

MANUFACTURING LITERACIES

by

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Bachelor of Arts, 2002
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Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
AddRan College of Humanities and Social Sciences
Texas Christian University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August, 2007

Dedicated to my grandmother,
Maria Romanelli,
for writing to me in Italian,
even when I wrote back in English,
for doing the work of the hand,
so I could pursue the work of the mind,
and for surviving wars that were
physical, cultural, economic, and linguistic,
so I would have the opportunity
to tell this story.

Preface

“This city, however, does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightening rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls”

–Italo Calvino *Invisible Cities*

In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino shows that cities are much more than intersections of latitude and longitude. Instead of being facts, cities are stories of exploration, transformation, and consequence. The meaning of a city is subjective and dependent upon the individual’s experiences within its boundaries. Calvino’s representation of the city can function as a metaphor for the term literacy as it is evoked in this project. Literacy, like the city, is a multitude of lived experiences. Literate tasks are performed in almost every language and serve disparate ends depending upon the community and the context. As Deborah Brandt explains in *Literacy and American Lives*, “what people are able to do with their ability to read and write in any time and place—as well as what others do to them with writing and reading—contribute to their sense of identity, normality, possibility” (11). Literacy is given prominence in the stories we tell about ourselves and the stories others tell about us. It is both of these stories that this dissertation project is invested in uncovering.

We are currently in the midst of an evolving story about what happens to literacy, its holders and non-holders, during times of economic instability. As we shift from an industry-based economy to an information-based economy, headlines proclaiming a shortage of skilled workers and, as a result, the loss of manufacturing jobs to competitors overseas abound. The solution to the crisis according to the government and the media is literacy training. As such, in response to our shifting labor market, workplace literacy programs have sprouted up at community colleges and in the back rooms of corporations. High school and

college curricula have become more focused on science, math, and technology. This response reflects an acceptance of the assertion that if we understand the labor market, we understand the training that is required for individuals to enter it. This response, I argue throughout this dissertation, is backwards.

In order to respond ethically to the literacy crisis at hand, we must first understand the stories, the communities, the history of crises, and the contexts for which literate skills are to be applied. In that vein, this project asks us to look towards history for answers to the problems of the future, to see how people before responded to similar literacy crises and how their responses can help us ethically proceed during this current climate of educational and economic crisis. It turns to the stories of immigrants who sought entry into the United States' booming industrial economy and who were told that English-language literacy was a necessity for employment, sustenance, and cultural acceptance. It tells the story of those who listened to this rhetoric and those who resisted it, and through these stories we learn tactics of linguistic, cultural, and economic survival.

Acknowledgements

Many people assume that writing is a solitary activity--a vision of an individual in a tweed jacket, smoking a pipe often comes to mind. People with these visions, however, have most likely never written a dissertation. Writing is always collaborative; it draws from the work of others not only for information, but also for inspiration and evolution. As such, I am very grateful to have an opportunity to thank the many people who contributed to this project.

I would like to first thank all of the members of my dissertation committee for their willingness to give of their time and for the level of their commitment to this project. Specifically, I would like to thank: Dr. Ron Pitcock for introducing me to the field of literacy studies and guiding me through my first round of archival research; Dr. Bonnie Blackwell for asking the tough questions and making me think about these issues in new ways and also for advising me throughout my graduate work; Dr. Ann George for welcoming me to the community of composition and rhetoric and the graduate community at Texas Christian University five years ago. Her conscientious feedback has not only helped me create a stronger project, but has also made me more aware of my writing style, its strength and its pitfalls. This learning will serve me far beyond this dissertation. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my director, Dr. Charlotte Hogg. This project found its beginning in her course on Women's Rhetoric(s) and throughout this process she has exhibited limitless patience: reading messy first drafts and offering guidance, responding to a barrage of questions and remaining enthusiastic. Most of all I thank her for teaching me the balance between the creative and the academic throughout my graduate work, all the while encouraging me to shape my own voice as an emerging scholar and writer. All of my

committee members modeled the qualities I hope to exhibit in my work with future students and colleagues.

I would like to thank all those who engaged in the conversations that brought me to the ideas contained in this dissertation: to my colleagues, especially Shelley Christie and Sarah Yoder for the conversations that took place over mojitos and on elliptical machines that made me think along the way; and to Jill Doise, Dave Kuhne, and Moriah McCracken for reading my earliest attempts at chapters, pretending they were great, and providing me with constructive criticism. I am grateful to the scholars who attended my presentations at CCCCs, Feminisms and Rhetorics, and RSA and asked questions and recommended sources that significantly enhanced this project. I would also like to thank the students of my two Rhetoric of Representation courses at Texas Christian University for their willingness to work through these questions with me.

My project also benefited from the access I was given to archives and documents by various institutions and individuals. The meticulously-kept records and archives at The Western Reserve Historical Society proved to be indispensable, and I would especially like to thank Pamela Dorazio Dean, Associate Curator for Italian American History, for helping me navigate the archives and track down documents not stored at their location. I would also like to thank the community members who continue to operate The Little Italy Museum in Cleveland and who allowed me to sort through documents that are not currently on display. The manager of special collections at the Cleveland Public Library, Pamela J. Eyerdam, was also an invaluable resource, tracking down books in remote storage without a question or a smirk.

Special thanks are due to my family: to my parents, Jacquelyn and Nick, who with little sense of what it is that I do, still assume that I must be saving the world and have done everything possible to encourage me to continue; to my large collection of aunts, uncles, cousins, my sister and my brother who never let me forget my roots; to my nephews, A.J. and Austin, and my nieces, Caelyn and Madelyn, who remind me that when life gets tough, it's best to go bowling or dance around your living room; but most importantly to my husband, Matthew, who supported me from across the country and did not stop once we shared an address. He was the first to read all of these pages and to listen to me hash out these conclusions. He worked, he cooked, he cleaned, and he learned more about literacy than he probably ever really intended to, but his faith in me and in this project never faltered. I am in awe of his patience and the extent of his support, but am most thankful for his love.

I have saved for last those who deserve my greatest gratitude, my participants—Bernardina Corte, Maria Romanelli, Joe Russo, Maria Romano, Antonio Ianiello, Pasqualina Casale, Tony Parente, Maria Falso, Tony Ruggiero, Pasqualina Parente, and Ida Casale--without whom this project would not have been possible. They invited me into their homes and into their lives. They shared experiences that they did not want to relive so that this project could exist. Before he passed away in August of 2006, Antonio Ianiello reminded me of the power of place and the power of words: “the best place for anybody is where you grew up before sixteen because you never going to forget that. If you got in your mind, even if you get Alzheimer’s disease, you still will have that. Like this tape,” he said resting his hand on my tape recorder “no matter what age, the tape stays there.” Words give us permanence. As such, my participants’ faith in me is both inspirational and frightening; I can only hope that I

have represented their stories and the implications as powerfully as they were represented to me during a summer filled with tomatoes, laughter, figs, and tears.

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Chapter 1: In Search of Our Mothers' and Fathers' Blue Collars: An Introduction

Cleveland's Dragons and Dinosaurs

“Cleveland even now I can remember
‘cause the Cuyahoga River
goes smoking through my brain.
Burn on, big river, burn on.”—Randy Newman

This city was a steel dragon, breathing giant puffs of smoke into the sky. During the years when imagination overruled logic, Ohio did not mean rubber or steel or automobiles to me; it meant clouds. Passing the Ford Plant where mom and dad met before they married, I would stare out of the back window, watching as fluffy white clouds puffed from the tall chimneys that reached into the sky. Grandma and Grandpa, MTD; Uncle Tony, LTV Steel; Aunt Carol, Engine Plant One; Uncle Ben, the foundry; they were all cloud makers. On clear days, I would look up and be proud.

That was before the strike lines, before those factories stopped breathing. Bits of conversations I can remember from the dinner table remind me of the transformation the city went through as I traded pigtails for high tops: “Benefits for workers,” “NAFTA,” “strike line,” “SCABS,” “plant closing.” Dad was chairman of the union at Local 1250 then. It was the eighties and the newscasters were talking of “bloodletting” and “job cuts,” but we never used those words. Dad would always remind us, “They’re not jobs; they’re lives.”

The skies are less enchanting on my flights home now, ten years later. As my plane begins its descent into Cleveland Hopkins Airport, the skeletal remains of LTV Steel come into focus. Even before it was an empty mammoth, people used to call it an eyesore, but I never saw it that way. Driving past on 71 North, looking from afar, the workers looked like specks, but those specks were my family members and all my friends’ parents. Now, only a

rusty monster remains, standing stolid like a modern art piece. They plan to put a Wal-Mart there. Some call it convenient. I call it ironic. Cleveland is replacing a symbol of industry with a symbol of the type of extreme consumerism that has sucked the industrial lifeblood from the city. Yet the city is not dead; the dragon is just sleeping now and the skies are less patchy.

