticism which must perforce question canons, mainstream cultural politics and, most importantly, go beyond the standard knee-jerk denunciation of cultural stereotypes or the iteration of a long denied cultural credibility.

Among the aims of this collection there is the attempt at a critical reconfiguration of the rhetoric of identity, and the first attempt slowly to construct a conceptual map which would characterize Italian American culture in terms of newer, multilayered and broader categories. Some of the key terms/concepts discussed in these pages that the reader will encounter are: *belonging and membership, polycentric consciousness, mediascapes, forms of translation, hybridity, strategic marginality, inventions of the past and the defusing of nationalistic mythologies*. Permeating these perspectives is the question of the *migrant* and the relevance of *migration* in general in shaping cultural identities or specific communities. Indeed, it will be argued that migration is the starting point, but by definition an unstable entity, not quite

an axiom. The overall organization of this book will of necessity have a rhizomatic nature, as themes and events appear and reappear at different junctures in the chapters, and some questions asked earlier will elicit a response pages or chapters later, or recur in a different key.

Italian American studies has grown into a full-fledged academic discipline in the past quarter of a century, and has drawn on the expertise of dedicated scholars from a number of different disciplines, from demography to folklore, from semiotics to cultural history, from gender and race studies to political analysis, from cinema to poetics to music and sports. In the papers that follow, I have touched upon several of these fields but mainly in the guise of an introduction, a problematic reference, or as *exempla*; other times the topics serve to link other and not necessarily Italian American issues, once again signaling possible paths for me and hopefully for younger scholars to pursue in depth in the future.

Of the three areas of investigation contained in the subtitle, the second, the question of interpretation, also looms large as well. Critique is also metacritique, an unceasing conscious retooling and refashioning of the means and methods of inquiry, crucial insofar as topics such as migration, identity and cultural politics constantly challenge any assertion or conclusion. In this sense the reader will find that I draw on theories and vocabularies of varied provenance, from hermeneutics proper to literary analysis, from sociology to anthropology, always essaying to elucidate a question with phenomenological clarity.

Nevertheless, in general, and retrospectively, a few hypotheses have guided me during these years. The critical task has periodically but persistently returned to one cluster of problems that go under the aegis of *cultural identity*. I believe it is high time we stop looking at Italian American culture in terms of a no longer tenable notion of identity when its very designation

signals an embedded and tearing duality that is time and place bound and, as such, subject to specific dynamics that emerge, assert themselves, and then must change in some guise as newer or alternative and broader palimpsests are set in motion. As some of the earlier chapters make patent, not enough reflection has been focused on the question of how someone – especially if an artist, or a writer, or a public persona – can identify as being *both*, an American *and* an Italian, without confronting the thus revealed possibility that identity is a construct of multiple elements, all critically slippery, all historically contingent and multipronged, and perhaps constituting, deploying a post-modern moniker, *a plurality of discourses in constant conflict and exchange*. Identity has no contours, it is fluid, amoebic, viscous.

Which idea of identity one accepts and parleys in a heterological social reality betrays from the start a political stance, and the assumptions it rests upon. The title *After Identity* wants to foreground this double movement: an attempt to draw up some maps of identity, chasing it, as it were, first, in literary texts – which make up the second part of the book; and then in the historic continuum, which is connotes the chapters of the first part. At the same time there are clear attempts to go beyond its monolithic presence in recent scholarship, leave behind its holistic, centering, neatly defined semiotic, and the façades that get tossed about without a more complex, problematic and timely content. As we will see, each horn of the dilemma is itself a palimpsest rolled into a maneuverable token for immanent validation but with little transcendent or trans-cultural usefulness. In brief, ethnic identity is found to be constituted by a cluster of different and not always coherent (sub)identities, some of which have little to do with nations and languages and much with politics and power.

Among the claims advanced in this book the reader will find:
1. That we opt for a *critique of margins* and of interrelations *across*

identity-markers; this means situating the critical act in a locus where it can see both sides of any given question but can never make a claim to totality or comprehensiveness. 2. That we essay to interpret the Italian American experience as eminently suited to serve as a herm at the interstice where conflicting rhetorics of class, power, aggression and cultural distortion can be analyzed in their constitutive even if at times not so reassuring elements. Finally, 3., as a critique of margins is implicitly a questioning of boundaries, of limits, of disciplines, then we should devise a topology (sketched in the Conclusion) that allows us to explore and chart sites of negotiation and power as manifested in the experience of the transit, of the crossing, and the entering and exiting from situations which are eminently political. Here ethnic studies in general, and Italian American studies in particular, ought to spend a great deal more energy in revisiting and re-contextualizing for the 21st century the issue of migration, once again, *across* states, classes, professions, forms of knowledge, genders, ideologies, styles of expression. Migration is the *de facto* enabling trope of all Americans, hyphenated or not, stirring that “being on the road” perturbation that pricks at the reassurances of rootedness and unitary identity and, ultimately, gnaws at the very core of all three master discourses, that of America, that of Italy/Europe, and most pointedly that of the offspring squashed in-between, Italian America.

Carravetta's *After Identity* is an epistemological and ontological gauntlet thrown down, a challenge to our collective scholarly, political and cultural imaginations. An especially timely work when millions of refugees, migrants and exiles flee the failed concept and reality of the nation state. Reminds us that the nature of being human is to move across boundaries and borders—be they physical, political or cultural. What remains after identity is de-centered, de-throned and de-mystified? An ancient truth: we are all migrants and only by embracing the other do we become fully human. One consequence—not inconsiderable—is that Carravetta's critique and theoretical framework goes a long way in making Italians and Italian Americans comprehensible to each other.

— STANISLAO G. PUGLIESE, Distinguished Professor of Italian and Italian American Studies, Hofstra University, author of *The Legacy of Primo Levi*

Thoughtful and wide-ranging, Peter Carravetta's *After Identity* probes the meanings inhering in cultural identity with especial emphasis on the shape-changing binomial of "Italian American." Carravetta's essays keenly examine and critique master narratives about nation and ethnicity through the lens of migration and exchange, brilliantly staking new claims for Italian American diaspora studies in the millennium.

— MARY JO BONA, Chair of Women and Gender Studies Dept., Stony Brook University, author of *Women Writing Cloth: Migratory Fictions in the American Imaginary*

Carravetta traces the coordinates of the modern migrant condition as the result of both a globalized capitalist economy, and of its never-ending geopolitical tragic displacements. Such awareness constitutes the moral and theoretical bedrock upon which to edify a new conscience of Italian American culture—a peculiar vantage point for exploring the challenges and opportunities of a post-identitarian experience. This is a first-class exploration, and expression at the same time, of Italian American creative thought.

— MARTINO MARAZZI, University of Milan, author of *Voices of Italian America*

PETER CARRAVETTA is the Alfonse M. D'Amato Professor in Italian and Italian American Studies at Stony Brook University. Founding editor of *DIFFERENTIA* (1986-1999), bilingual poet and translator, he authored eight books of criticism, including *Prefaces to the Diaphora* (1991), *Del postmoderno* (2009), *The Elusive Hermes. Method, Discourse, Interpreting* (2013). He is currently finishing a book on migration and colonialism. For more information visit www.petercarravetta.com.

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