

were held in a region of the United States that lacked strong Italian American communities? Were their experiences as positive as those in Chambersburg?

One of the strengths of Conti and Perry's book is that it does not end the story with the repatriation of Italian cooperators. The authors offer postwar life course histories for many former prisoners that show that they were successfully reintegrated into Italian society. Several friendships forged between prisoners and Italian Americans continued for decades, nurtured by the exchange of letters and even the occasional transatlantic visit.

What to make of the Italian American experience during World War II? Can a grand narrative be written that includes the different facets offered by these three works under review? And how does the Italian American experience fit into the broader story of the United States in World War II? All three works when considered collectively suggest a nuanced and complicated wartime experience for Italian Americans. Persecution and fear were felt by a significant number, especially those living on the West Coast, mixed with opportunities to participate in sensitive intelligence operations of the war for others. And despite a war marked by inhumanity, Italian prisoners of war were treated with dignity by the U.S. Army and received support from the Italian American community.

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After Identity: Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture.

By Peter Carravetta.

New York: Bordighera Press, 2017.

278 pages.

In *After Identity: Migration, Critique, Italian American Culture*, Peter Carravetta invites a rethinking of Italian America beyond the problematic framework of identity discourse. Carravetta notes that identity, as a category that labels a group on the basis of sameness, imposes a collective homogeneity on internally diverse subjects. To declare a singular identity is to erase an interior plurality, and this in turn presents a problem because it differentiates one entity from

another in absolute terms. Identity, as a concept that asserts unique particularity, and therefore definitive difference from others, inevitably draws a rigid boundary between Self and Other. In doing so it renders cultural differences absolute when in fact seemingly dissimilar cultures intersect, overlap, and exhibit commonalities.

The author aptly identifies the political problem associated with the production of impenetrable cultural boundaries. As he explains in his introduction, identity discourse directs a society to see newcomers such as immigrants or refugees as strangers and therefore dangerous to the host. Seen as categorically different, certain migrants are often subject to exclusion and demonization. Against this, the author proposes that analysis move “beyond identity” (29), that is moving away from unitary and fixed notions of identity to explore instead intersections between the Self and Other, the fluidity and internal complexity of the Self as well as cross-cultural combinations within the Self. If identity discourse foregrounds the differences between the Self and the Other, moving beyond identity in this manner enables the recognition of commonalities between the two.

At the crux of this rethinking is the recognition that multiplicity inherently resides within the Self as well as within the Other. Only this acknowledgment permits one to identify interconnections between the two—to admit interfaces and commonalities without erasing difference. This manner of understanding Self and Other carries a real impact, allowing civil co-participation in diversity (32–33) because it provides the means to move beyond the fear of “strangers” in neighborhoods, workplaces, institutions, and public spaces. Therein lies the political significance of this book and its aim of rethinking Italian America—and ethnicity, for that matter—through the lens of “after identity,” a position the author marks through the sign *Italian/American*.

But how to foster such a narrative of Self and Other? Carravetta finds promise in the figure of the migrant, the exemplary traveler who crosses borders, undergoes transformation, and experiences inner plurality. Migrants inhabit the instability of in-betweenness and for this reason “make poor nationalists” (32). One stands to learn a great deal about Self and Other then by studying the migrants’ own point of view. The author brings cultural studies and philosophy into conversation—an interdisciplinary perspective that is present throughout the book. Migrants, through the philosophical lens, represent “the sole ontogenetic precondition, the primordial drive through the ages: *change, travel, and metamorphoses*” (32).

Carravetta presses further for the rereading of history, migration, and literature, making a case for the value of a particular method of reading he calls “topological critique” (230). The aim of topological critique is to undermine the single truths of dominant narratives and commonsensical thinking.

Topological critique reads history and cultural texts (fiction, poetry, autobiography) with the aim of producing knowledge that canonical history and culture displace. To practice topological critique means to “*live in the border*, critically and pedagogically inhabiting the fault line, capitalizing on being able to see both sides of a culture or society at the same time” (229–230). Topological critique, then, is a practice of reading that recognizes plurality in places where identity discourse asserts singularity. Not surprisingly, the multifaceted figures of the mestizo and the hybrid serve as the topoi that this critique aspires to bring to consciousness.