The people who inhabited those buildings live on. On Saturdays, the city comes alive with color and music. Saturday streets are filled with jazz and peddlers selling African garb, paintings of the city's yesteryears, little statues of Buddha, and sometimes even Asian-crafted beads. People dance and eat falafel or fresh mozzarell' and, for those hours, it is as if our schools are not closing, and we are not number one on the poverty list, again.¹ On Saturdays the voices that once filled the factories now fill the streets surrounding Cleveland's West Side Market.

In the market, languages blend. People wear their ethnic identity on their backs and display it in the foods they sell. Whether it is for pierogies, cannoli, wienerschneitzel, hummus or egg rolls, people are drawn into the market to experience ethnic authenticity. The energetic shouts of the vendors and the samples waved in front of your face are intoxicating, as if you were living your own jazz song: just as in jazz where incongruous elements meet and clash in a sound that can be cacophonous to the untrained ear, so can the mixing of German, Irish, Italian, Asian, Hispanic, and Indian accents become music if you close your eyes and listen closely.

¹ According to U.S. Census Report of 2002, *Poverty in the United States*, Cleveland had the highest poverty rate of all the big cities in the United States—a record she held until 2004 when she was replaced by Detroit. In 2006, Cleveland, again, became the poorest city in the country according to the census.

As with many urban areas, ethnic diversity is a staple of the city and a commodity to be bought and sold. There are no Macaroni Grills or Chipotles in the Ohio City section of Cleveland. Everything is as raw and real as the painted signs identifying the buildings and paper menus plastered to the windows. It is not rare that the ethnic identity of the workers and the menu match. Yet, while these visible markers of culture and ethnicity surround us, it is rare that people recognize that the individuals now trading their ethnic identities were often the ones who were previously trading their bodies in factories—factories which have, in an information economy, gone from being dragons breathing clouds into the sky to dinosaurs whose bones are the only reminders of our economic past.

Beginning the Search

As this narrative highlights, class and ethnicity connect in a way that, though apparent, is often not discussed. The shift in the economy from industry to information has produced important conversations about computer literacy, visual and virtual rhetoric; yet, at times these conversations overshadow discussions of those impacted most by this shift: the working class, which is largely comprised of immigrants. While the evidence of “those millions of anonymous immigrants who took part in building railroads, tunnels, and skyscrapers, who worked in factories and farms helping to clothe and feed the country” surround us everyday (Mangione and Morreale xviii), our scholarly gaze rarely lands upon them as valuable resources that could help us discover new knowledge about the way that literacy is acquired, used, and understood by those outside of our academic circle. For instance, within the field of literacy studies, while we have studies that discuss language

practices within lower economic areas,² Morris Young's work on Asian-American literacy, as well as texts that discuss the history of literacy practices within segments of the African-American community,³ further work is necessary to uncover the myriad of literacy practices of the various communities which comprise the working class.

Shifting our academic gaze in this way is inevitable, as changes in our economic system have led to proclamations of the "illiteracy" problem posed by the working class and calls for solutions to our current "literacy crisis." While literacy scholars have begun responding to this "crisis" by researching the agendas behind these calls and the effectiveness of the attempts to "retool" the working class, we continue to talk about the working class as though it is an homogenous group of individuals with the same needs, backgrounds, and goals. From the media to studies by scholars such as Glenda Hull, however, it is clear that when we are discussing "the working class," we are really discussing various non-dominant cultures. As Hull states in "Hearing Other Voices: A Critical Assessment of Popular Views on Literacy and Work":

Articles reporting worker illiteracy often specify as well which groups among the American population will dominate in the future—that is, women, minorities, and immigrants—and then make the point that, since these groups are likely to have the poorest skills, literacy-related problems in the workplace will likely worsen. (6)

² See Ellen Cushman's *The Struggle and the Tools: Oral and Literate Strategies in an Inner-City Community*, Shirley Brice Heath's *Way With Words: Language, Life and Work in Communities and Classrooms*, and Mike Rose's *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*. New York: Penguin, 2004.

³ See Jacqueline Jones Royster's *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change Among African American Women* and Shirley Wilson Logan's *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth-Century Black Women*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP, 1999.

While women, a myriad of immigrants, and African Americans together make up the majority of the working class, focusing on these communities as one homogenous group will not help us understand the complex relationships these individuals have with language or the multiple factors influencing their literacy practices. As Audre Lorde explains, “It is not those differences between us that are separating us. It is rather our refusal to recognize those differences, and to examine the distortions which result from our misnaming them and their effects upon human nature and expectation” (122). It is necessary to investigate these differences in order to understand the ways our view of the working class has become distorted. Under the title “working class,” these individual groups disappear, which is problematic as “class is rarely talked about in the United States; nowhere is there a more intense silence about the reality of class difference than in educational settings” (hooks 177). As little is known about “the working class,” even less is known about the factions making up this amorphous group. Indeed, given that the working class is made up of individual groups who have their own cultures, histories, values and literacy practices, making generalizations about them appears to be too simplistic to account for the diverse meanings language takes on within these disparate communities, especially when we consider the fact that many members of ethnic communities have a high level of literacy in their native language and a limited literacy in Standard Edited English.

These linguistic differences are important for scholars in both literacy and rhetoric to recognize, as the language practices of immigrant groups work as a means of both oppression and cultural resistance. As “the extended sense of attachment to a special group with whom [one] can identify and [be] accepted,” ethnicity both divides and unifies (Veronesi 304). It allows individuals to create communities based on their likenesses and to establish a

community outside of the general realm of Caucasia. Because one of the goals of “ethnicity” is to demarcate a terrain for individuals as “an extension of one’s being beyond being an American to another dimension of existence” (304), I explore the literacy practices of a specific ethnic group rather than looking at the working class as a whole to consider whether or not their “illiteracy” is truly a problem, a chosen position, or a diversion from the real economic problem that the shift from industry to information imposes.

Therefore, I call this chapter “In Search of Our Mothers’ and Fathers’ Blue Collars” because that is essentially the purpose of this project; it is a search to develop a better understanding of the literacy needs and abilities of the working class. In homage to the process Alice Walker uses in her work, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens,” to discover the creative works of her “mothers” by examining the garden as a rhetorical space, I will return to my own garden—Cleveland’s Little Italy.⁴ As I am interested in the shift in the economy and its impact on workers, focusing on this group will enable me to get a historical sense of the changing literacy demands from the 1950s to today. Examining the voices of eleven Italian-American immigrants from this area through the lenses of literacy and rhetorical theories, I analyze the literacy practices of this specific ethnic group and reflect on the accuracy of generalized statements made about the literacy needs and goals of the working class. Further, I gauge the techniques they used to survive within the American economic landscape and infer practices based on their experiences that may prove fruitful for pedagogues and scholars as we proceed into our current environment of crisis.

⁴ This idea is based on Walker’s own search for African-American women’s historical creative activities and her call for others to engage in this type of history writing. Walker’s search is described in her essay “Saving The Life That Is Your Own: The Importance of Models in the Artist’s Life” in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Florida, Harcourt: 1983. 3-14.

In order to show the relationship between my participants' ethnicity, class, and literacy practices, I trace the literacy sponsorship or lack of literacy sponsorship they received in Italy, which contributes to the way they view language in America. By reviewing historical and current depictions of Italian Americans in American media, I show how Italian Americans became twofold victims of the literacy myth: first because the literacy myth lured them to America and, second, because they are represented as "illiterate" and, therefore, criminal, amoral, and/or ignorant. Based on the data gathered through interviews, I examine the way my eleven participants responded to this depiction, gained work, and maintained their subsistence with limited English literacy. Finally, I compare the experiences of these immigrants to the current situation members of the working class find themselves in as America's economy shifts from an industrial to a service/information economy. It is my hope that this project will help scholars and teachers of writing understand how they can best respond to the literacy crises that arise out of this economic shift from industry to information.

I begin this project by explaining why the category of "class" needs interrogation, discussing the frameworks I use to analyze my participants' rhetorical and literate practices, and explaining the methodology I used to complete this dissertation. I explain why Italian Americans provide an interesting context to learn more about literacy and its consequences and describe the circumstances which led me to this conclusion. Hence, I begin the process of questioning popular assumptions about those who have worn and continue to don blue collars.

Defining Literacy, Defining the “Working Class”

This process can only begin by interrogating the very terms that comprise the core of this project: *literacy* and the *working class*. Looking at the definitions of these terms tangentially is a logical choice, as the process of defining *literacy* and the *working class* followed a similar path: both have been defined broadly and, in order to be studied and understood, need to be defined contextually. In many ways, the term *working class* conflates everyone who engages in labor that is not highly valued within an information economy into a singular category, making the group appear to be homogenous. Literacy scholars should be particularly concerned with this conflation as the attempts to make *literacy* an all-encompassing term became the driving force in the development of our field.

For many years, scholars studying the history of literacy have used a broad definition of literacy as the mere ability to read and write, trying to determine exactly what, to borrow a phrase from Jack Goody and Ian Watt, “the consequences of literacy” are.⁵ In trying to study the cognitive effects of literacy or compile a vast history of literacy across cultures and time periods, scholars such as David Olson, Walter Ong, and Goody had to define literacy broadly as they were attempting to understand how literacy originated, and how it changes individual cognition in order to understand how cultures and individuals advance.⁶

⁵ This phrase was originally coined in Goody and Watt’s “The Consequences of Literacy.” *Literacy in Traditional Societies*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1968. In this article, they argue that literacy has significant cognitive and cultural “consequences” and aim to show how major societal developments are tied to the attainment of literacy alone.

⁶ For representative examples of cognitive and cultural literacy studies by these scholars see David Olson’s “From Utterance to Text: The Bias of Language in Speech and Writing.” *Harvard Educational Review*. 47.2 (1977). 257-81. These ideas can also be found in Olson’s “Writing and the Mind.” *Literacy: A Critical Sourcebook*. Ed. Cushman, Ellen, et. al. Boston, NY: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2001. 107-22. Also see Walter Ong’s. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London: Methuen, 1982. See Jack Goody’s. *The Interface Between the Oral and the Literate*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1987.

However, applying this definition leads them to make grand claims about the ways that literacy impacts individuals, as well as society. As Street states in *Social Literacies: Critical Approaches to Literacy in Development, Ethnography and Education*, using this definition led individuals to believe that one can “give them literacy and they will achieve social mobility, economic and political equality” (21). As such, these types of studies contribute to what Harvey Graff refers to as “the literacy myth”—the belief that attaining literacy makes an individual more moral, civil, and employable. However, Graff’s study of literacy in three nineteenth-century towns—London, Kingston, and Hamilton—points out that this simply is not the case. Rather, ethnicity, gender, and class play a larger role in determining an individual’s opportunities and positioning; the ability to read or write can to some extent aid an individual, but cannot enable him or her to overcome these ascriptive characteristics which are responsible for his or her social position.⁷

For this reason, the research methods and the definition of literacy used by early scholars in literacy studies led scholars such as Beth Daniell to claim that these studies created a “Great Leap Theory” of literacy or what Street labels an “autonomous model of literacy,” as they assign societal changes to the attainment of literacy alone. Essentially figures such as Daniell and Street take issue with scholars such as Ong, Olson, and Goody for trying to scour the history of civilization, locate the moment a culture achieved literacy, and then go on to attribute any cultural developments to the attainment of literacy. What Goody, Ong, and Olson fail to mention is that literacy is politically charged, varied, motivated, and complex. The problem with this approach is that “literacy appears both as a social explanation that individualizes oppression by blaming the victim and as a tool to incorporate

⁷ For the full study see, Harvey Graff’s *The Literacy Myth: Literacy and Social Structure in the Nineteenth Century City*. New York: Academic P, 1979.

all the ‘other Americas’—the poor, blacks, Hispanics, new Asian immigrants—into a monolingual body politic” (Trimbur 286).

Illiteracy, therefore, becomes a stigma and often carries with it “a greater burden than the actual literacy problems” (Street 19). As Graff explains in *The Literacy Myth*, throughout history, illiterates have been portrayed as members of a culture of poverty and immorality. Similarly, the term *working class* has become pejorative in a time when this group is being blamed for the economic collapse of certain markets within our society. The supposed “illiteracy” of this group is used to blame them for America’s inability to compete nationally and globally in the economy and leads to broad statements such as “due to poor reading and writing skills, workers make costly mistakes, they don’t work efficiently, they produce inferior products, and apparently, they stay home a lot” (Hull, “Hearing” 9). Partially, I believe that these caricatures are possible because we know so little about the members making up the working class aside from the fact that the majority are often doubly disempowered: first by their class status and second by their race or ethnicity. With the limited knowledge we do have about the working class, it is difficult to determine their social literacy practices (the literacy practices required by the activities they engage in) and the types of literacy requirements underlying our economic situation. Failure to interrogate these practices allows the media and government officials to discuss the members of the working class as though they are all illiterate, making their “illiteracy” the factor that keeps them from being employable and keeps American labor from being competitive in the global economic market. For instance, former U.S. secretary of education, Madeleine Kunin was quoted as stating: “We cannot be competitive as a nation or improve our standard of living unless we are able to improve the literacy rate” (qtd. in “The Broken Dream” 4). The warrant of this

argument is clear: the workers are blamed for our inability to strengthen our foothold in the global market.

The problem with the term *working class*, therefore, is one of definition. While *working class* is preferable to the term that preceded it, *the lower class*, similar to the definition of *literacy*, the definition of the *working class* as the group of workers who engage in the work of the body rather than the work of the mind is too simplistic to account for the diversity found within the working class. First, as Mike Rose shows in *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker*, what it means to be “blue collar” has shifted with the changes in our economy. Previously, it was believed that the work engaged in by the working class required little skill or training.⁸ However, as the value of certain professions have begun to decline, electricians, plumbers, hair stylists—people with a high level of training and skill—are now counted in as members of the amorphous “working class.” This shift has occurred because, as Brandt explains in “Accumulating Literacy,” the value of any one type of “literacy is always in flux” (666) and is dependent upon the political, social, and economic values a particular type of literacy carries with it. The literacy

⁸ By using the term *previously*, I mean only to refer to the previous generation’s view of working class labor. Historically, the work we now consider “unskilled” actually required knowledge that could only be obtained through membership in a guild society. According to Stephan Epstein in “Property Rights to Technical Knowledge in Premodern Europe, 1300-1800,” from the late 11th century to the early 19th century, entry into these now often considered “unskilled professions” required rigorous vetting. As he describes, “craft guilds supervised job performance, work conditions and quality of instruction; enforced contracts through compulsory membership, statutory penalties, and blackballing; and protected apprentices from poor-training in craft specific-skills” (382). Professions we today consider highly-skilled such as those in the fields of dentistry and surgery were skill-wise regarded as being on par with those we now consider low-skilled such as mining, building, and metalworking.

skills which once were highly sought after in an industrial economy have a declining value as we shift from a “thing-making, thing-swapping society to an information-making, service-swapping society” (“Sponsors of Literacy” 173). With this shift in values, the definition of *the working class* becomes even more nebulous.

Therefore, as Daniell and Street argue that literacy cannot be defined as a catch-all if its “consequences” are to be understood, the term *working class* must be more carefully defined if we are to uncover the linguistic consequences for this group. Just as scholars in literacy studies recognize that the broad definition of literacy cannot account for the various practices and meanings that communicative acts take on within disparate communities, we also need to recognize that a broad definition of the working class will not help us understand the variety of linguistic practices, the various meanings literacy takes on, or the needs and literate abilities of the multiple factions making up this particular community. Not only do these individuals literally not speak the same language, but also the values of the language of the home and the language of the workplace mean disparate things to African Americans, Latin Americans, Polish Americans, Asian Americans, and Italian Americans. Therefore, just as there was a shift in the way in which we study literacy, there must be a shift in the way we study the working class.

Taking a cue from the methodological shift in literacy studies from broad explorations to contextual studies, I believe that the key to understanding the working class can be found by engaging in research that focuses on specific communities. Since the time when individuals began questioning the autonomous model of literacy studies, there has been a continual narrowing in the types of studies being conducted to understand literacy. As

scholars such as Graff, Street, Edward Soltow, and Lee Stevens began to point out ways that literacy practices are always contextual and ideological, scholars such as Daniell and Ellen Cushman began narrowing the focus of their studies in order to examine the meaning of literacy for individuals at a specific time. Scholars began to realize that the term *literacy* must be looked at within a certain context to determine exactly what it means to be literate. As Carl Kaestle acknowledges, “To suggest new directions and answer new questions we also need studies focused on single communities or more specific topics, studies that address such questions as educational opportunity and the uses of literacy among adults” (31). Recent scholars have found that what it means to be literate depends upon whose literacy is in question, who is doing the judging, and whose benefit is being considered. As such, in order for us to understand the literacy needs and practices of the working class, one must first understand the group in question, which can only be achieved by focusing in on the various communities falling under this umbrella term.