In addition, topological critique asks: Who represents migrants and how are migrants spoken about? Two chapters take up these questions. Chapter 1 registers a critical unease regarding the ways in which historiography has represented Italian migrants: “The great many Scholars and Historians who have tried to make sense of Italian history have consistently not seen the emigrants” (69). “[T]he story of Italian emigration has never been written by the agents themselves, by the very people who experienced it” (45). Along parallel lines, chapter 3 discusses how dominant discourses such as Anglo-American science imposed their own truths on the early emigrants, or how they silenced their voices.

The task of the topological critique in this case is to reclaim these “silent, untold, unheard stories of the players themselves” (77). Chapter 2 recognizes that migration entails not only adaptation and negotiation in the host land but also experiences associated with the pre-emigration time and place. One must include the “how, why, and what happened before they sailed westward” (44), not just integration and assimilation. The author calls, in other words, for a transnational analysis of migration. Given the scarcity of migrants’ perspectives in the archive, it is literary and popular culture—“regional ballads, *stornelli*, nursery rhymes, *cantilene* linked to pre-Christian rituals” (48)—that help us “gain access to a socio-political reality too often ignored in cultural analysis” (49). Contemporary literature about the Italian/American experience offers yet another vital route to excavate previously silenced perspectives.

After Identity devotes particular attention to the question of Italian/American literature. Does it exist? Why should one label a literature Italian/American instead of merely American? In other words, what is in the name *Italian/American literature*? In chapter 2 the author regrets the invisibility of an explicitly marked Italian/American literature in the early 1990s. In contrast to the previous decade, prominent literary events eschewed the label *Italian/American* in panels, workshops, and readings featuring writings on the Italian/American experience. The literary and academic establishment, he contends, is moving toward the erasure of Italian America. This is a question of power

and exclusion, and Carravetta adopts an accusatory tone, charging a deliberate devaluation, as he pursues a semiotic angle to explain the exclusion:

[T]he force of this silence, may be embedded in the empty space between the two words, Italian [] American. It may also rest buried beneath the diacritical mark: Italian-American. . . . one can still register an underlying discomfort or annoyance, and the energy of an unstable yet uncodified discursive formation. . . . And there are many signs that *equal opportunity is not desired*. (83, emphasis mine)

The pervasive cultural devaluation of authors labeled as “ethnic” or “minor” unsettles the author, a concern that dominant media such as the *New York Times* register as well. “Call an author ‘minor,’” James Marcus writes, “and you tar him or her with a saturated brush. According to conventional wisdom, minor authors are too gifted to dismiss, and too trivial to bother reading” (cited in Carravetta, 105). How to position Italian/American literature in this power-laden terrain?

The sign *Italian/American* conveys a link between two worlds. Yet the literary canon dispenses with the label *Italian/American* when it classifies literature that connects Italian and American worlds. It classifies such work as national. The author sets himself the task to establish an alternative perspective, a task that is consistent with his topological critique: *Italian/American* is a legitimate literary marker, and Italian/American literature does exist. Carravetta argues “that *the two cultures, the two worlds, cannot communicate unless they trespass into the conjoining tertium of Italian/American culture and literature*” (emphasis in original, 84). From this angle, any literary work that connects Italian and American worlds inevitably lays claim to an Italian/American status.

Part 2, “Geography of Identity through Literature,” showcases key Italian/American fiction and poetry with the aim of outlining an Italian/American literary history. The first chapter in this part is a preliminary overview of several poets of Italian descent—Felix Stefanile, Sandra Gilbert, Jay Parini, Claudia Menza, Diane Di Prima, and Kathryn Nocerino—whose poetics move beyond national or hyphenated identities; their work has “nothing to do with their ‘Being Italian American’—or being American! Or being Italian!” (147). The author shows how this poetry matters, and he hopes to simulate “further interest” in it (166). In Kathryn Nocerino’s work (161), for instance, “we read a brutally realistic and ethically discomfiting assessment of inner city life, of urban politics laced with a recurring sense of alienation.” In the midst “of incertitude, of hopelessness, of absurdity, of the unexpected and incredible encounters emerge and constellate these texts. This displays further evidence of their own resistance to silence, resilient being-in-the-world” (163).