Finding Our Blue Collars

Understanding the working class is a difficult venture for those within the academy because it asks them to step outside of the bounds of objectivity and neutrality and, often times, into their own pasts. Class is something that the academy often teaches us to abandon. As Richard Miller reminds us, “the university does, in fact, serve a certain sector of the working class; but it does so by engaging those students willing and able to abandon their home cultures in exchange for more ‘universal pleasures’” (125). Yet, class cannot completely be abandoned by students, for even if they believe they have been given an equal chance, “we know, however, that first-generation collegians rarely graduate” (Kampf 248).

Moreover, it is not only students who are faced with this conundrum; “We [scholars] were encouraged, as many students are today, to betray our class origins” (McMillan 182).

Therefore, those within the academy can extend Miller’s point to their own situation, as they too try to “pass” by burying their past under layers of theoretical frameworks and code in language through such terms as *hegemony* or *ideology*. Hence, a large reason why class is not well understood is because the only way to begin talking about class is to acknowledge our own class positions—a conversation that is in many ways considered too subjective for the academy. As Patricia Sullivan explains in “Passing: A Family Dissemblance”:

As a rule, we allow ourselves to contemplate class in the academy only insofar as it is, in fact, an act of contemplation we are doing—the studied pursuit of knowledge, truth, and reasonable certainty by reflection, observation, and research. And the object of such contemplation must include at least one person, and preferably a group or community of persons, other than the perceiving/ emoting/ speaking/ writing subject. Otherwise we grow suspicious about the seriousness of the work we are reading. (240)

While works that on the surface do not appear objective may arouse suspicions, self-reflection and the sharing of these narratives enables us to recognize and theorize about the impact of class within and outside of academia. It is a means of breaking a stifling silence that keeps us from being aware of the class issues within our own lives and those around us and the way that these matters of class are tied to the attainment of literacy.

For me this awareness developed quickly, as I stepped out of my undergraduate career at a large, public university and into a PhD program at a small, private university. In my first semester of graduate school, I was having coffee with two fellow students who were

discussing their choice to come to graduate school. Their responses were filled with the occupations of their parents—professors, teachers, lawyers, and the experiences they had that led them to their particular fields—semester-long trips abroad, family visits to the art museum and theatrical productions. While one student was talking about some politicians who came to a dinner party at her parents’ house, my mind wandered: her family was throwing a dinner party; mine was literally throwing dinner against the wall to see if it would stick—al dente! I chuckled, but I didn’t say anything. I just listened. It was clear that there were some extracurricular activities that just couldn’t be made up.

It wasn’t just our familial backgrounds that diverged, either. Throughout my coursework, I couldn’t help but feel that I was constantly trying to catch up. Words that I never heard would roll off of their tongues like liquid. In the margins of my notebook, I would write them down and look them up later. I read for my classes months in advance and would use the extra time to read the texts the other texts cited. I was passing. My peers would comment on my diligence and jokingly call me an “overachiever.” Yet, no matter how far ahead I was, I always feared I would fall behind. So I just kept running, even when I was out of breath. Eventually this running landed me in a literacy class where I began to discover I wasn’t alone. I began to find writers such as Sullivan whose narratives reflected my own. It was then that I realized that the truth about class can only be found in stories.

This argument is made throughout *Coming to Class*, an anthology of essays dedicated to reflecting on the class positions of the individual contributors and how this impacts their teaching. For instance, John McMillan’s essay, “Seeing Difference: A Reflection on Narrative and Talk about Social Class,” argues that story is central to class identity and the understanding of class as a category as it is difficult to be abstract when talking about class.

Class is a way of seeing; it is an experience complicated by ethnicity, race, and gender and is, therefore, best explained by focusing on experience. Though McMillan acknowledges that scholars often treat narrative as mindless matter, he contends that we have to accept narrative in order to be able to discontinue the silencing of class experiences that bell hooks argues is so prevalent within the academy. While the works of Marxist scholars are no doubt useful in helping us analyze class relationships, distant theoretical applications do not bring us closer to recognizing that class is not an abstract concept, but a reality that individuals face on a daily basis—a reality that impacts their relationship to language and social power.

Cultivating a Conversation

Therefore, in order to break the silence surrounding class, the logical place for me to start this project is with what Daniell refers to as “the little narratives of literacy” that reveal the complex relationships individual groups have with language and the discourse of power. Doing so will not only enable me to penetrate beneath the surface of the blanket term *working class*, but, as scholars in women’s rhetoric have shown, beginning with narrative challenges the structures and discourses which have perpetuated the silence about such issues within the study of rhetoric. The apparently neutral and objective appearance of masculine discourse is what, women rhetors and feminists argue, enables male scholars to make arguments that maintain the status quo without appearing subjective. However, language is never neutral. As the lexicon of academic discourse was for centuries male-authored with women playing only a marginal role in the terms and theories used to describe their rhetorical

practices, French feminists such as Luce Irigaray⁹ and Hélène Cixous¹⁰ recognized that women need to reclaim language, write the personal, write the body, in order to write about subjects that male discourse cannot explain. Essentially then, these feminists call for what Walker coined as “womanist prose”-- “a blend of historical narrative, autobiography, poetry, criticism, and lyrical language” (314) and ask us to break down the boundaries between male/female, active/passive, personal/public, and creative/academic—boundaries that cannot remain intact if we are to discover the interplay of self and other, powerlessness and control, American and foreigner that is highlighted when studying the literacy practices of working-class immigrant communities.

While feminists recognize the need for this change in academic discourse, autobiographical scholarship is critiqued by many in the academy for not being objective enough and threatening to undo the closed community of academia. It is for this very reason that women writers have engaged in this type of writing; autobiographical criticism challenges dominant language and knowledge patterns and tears down boundaries that previously kept certain groups outside of academic conversations. Still in the corridors of academia, however, it is a truism that we do not write of the communities in which we live or of the issues in which we are personally vested or, at least, if we choose to write about them, we should try to do so from an objective standpoint. For instance, in *Traces of a Stream*, Royster feels compelled to explain her personal connection to her research subjects and ask

⁹ See Luce Irigaray’s *The Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1985.

¹⁰ See Hélène Cixous’ “Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/ Forays.” *The Newly Born Woman*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota P, 1986. Also see Cixous, Hélène. “Castration or Decapitation?” Trans. Annette Kuhn. *Signs* 7 (Autumn 1981).

her readers to view her work as scholarly. Setting up her work in the introduction, Royster explains:

I openly and proudly acknowledge my identity with this story. My view is that my personal passion, in its openness, does not change one iota the realities of these women's lives. Despite the places where passion might seep through this text, the story does indeed speak for itself, which makes my alliance with its central characters virtually a by-product of its power to hold and to absorb attention. (14)

As her book garnered her the Mina P. Shaughnessy book award and numerous accolades, her personal connection to her material did not force her to sacrifice the marks of quality scholarship. From works similar to Royster's, I have come to agree that "a scholar can be scholarly and still be ethically and pathetically connected to the subject" (13-4). Clearly, as the contributors of *Coming to Class* have shown, this must be a step that is taken before nuanced conversations about class can enter our academic journals and conference panels.

It is necessary to make this matter of form and methodology clear, as I am personally connected to both the issues I explore and the individuals who agreed to explore them with me—Ida Casale, Maria Romanelli, Joseph Russo, Bernardina Corte, Maria Romano, Anthony Ruggiero, Pasqualina Casale, Rosa Falso, Antonio Parente, Pasqualina Parente, and Antonio Ianniello.¹¹ This connection extends beyond the fact that our last names all end in vowels. All of my participants grew up in the same small town in *Italia* as my grandmother and grandfather. They labored side by side in factories and, at night, they all returned to their homes located in my hometown of Cleveland, Ohio. While these connections may lead to

¹¹ With one exception, all of the participants asked to have their real names disclosed in the project. One woman chose a pseudonym, Maria Romano, which will be used throughout this dissertation.

certain biases within my text, without them, I am not sure this project could have been completed.

This project centers upon my ability to not see my participants as subjects. Because of their cultural history, a majority of Italians subscribe to *omerta*—a form of self-silencing that is meant to control knowledge about the family and community. Although in America *omerta* is often evoked in representations of mafiosos protecting the criminal activities of “the family,” *omerta* as a chosen form of silence has a long history in Italy. As Mary Frances Pipino explains, this “strong and sometimes stifling force of family loyalty finds its roots in Italian history” (3). The national unification of Italy did not occur until the late nineteenth-century, and even this symbolic unification was not felt in the southern, rural regions of Italy that went into the 1950s without an organized school system, running water, or any institutionally-guaranteed payment for work or goods received. Rural Italians, as such, “suffered a long history of economic and political abuse at the hands of various rulers” (3). Therefore, Southern Italians essentially had to rely upon one another—their families and neighbors—to enforce “laws” and ensure economic and physical survival. Hence, the ideals of respect and silence were intrinsic to the lives of Italians. Respect and silence go hand-in-hand in Italian life. Silence means hiding their shortcomings and preserving the name of their family in a land where that name is carried on forever—even women do not change their last names when they marry.¹² In the area and period in which my participants lived in Italy, if a member of one’s family was caught in a crime or incurred a reputation as a miscreant,

¹² Interestingly, in Italy not all members of the family share the same last name. Especially before the unification of Italy, it was common practice not to give adopted children the family last name. Instead, they would often be given the surnames: *Orfanelli* (orphans), *Poverelli* (poor children), or *Esposito* (from the Latin *exponere*, meaning, “to be put out”). According to my participants, as Italian surnames carry such historical and cultural baggage, it is considered a great risk to allow someone of unknown or disparate parentage to carry the family last name.

everyone within the small community would be aware of these errors and forever associate the whole family with those who share the family name. In order to find employment or employees, sell the goods raised on their farm, or feel a sense of community with the members residing in their town, their name had to be clean.

As such, from an early age, Italian children are taught that certain knowledge must remain within *la familia*. For instance, Maria Romanelli reveals that, at the age of five, she remembers her mother witnessing a neighbor stealing chickens and vegetables from a farm. When the police came to investigate the series of crimes, without a word, with only one look, Romanelli's mother was able to tell her that this particular man's name was not to be revealed. Without knowing the reason or the consequences of her actions, Romanelli stared blankly at the officers as they repeatedly asked her to reveal the criminal. Similarly, another participant told the story of a woman whose fifteen-year-old daughter became pregnant. Instead of jeopardizing the daughter's future ability to marry or walk proudly in town, the mother sewed a blanket into her dress, pretending to be with child. Her daughter was sent away for a weekend and, when she returned, the new child became a daughter to her grandmother and a sister to her mother. The truth was never revealed to anyone except those directly involved in the switch, not even to the child.

In America, *omerta* took on a different meaning. Rather than being a means of protecting one's family and providing for individual and familial sustenance, *omerta* became a means of protecting Italian culture and resisting efforts to Americanize these individuals. Accordingly, this type of silence, both currently and historically, has never been a passive act, but a rhetorical choice. As Cheryl Glenn describes in *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence*, silence can both defer and deploy power and can be the result of either an enforced position

or a strategic choice. This act of silence is so powerful that literary scholars trying to study the writings of Italian Americans often begin their books by lamenting that within this culture “making one’s voice heard often risks betrayal (or, at least, perceived betrayal) of one’s ethnic group, culture, and religious assumptions”(3) and hence makes “listening to these voices no easy feat”(1).¹³ Breaking the silence within this community is seen, as Audre Lorde describes it in “The Transformation of Silence Into Language and Action,” as being “fraught with danger” (40), making the completion of an ethnography a challenging venture within this community and one that cannot be completed if the participants view the scholar as an outsider or interloper.

In order to interview these individuals, I had to be introduced by a member of their community who could vouch for me and the credibility of this study. At first, during the interviews, there were numerous moments where they requested I turn the tape recorder off—a request to which I readily complied. At times, they would ask me to speak in Italian, which I would, and, once they discovered I could not speak nor understand their dialect, they would sometimes speak to one another in dialect—a way of keeping me out of the conversation. During the research process, I engaged in activities to prove that I was committed to being a member of this community, expressing a willingness to sell sausage at festivals, writing personal letters to them in Italian, visiting with them numerous times over the phone or in person, trading recipes, and, of course, *mangiano molto*. Over the course of several months, I gained a seat at their kitchen tables where they gave me journals and notes

¹³ For evidence of the ways that this form of silencing functions as a roadblock for scholars see Barolini, Helen. *The Dream Book: an Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women*. New York: Schocken, 1985. Also, see Talese, Gay. “Where Are the Italian American Novelists?” *The New York Times Book Review*. 14 March 1993. Also see Mannino, Mary Ann Vigilante, and Justin Vitiello. *Breaking Open: Reflections on Italian American Women’s Writing*. West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue UP, 2003.

they had kept and books that had been given to them by family members. I watched tears well up in the corner of their eyes as they talked about the struggles they faced in this new land and, sometimes, I watched those tears spill over as they described watching as a family member was shot through the chest or torn apart by shrapnel during WWII. In their kitchens and their gardens, they shared with me secrets—some that their children do not know, some that I will share, and others that will remain just between us and the other people who were invited to the table.

Their breaking these silences is not only an empowering rhetorical act, but also listening to their silences enabled me to see how vocal and textual silence can be chosen or oppressive. Their sharing these stories gives scholars an example of the way that silence and literacy often work together and also oppose one another. Given their willingness to share with me these experiences that, according to their culture and history, were never to be shared, I am very aware of the way these stories, as well as my participants, are represented. An academic tone would not do them or their stories justice, and while it is useful for me to use the theories and the heuristics theorists have constructed in order to analyze their stories, it is necessary to recognize that it is the stories that contain the most useful knowledge about class. While the editors of *Coming to Class* call for us to share our personal class related experiences, in some ways, we must recognize that our position within the academy places us a bit outside of the realm of “the working class.” In order to truly understand “the working class,” I believe we need to listen to the stories of the individuals who make up this multicultural entity. As such, this project not only embraces the narratives of my research participants, but the form of my research at points turns from academic prose to the narratives that inform my conclusions.

Given my relationships with the participants, I believe making the path which led me to this project clear is generative; it forces me to reflect upon my biases and share them. While my partiality, no doubt, shapes this project, I hope that as I engage in this conversation with my readers, we can see beyond these biases and begin to understand why I selected this community as a means of understanding the complexity of the working class.

The Emergence of the Seed

When I was little, I recall my grandmother stockpiling beef and chicken in a freezer big enough to hold a body or two. At five a.m. we would cross the street to Rini's to scope the meat sales: "Grounda beef ninety nine cent a pound" was a phrase that made me cringe because I knew we would be walking out with thirty pounds of meat, inviting the stares of the uniformed grocery employees with name tags that read "Tom," "Sue," or "Betty." Before I knew why they were giving us those glares, I knew *mia nonna* Maria was eccentric. While mass quantities of meat were coming in from the grocery stores, vegetables came solely from the backyard or the backyards of my uncles and aunts. One week out of the year was devoted entirely to canning—sauce, peppers, stewed tomatoes. At Thanksgiving, we consumed meatballs, gnocchi, lasagna, antipasto, calamari, sausage and peppers—turkey was an afterthought. Nonna's house had two kitchens—one upstairs and one in the basement where great-grandma and grandpa lived. During holidays, both rooms, both refrigerators, and both tables were full. But when it was time to eat, we all moved to the basement, taking our designated position at the long, elaborate table. The dinner table was a site of communion for the twenty people surrounding it—a celebration of our culture and, interestingly, a celebration of our class.

Depending on which end of the table you were sitting at, you would either hear Italian or English. The right end of the table was where the older generations would sit. At that end of the table, there was only Italian and in my young mind it became the language of love. Nonna Maria and I would play patty-cake, but not the American version—our hands would slap to the rhythm of *Piza Piza tata. Mama una casata. Tata una picione. Picola uno scopolone*, and I would always laugh at the end because she would run my small hands over her lips and then fill her cheeks up with air, using my hands to pop the air bubble she had created. My great-grandmother and grandfather would pass me back and forth, proclaiming me as either *bella* or *brutto*, great grandma always arguing that I was a pretty baby, while great grandpa jokingly called me ugly one. Meanwhile, at the other end of the table, my father and my uncle verbally sparred in English about NAFTA, benefits, unionization, and work. The language at this end of the table always seemed much more foreign to me than the rolling r's and lyrical alliteration of the elders. For so many years, I traveled back and forth between these worlds. In fact, my spot at the table still remains directly in the middle. All this time and it wasn't until I left that table for four years that I realized everyone filling those chairs, regardless of their age, had two things in common: they were all Italian and they were all working-class.