Each of the remaining three chapters in Part 2 undertakes close readings of selective authors and texts. Chapter 5 presents an insightful reading of Anthony Valerio's *Valentino and the Great Italians* as a work that confuses genres, a book that could be read as "fiction in the high modernist sense of the term," "a literary construct," an autobiography, "creative journalism, or semiserious *scherzi* [jokes] worthy of the highest journal tradition" (167). *Valentino* represents an example of Italian American literature (the author does not use punctuation in the sign in this part) whose concerns go beyond identity; it does so in revealing the power of stereotypes to consequently undermine them: "The interest and novelty" of Valerio's work is in its capacity to have us "savor the disturbing possibility that these stereotypes may indeed be, if not pre-determining the fate of certain encounters, probably co-determining the unfolding of the semantics, disclosing newer understandings" (170). Its discussion of Frank Sinatra presents human aspects of this "mythical singer"—"carrying emotional scars like any other of our fellow humans" (172)—thus generating empathy that may move readers beyond ethnic stereotypes.

Chapter 6 offers a fascinating close reading of Maria Mazziotti Gillan's poetry. Gillan's is a poetry of affect, Carravetta notes. Feelings and emotions are pervasive, and they structure intergenerational relations within a family. Gillan's work explores the immigrant mother and her relationship with her American-born daughter. The positive image of the immigrant father—as "a strong moral model and a loving person" (184)—defies stereotypes of Sicilian fathers having "been monsters to their wives and daughters" (184). But Gillan moves beyond identity through her "paradoxical poetic" (179), Carravetta points out. Hers is a poetic that resides "in-between two worlds" (191): "the old and the new, the traditional and the radical" (179), creating a space that "refuses to take sides because it seems to perceive the possibility of making contraries co-exist" (179), making for an exemplary topological co-presence of alternative truths.

Finally, chapter 7 undertakes close readings of two works by Robert Viscusi, *An Oration Upon the Most Recent Death of Christopher Columbus*, and *Astoria*. Carravetta reads the former as a political text that critiques upper classes and places the emigrating starving poor at its center, functioning in this focus as "a concise history of Italian American origins" (198). *Oration* is read also as a philosophical poem, one that "sets the stage for a possible ontology [of the Italian people], which can be expressed in Heideggerese as 'being-in-the-world-with others.' This means accepting movement, change, risk, a constantly shifting landscape" (204).

The ontology of "existence as constant becoming," of the "will to dis/cover [and] to ex/perience" (204), finds poetic expression in *Astoria*, a text that exemplifies the "processual changing nature of ethnicity . . . its being 'porous' and

‘segmented’—ethnicity as reinvention (218). *Astoria* goes beyond concerns of identity when it construes the narrator’s bilateral affiliations as “a stratification of unreconcilable identities” (219), contributing to the Italian/American literary corpus that confronts the singularity of identity.

Italian/American literature places in tension the Italian and American worlds that it intertwines and brings into conversation. But what is its wider cultural role? If literature marked as Italian/American is relegated to the margins, Carravetta builds on scholarship that explores Italian/American marginality to advocate that it is precisely this position that should serve as this literature’s critical function. Literature from the margins, after all, critiques dominant literary production. “For those enmeshed in the self-annulling network of middle America,” the author writes, “marginality is now actually something to be yearned for, it becomes an ontological necessity, proof of a visual angle, limited but not abstract topology, there being no credible Center or Grand Value any longer” (197).

Italian/American literature thus works to recognize the truths that the literary canon may omit. It aims to interrogate national literature from the margins. “‘Italian American Writers’ can disclose imaginary and critical loci from which to re-view our very traditions, relying on the ‘positioning’ at the margin to exercise a cultural/political critique *through* a novel” (207). The author endows this literary marginality with the power to give voice to subaltern experiences of the past:

[F]or the Italian American writer, a great deal of expressive tension and interpretive torsions occur right at inception as the text ventures to negotiate continuous reconfigurations of name and reality, in the inscription of a subaltern past or non-glorious (namely, not accepted, not wanted, not profitable!) background. (91)

After Identity, bringing together writings published “over a period of twenty years” (x), inevitably presents considerable challenges to navigate. The author is explicit regarding the problem of consistency and coherence. “The chapters,” he writes in his introduction, “bear textual witness to an uneven, often conflicting personal journey into an amorphous field called Italian American Studies” (x). The book can be a difficult read. Carravetta’s erudition is often expressed in rather dense prose. The high level of abstraction, in my opinion, undermines one of the strengths of the book: its bringing into conversation migration and literary studies with philosophy. We all stand to greatly benefit from this interdisciplinary dialog, and an additional layer of editing would have opened this book to a wider, nonspecialized audience.