This connection had to be handed on to me as a seed, as Walker defines the term: “our mothers and grandmothers have . . . handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read” (320). My seed was handed on to me by my grandmother, a woman with little literacy in the English language, which at certain times was a point of embarrassment or frustration for me. This, of course, was before I knew my grandmother--before I heard stories of pulling

shrapnel out of the carcass of a rabbit so that she could have dinner, before I heard her tell me she would sneak her daughter's elementary school textbook into her room at night so she could learn to read, before I knew that she crossed the sunny ocean from Italy to New York with only a dream and two dresses. I only knew that she was different, but I, nor anyone else, had ever heard her story.

Recognizing the omission of her life from our family's memory, I asked her to record her story on a cassette tape without knowing the impact it would have on my life as a scholar and researcher. While I was busy at night, reading about literacy or women's rhetoric, she was staying up with a hand-held cassette recorder, reliving a war, explaining why her school closed down, sharing the tumultuous experiences she had when she crossed the ocean, relating the various types of work she engaged in-- cleaning, sewing, piece work-- the only types of work available to immigrants who did not know the language. As I listened to the tape, I kept connecting the materials I was studying and the stories she was telling.

Essentially then, as Walker states of her own work: "Guided by my heritage of a love of beauty and a respect for strength—in search of my mother's garden, I found my own" (322).

After listening to her narrative, I began to think back to other stories that I had heard in the same Italian dialect, often in kitchens or at bocce tournaments. As I began to think back to these people, contact them, and listen to their narratives, I began to see them as more than a generation of people who built the roads on which we drive and the clothing now resting in a second hand store, but as individuals with important contributions to make to our academic conversations. It wasn't coincidence that all of their narratives sounded the same; they were all shaped by the same forces of culture and class. The more I listened to these narratives and conducted secondary research, the more I discovered that Italian Americans

have a literacy past that highlights the way that, through the interplay between culture and class, disparate linguistic concerns, goals, and abilities arise. It is recognizing these differences that is essential to understand the lack of homogeneity within the working class, which can then help us understand the varying relationships these individual communities have with language. As this project focuses specifically on Italian Americans from the working class, this will only be one story of many that are needed.

Que Italiani?

While numerous immigrant groups provide an interesting context in which to study this connection between literacy, silence, and non-traditional rhetorical practices, Italian Americans, because of their depiction in popular culture and the extent to which they function in an ethnically-isolated environment, provide us with an example of the ways that an industrial economy made it possible for individuals to succeed without English literacy. They are an ideal case study for extending Graff's conclusions about the literacy myth to the landscape of the twentieth century. Not only are they one of the largest language sharing ethnic minorities,¹⁴ but also they have often been labeled as one of the most highly "illiterate" ethnic groups. With the early wave of Italian immigration in 1880, this label was already being applied. In popular descriptions of them, Italians were viewed as the 1914 issue of *Century Magazine* describes them: "Among the foreign-born, Italians rank lowest in ability to speak English, lowest in proportion naturalized after ten years' residence, lowest in proportion of children in school, and highest in proportion of children at work" (Ross 443).

¹⁴ According to Yole Correa-Zoli, Italians were, at the time of his research, the "largest language-sharing ethnic minority" (239). Correa-Zoli, Yole. "The Language of Italian Americans." *Language in the USA*. Ed. Charles Ferguson and Shirley Brice Heath. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1981.

Representations such as this one stigmatized Italian newcomers and often resulted in a fallacy, connecting the way that they were treated and their lack of English literacy skills. For instance, Frank Alesci, an Italian American and Clevelander describes

America, as it is believed to be even today in every country is a mirage. If one does not come here in person to see for himself, he believes he will find gold nuggets on the sidewalk. Actually if one does not work hard and without stopping for even one day, one cannot, will not, live. The dollar is made of sweat and endless sacrifices. But for those who came as we did, not knowing the language, and in the era in which we came, life was cruel. Other immigrants who had been fortunate to live in countries where English was spoken treated the tongue-tied newcomers like beasts. (9)

As Alesci describes, among the immigrants arriving at the American shores between the years of 1880 to 1970, Italian Americans and others immigrating from non-English-speaking regions were considered among the least desirable and inherently working class—for the majority of Italians, there was no dollar that was not “made of sweat” (9).

Because of their visible “otherness” and their lack of literacy skills, Italian Americans were often lumped together in popular representations with two other historically-disempowered groups: African Americans and Latin Americans. This conflation can be seen in the language used to describe Italian Americans. For example, a Guinea—gold currency of a small denomination—is symbolic of the ties between the U.S. and slavery, “taking their names from the African trade for which they were designed to provide currency” and later becoming synonymous with members of the slave population (Roediger 654-5). However, because of their darker complexion and openness to intermarriage, “Italians, as a leading

account of triracial Guineas noted, were also called Guineas . . . connecting them with African Americans” (656). Linguistically, Italian Americans, at a time when they were striving to be accepted as “white,” were not only equated with African Americans, but also Latin Americans. Dago-- a corruption of the Spanish name for James, *Diego*—began as a term to signify a Spanish or Portuguese sailor, narrowed from the 1870’s to become a derogatory term to refer to Italians (“Dago”). Given this cultural labeling, from the early to mid-twentieth century, many of the job opportunities for Italian Americans were similar to those open to other disenfranchised minorities. As Rudolph Vecoli notes in “Are Italian Americans Just White Folks,” “many Anglo-Americans questioned that those swarthy sons of sunny Italy were really white. Employers and labor leaders referred to them as ‘black labor’” (313). As is evidenced both by the linguistic connections and their employment histories, Italian Americans often faced discrimination. However, what is often overlooked is that not all Italians faced this type of prejudice; because of their culture, which was based on agrarianism rather than industry and education, Southern Italians faced harsh criticism. For example, a common representation of the differences of these groups is explained in a 1904 issue of *Popular Science Monthly*:

In considering Italian immigrants it is necessary to recognize the differences existing between northern and southern Italians. The northern Italian is taller, often of lighter complexion, and is usually in a more prosperous condition than his brother from the south. The northern Italian is intelligent, can nearly always read and write, and very often is skilled in some trade or occupation On the other hand, the southern Italian, short of stature, very dark in complexion, usually lands here almost destitute. His intelligence is not higher

than one can imagine in the descendant of peasantry illiterate for centuries. He can seldom read and write, and invariably is an unskilled farm laborer. He has little money and often has no definite purpose, and naturally must depend on someone who speaks his language. (McLaughlin 341)

The writer for this magazine finds it necessary to note the difference in complexion, first and foremost, drawing on readers' preconceptions of those with dark skin, and then moves on to connect the lower class of Southern Italians with their lack of literacy training and their penchant for cultivating the earth rather than cultivating the mind—a practice that had been culturally handed down for centuries.

While this representation has tempered as Italians have been further assimilated into American culture, the negative depiction of Italians based on their language practices and cultural beliefs has not completely faded. Though Italian Americans, similar to a number of other ethnic groups, were able to gain the label “white,” they are often considered as having their own shade of whiteness.¹⁵ This particular shade of white carries with it negative associations, which highlights a connection between representations of Italians and their language skills. In contemporary popular culture, we see numerous representations of Italians, such as *The Godfather*, a number of other gangster films, and the television series now in its fifth season, *The Sopranos*, which often link their “illiteracy” to criminality. Commercials featuring Italian products or restaurants often also feature the broken-English-speaking earth mother who has come to represent the typical Italian-American woman. As Richard Gambino states, “The distortion of Italian realities is so extreme that we are grateful

¹⁵ See Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno's *How Race Is Made in America*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Also see Dan Ashyk, Fred Gardaphe, and Anthony Tamburri's *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration Between Two Communities*. Staten Island, NY: American Italian Historical Association, 1999.

if a work stereotypes us benignly, for example, as merely an ‘operatic’ (emotionally overexpressive and, therefore, ridiculous) but likeable people, as in the film *Moonstruck*” (269). When it comes to my family, some of the stereotypes are true: yes, we eat spaghetti for Christmas, and yes, there is plastic on our furniture and a velvet painting of Jesus on our wood-paneled wall. We drink red wine, have four or five cousins named Michael, Anthony, Maria, and Gina, but, despite the rumors, we do not all have hair on our upper lips or a semi-automatic weapon under our pillow. While some of the cultural markers may be grounded in what outsiders can see about Italian-American culture, the problem, as Edward Said notes, is that “what is commonly circulated by [culture] is not ‘truth’ but representations” (21), and these representations “can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe” (94).

While these representations may not be as preponderant as they were in the early 1900s, they are still subconsciously or consciously involved in the process of creating a reality of Italian Americans. As Salvatore LaGumina reminds us in his 1973 book *WOP!:*

It should come as a sobering reminder that the Office of Human Rights affirms that increasing numbers of Italian-Americans are complaining, with justification, that they are victimized by discrimination because of their ethnic and/or religious background. The number of cases so reported in 1971-1972 shows a marked growth over the previous few years. Thus, contrary to the wisdom and prognosis of many sociologists, discrimination because of national origin is not passé and an anachronism confined to the era of mass migration. (18)

While LaGumina's work is now a bit dated, judging from the representations of Italian Americans presently circulating in popular culture, his conclusion remains apt; as long as stereotypical notions of behavior, beliefs, and knowledge of Italian Americans continue to surface without being challenged, discrimination based upon these cultural markers continues to present itself as an issue.

Even within literacy studies, we seem to be unable to get beyond stereotypes of Italian Americans in order to study their language practices. Given that Italian Americans consist of the seventh largest ancestry group and Italian is the fifth most common language spoken at home,¹⁶ their literacy practices are obviously complex and illuminating. However, the only article within literacy studies that appears to discuss Italian Americans at all, "Italian American Cookbooks: Authenticity and the Market," also perpetuates the stereotypical connection between Italian Americans and food. While food, in many ways, is symbolic within the Italian home, signifying a connection to culture, family, and tradition, this cultural icon has in many ways overshadowed the role that language plays within and outside of the Italian-American home and neighborhood.

Because of these representations and the ways Italian Americans have used language to both maintain and resist these representations, I think that this community provides us with the opportunity to reassess "the literacy myth." While Italian Americans have often been depicted as the least literate of European immigrants, they have in some ways been able to subsist and, in many ways, succeed in achieving the basic tenants of the American Dream—homes, employment, middle class status—with little if any knowledge of the English language. On the surface, this resilience would appear to support Graff's conclusion in *The*

¹⁶ Statistics according to the 2000 US Census report. The study did not include the use of English and Spanish.

Literacy Myth that literacy is not a necessary component in gaining employment, homeownership, or social mobility. I also believe, however, that the Italian-American working-class community provides us with a means of extending Graff's conclusions. As Graff was writing about an industrial society where what is labeled "non-skilled labor" had a cultural value, his ideas about the importance of literacy may have limitations when applied to twenty-first-century America, which is based on the trading of information. In response to Graff's conclusion, in this project, I determine the extent to which literacy played a role in the attainment of the jobs these individuals held and the class advances they were able to make after crossing onto the foreign shore. Uncovering the techniques these individuals used to obtain their class status, I hope to help us see the ways these same actions would be (im)possible today for current immigrant groups entering our information economy.

From Narrative to Theory: Methodology

In order to complicate our current understanding of "the working class," disrupt commonly held notions about literacy and silence, and possibly revise our belief in the extent of "the literacy myth," I interviewed a specific set of Italian Americans—a group of eleven men and women who were born in the Province of Latina, lived there during WWII, and immigrated to Cleveland in the aftermath of the war. Participation in the project was entirely voluntary, and the participants were drawn from the members of Cleveland's Home Family Club—an Italian-American organization for individuals from this particular region of Italy. Participants were informed of the project verbally and, if they were interested in participating, I provided them with a copy of the appended informed consent form to be signed. Once signed, a copy of the form was given to them for their records, making it

available and accessible to them as I conducted the study. Using the appended questions to guide our interview session, I focused these interviews on three specific categories: 1. literacy in Italy as it was taught in schools, used in daily life and impacted by the war; 2. literacy in the English language as it was learned and used to obtain work and function in daily life; 3. the interplay between English and Italian literacy, the disparate purposes for which they are pursued and used, and the different values that are attached to each. Following the two-hour long interviews, which were tape-recorded and transcribed, I revisited the eleven participants, read over the transcript, and requested their approval to publish their words. As a focus of this project is on the imposition of silence, these participants had the option to include their own name or to be given a pseudonym.¹⁷ After I began interpreting the data they provided, I met with my participants again to discuss my conclusions and enable their input.

While I recognize that eleven voices are not representative of the entire Italian-American population,¹⁸ I position the results of my research as leading to an understanding of how literacy is experienced, rather than trying to make generalized conclusions about literacy for immigrants or the working class. The latter would result in the same types of sweeping generalizations found in current debates about literacy; as Brandt describes, “many current debates about literacy education and policy continue to be based largely on indirect evidence, such as standardized test scores or education levels or surveys of reading habits,” which in

¹⁷ All but one chose to reveal their real names and even gave me pictures to include in my project at my discretion. At the conclusion of this project, all tape recordings, transcripts, and consent forms will be turned in to Texas Christian University’s IRB, where they will be held for five years and then destroyed. These procedures and documents have received expedited IRB approval.

¹⁸ Throughout this dissertation, Italian American will only be hyphenated when being used as a compound adjective.

many ways obscure the contextual nature of literacy (*Literacy* 11). Instead, similar to Brandt's work in *Literacy in American Lives*, "it is the persistent interest of this study to characterize literacy not as it registers on various scales but as it has been lived" (11).

In an effort to prevent making broad generalizations, I have limited the scope of primary research to Italians from a particular region in Italy. While there is a tendency to lump Italians together as a homogenous group, many differences exist between Italian provinces that make this sort of selectivity necessary. As I will explain in chapter two, Italy's national unification developed late in her history and is, to some extent, still doubted today. The differences and hostilities between Northern industrial cities and Southern agrarian towns gave rise to disparities in terms of lifestyle, as well as language. Most regions of Italy developed their own dialect, as individuals from different regions did not often come into contact with one another. Unlike variations of dialect in America, which are mainly a function of vowel pronunciation,¹⁹ Italian dialects vary so drastically that is not uncommon that a person from one region cannot communicate with someone who comes from another part of the country. Similar to the way Italians prefer a regional to the national dialect, Italians have more of a regional loyalty than a national identity. Though in the 1940s Benito Mussolini attempted to define a standard dialect and one was taught in the schools, the adoption of a standard dialect was a slow process, hindered by the disruption of education during WWII and the fact that Italians, though taught a standard dialect, often only used it in school. In fact, it was not until after they entered America that developing a standard dialect became a requirement as a means of communicating: "Standard Italian is now needed by dialect groups all of which are termed 'Italians' by Americans" (Correa-Zoli 246). As such,

¹⁹ I thank Dr. Bonnie Blackwell for this insight.

in terms of selecting a specific group of Italian Americans to investigate, I focused on those who speak the same dialect of Italian; this helped me determine the issues they had adapting to English and how they garnered support through the community who spoke their own language.

Italians not only differ based on the dialect spoken at home, but also, as I will further discuss in chapter two, based on drastic economic and educational differences between northern and southern Italians. While there was a tendency for northern and southern Italians to discriminate against one another back in sunny Italy, this sort of discrimination actually heightened after the great wave of Southern Italian immigration, as Northern Italians fought to separate themselves from their agrarian countrymen and women. The particular region that most of my research subjects come from, Latina, lies between Northern and Southern Italy, as it falls directly between Rome and Naples. However, as most of these individuals lived an agrarian lifestyle, they would more closely be associated with Southern Italians. While in Italy, they would not traditionally be considered Southern Italians, they would be put into this category as they landed on the shore of America because of their lack of traditional literacy skills.

In an effort to refrain from making generalizations, I also limited my selection of research subjects to people who lived in the region of Latina during WWII and immigrated to Cleveland in its aftermath. Narrowing my scope in this way is essential since the war disrupted education in ways that I believe are necessary to understanding the particular literacy issues members of this community faced. Since Latina is a mountainous region that acted as a hiding place for German soldiers, it was completely thrown into upheaval during the war. For its duration, all of the schools in this region were closed, leaving many with only

a third or fourth grade education. As such, this experience played a role in shaping my subjects' views of education and, therefore, will be a focus of the next chapter. Limiting the project enabled me to get a sense of the educational opportunities available to these individuals, before, during, and after the war, which will help us understand their relationship to schooling and views of language training, as well as literacy in general.

Because this particular community is not discussed within literacy studies or rhetoric to a large extent, much of my secondary research came from other fields: history, sociology, literary studies, cultural anthropology, and education. The works within these fields helped me get a sense of Italian-American literacy practices in America and abroad, cultural representations of Italians circulating in America, as well as the cultural practices Italians engage in at home and at work. These sources also allowed me to get a greater sense of the immigration laws, citizenship tests, and educational opportunities provided in America in order for me to understand how my participants were able to complete necessary literacy tasks, such as taking their driving tests, applying for jobs, communicating with others, and gaining citizenship.