But this ambitious book is aware that it “ask[s] more critical questions” than it “can possibly answer” (x). For my part, I wished for a deeper historical

and cultural probing regarding claims about the ontology of migration. The enduring existence of diaspora nationalisms certainly challenges the idea of migrants as ontogenetically “poor nationalists.” Also, the claim of Italian Americans as ontologically “accepting movement [and] change” sidesteps the question of what changes they accept (and what they reject) in specific contexts and relations of power. On another issue, as someone with a keen interest in questions regarding the representation of the migrant past, I would have liked to see a discussion explaining why the author dismisses a host of texts that “have tried so valiantly to ‘re-construct’ or ‘re-imagine’ or ‘reclaim’” early migrant voices as a failed “hollow space,” a space that is “given a voice, but one which somehow sounds distant and, as it were, from the ‘outside’” (136). In this critique, Carravetta raises the issue of authenticity in representation. But this is a vexed territory. After poststructuralism, any narrative that claims immediate access to a real, true experience is inclined to be suspect, since our access to reality is mediated by language. Thus the representation of the early migrants by so-called second-generation writers is not necessarily less authentic than the one by the original migrants themselves. The discussion of “giving voice” to the subalterns requires a framework other than the one of authenticity.

A question kept recurring to me throughout my reading of *After Identity*. In the writings of eminent thinkers, as Carravetta points out, postidentity discourse “deal[s] precisely with the ontological status of being/living ‘in between,’ or of ‘belonging-to-no-one,’ and with the perplexities ushered by having to construct such belonging *through* literature” (207). This raises a question for those in the academy who are committed to this politics but whose mandate also is to advance knowledge about “ethnicity” in the American university. It would be telling in this respect to pay attention to the rhetoric that scholars in Italian American, or for that matter Greek American, academic programs utilize to legitimize their faculty positions at the university and enlist public support. The deployment of identitarian positions is not uncommon, I believe, in these programs that advocate themselves as sites for cultural and linguistic preservation. This interest certainly falls within the domain of what we commonly refer to as identity politics, a practice that the author acknowledges but largely brackets from further discussion. In his analysis of Gillan’s poetics, for instance, Carravetta leaves “aside the knotty and often ambiguous pursuit of how to locate and characterize identity politics” (179). But how *do* the politics of “after identity” in our writings square with the politics of identity in our material environment? In this cultural moment when “minor” academic programs are the most vulnerable in the face of dramatic budget cuts, it seems unlikely that these programs will not resort to identity discourse as a strategy for survival. After all, “ethnic” communities often support endowed positions

in the name of identity. How does one dismantle identity when identity still mobilizes the public?

A careful reader of *After Identity* will reap plenty of rewards, as this volume advances Italian American studies on multiple fronts. It contributes to the ongoing rethinking of migration as a transnational phenomenon and the question of representing subaltern subjects. It proposes a pedagogy of teaching Self and Other through literature and migration. It offers insightful readings of Italian/American poetics and creates signposts toward an Italian/American literary history. And its topological critique makes a key intervention in interrogating the literary canon for marginalizing “minor” literatures. Linking power with literary production, *After Identity* also invites us to examine inclusions and exclusions of so-called ethnic literature in the United States in specific sites and contexts of power. This examination could shed light on the historical fluctuations and contemporary unevenness in the public presence or invisibility of Italian/American literature in American society.

After Identity opens spaces for further topological inquiries and a critique of the center from the literary margins. But can we imagine a postmarginal position for bicultural literature? A bicultural literature that performs critical work from the power of the center? Can we think after margins, so to speak, to have *national* literature advocate the interests that *After Identity* so passionately advocates?

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Built with Faith: Italian American Imagination and Catholic Material Culture in New York City.

By Joseph Sciorra.

Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2015.

262 pages.

In his introduction, Joseph Sciorra explains: “This book offers a place-centric, ethnographic study—conducted over the course of thirty-five years—of the religious material culture of New York City’s Italian American Catholics” (xviii). The longevity of Sciorra’s commitment to the study of vernacular shrines, outdoor altars, *presepi* (nativity landscapes)—and to the craftspeople who make them—is reflected in his richly detailed treatment of both the formal