My scope will be further narrowed by my choice of including only Italian Americans who immigrated to Cleveland. I wanted to focus on immigrants who came to the same area in America so that I could get a sense of the role that the Italian-American community played in helping them complete literate activities. The focus on Cleveland occurred almost naturally as immigration laws from the period required that a family member sponsor the immigrant for the period of one year, promising to provide housing and subsistence for the newcomer for that period of time: if one person immigrated to Cleveland, s/he would slowly bring over the rest of her or his family. Since *San Cosma e Damiano*, the city in Latina that the majority

of the participants hail from, was a tightly knit community, family and friends tended to migrate to the same community abroad.

In order to gain a specific understanding of the cultural context of Cleveland during the time period in which this community immigrated to the city, I engaged in primary research at the Cleveland Public Library and the Murray Hill Little Italy Museum. Here I was able to find old newspapers highlighting the treatment, portrayal, and reactions of the Italian-American community written in both English and Italian before, during, and after WWII. I was also able to locate newsletters from Italian-American organizations that worked to unify the Italian-American Clevelanders by advertising businesses owned by Italian Americans, inviting members to participate in Italian-American cultural events, and glowingly remembering the traditions from “the old country.” Finally, I also looked at local school records that discussed the impact of night school on immigrants of multiple nationalities within the Cleveland area and The Western Reserve Historical Society.

Making Our Way Back to Our Blue Collars

In order to trace the development of literacy skills that equipped these Italian Americans with the tools necessary to survive and maintain their culture within America, this dissertation will focus on four areas: the literacy experience gained in Italy, the representations of Italians in America, the literacy campaigns that influenced their lives in Cleveland, and the ways they resisted these campaigns or used them to the extent that they would increase their chances of being socially mobile. Each chapter will focus on one of these components and build towards a conclusion that explains how the results of this study

can better equip us to understand and study the complex relationship individuals within the working class have with language.

In order to look forward to our economic horizons, it is often necessary to look backward to what brought members of the working class to America and, more importantly, what they brought with them when they came. In chapter 2, through my primary research in conjunction with studies of the Italian education system, I explore schooling in the Italian region of Latina: the functions it served, the classes that were taught, and the variations between city, farm, and mountain education. Both Basil Bernstein and Lawrence Cremin argue that we cannot generalize about education because each configuration is a conversation in which education is given, accepted, revised and rejected in a complex process.²⁰ As such, it seems essential to understand the role of schooling in Italy in order for us to understand how my eleven participants came to view literacy.

Deborah Brandt's theory of literacy sponsorship as defined in *Literacy in American Lives* acts as a frame, allowing me to uncover the extent to which these individuals' literacy practices were or were not sponsored, who was doing the sponsoring and to serve what end; as such I have entitled this chapter "Literacy in Agrarian Lives." In "Sponsors of Literacy," Brandt defines sponsors as "any agents, local or distant, concrete or abstract, who enable, support, teach, model, as well as recruit, regulate, suppress, or withhold literacy—and gain advantage by it in some way" (166). The major sponsors I focus on are: the government, schools, and families. In order to understand the interplay between these components, I not only look at literacy training as it takes place in schools, but I also highlight how the individuals used their reading and writing skills in their daily lives and whether or not they

were encouraged to develop these skills. As these individuals were meant to follow in the footsteps of the generations that came before them and be content with a life of farming, their learning was often viewed as an end in itself rather than an opportunity to move beyond the circumstances of the family. Further, though typically, we, as Americans, think the government serves as the strongest of literacy sponsors to meet the needs of society—whether that is to, as Soltow and Stevens explain, train individuals to live up to social mores or prepare them for working class lifestyles, the government was a sponsor who was almost completely absent in the lives of these Italians. In fact, within the specific agrarian community under investigation, schooling was not even held in a public building, but within the largest family home in the village. Without a traditional sponsor or a real impetus for their learning, I uncover why these individuals valued schooling enough to hold classes within their own homes.

Adding to Brandt's theory of sponsorship, I highlight what I have come to term "barriers to literacy development," individuals or circumstances that actually detract from individual literacy development. While Brandt's theory accounts for agents that purposefully withhold literacy or, at least, higher levels of literacy, it does not allow for discussion of events that, though not purposefully, inhibit the development of literacy nonetheless. In order to show that not all literacy sponsorship is inherently tied to an intent to withhold or enable literacy, I focus specifically on the disruption of education that took place in the region of Latina during WWII through the use of narrative. All of the eleven participants tell stories of

²⁰ See Basil Bernstein's *Class, Codes, and Control: Towards a Theory of Educational Transmission*. London: Routledge, 1977, and Lawrence Cremin's *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980*. Harper Collins, 1990

moving quickly from elementary school and life on the farm to living in caves without the basic necessities of sustenance, let alone education. When the war was over, many of them had not attended school for a couple of years and felt as though at age twelve they were too old to return to the first, second, or third grade. While for many of them schooling stopped at the third grade, a new literacy imposition was placed upon these individuals as their world was invaded by German, English, and African-speaking armies who took their homes, made them move to far away sections in Italy, and, eventually, became both their enemies and their heroes without ever being able to communicate verbally with these individuals.

The take-over of their land with new languages, lifestyles, and major financial hardships was a major impetus that led to their immigration to America and particularly the region of Cleveland. Partially, as is revealed in Alesci's previously cited autobiography, literacy served as an impetus for their movement, as popular lore about America that was circulating told of a future where one could work hard without much skill and become anything they wanted in America. In discussing this lore, I will begin to make connections with Graff's ideas about the literacy myth that will be drawn out in the next chapter.

Closing the previous chapter by discussing the dream compelling these individuals to come to America, which is inherently tied to the literacy myth, I then move into exploring the actual culture they were seeking entrance to in chapter three. Through secondary research in history, sociology, film theory, and literature, as well as through the primary research I conducted at the CPL, Western Reserve Historical Society, and Little Italy Museum of Cleveland, I show that while the literacy myth created a dream for these immigrants, in reality they were entering a society that was hostile towards them based on the belief that Southern Italians had a low level of literacy skills that within popular culture became tied to

criminality. In *Man Cannot Speak For Her*, Karlyn Kohrs Campbell discusses the stereotypes created about 19th Century women by male politicians and major media outlets. Campbell then uses the actual speeches of women from this period to rebut this discourse. Similarly in chapter three, I show how a discourse of Italian Americanness was created in America and how prominent Italian Americans have begun to challenge this discourse; as such I have entitled this chapter “America Cannot Speak for Them.” Using Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, I show how stereotypes of Italian-American culture became a discourse by which the Italian Americans could be controlled and othered. Similar to the way Ellen Cushman traces the development of the city in which she conducted her research in *The Struggle and the Tools*, I recreate this context by summarizing the depiction of the Italian Americans that began surfacing with their first wave of immigration in 1880 and continues even to today.

As Graff discusses in *The Literacy Myth*, “illiteracy” and “immorality” are often displayed in the media as being synonymous. As we can see in popular cultural representations today—*The Sopranos*, *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, etc.-- this statement is particularly true when we look at the depictions and treatment of Southern Italian immigrants. Similar to Virginia Woolf’s discovery about women in *A Room of One’s Own*, what I found was that though Italian Americans were not telling their own story, others were painting portraits of them that negatively displayed their characters as well as their cultures. As Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno blatantly remind us in *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made in America*, “Italians were not always white, and the loss of this memory is one of the tragedies of racism in America” (1). Tracing this historical representation of Italians as the illiterate other provides us with a way of seeing within a specific locus how the

connections between immorality and illiteracy are made, perpetuated, and used within America, allowing the literacy myth to persist at the expense of those being “othered.” Similar to African Americans, though to a lesser extent and for disparate reasons, Italian Americans entered America with a situated ethos or the existence of power relationships that create a “gap that must be traversed in order to communicate effectively” (Royster 64). The situated ethos of these individuals, as Graff suggests, limited their opportunities and played a role in maintaining their working class status.

After tracing the creation of the situated ethos or discourse, as Said labels it, I turn to look at how Italian Americans were able to use these stereotypes in order to move beyond them. By examining the singing of Frank Sinatra, the films by directors such as Martin Scorsese and Brian DePalma, the television show the *Sopranos*, and the writings of individuals of Italian-American heritage, I argue that the stereotypes are used as springboards to discuss issues within American culture and provide clues as to the real Italian-American experience. Whether debunking American ideals of romantic love or capitalism, these representations by Italian Americans rhetorically turn the perspective of Italian Americans as illiterate criminals into Italian-American criminals as heroes and, in effect, chip away at the tenets of the American Dream. Specifically, they offer an alternative view to those who believe in the persisting idea that with literacy comes economic mobility.

In “Observations on Literacy: Race, Gender, Class,” Michael Holzman argues that the country’s focus on illiteracy is really a way of avoiding discussions of racism, as literacy campaigns allow society to symbolically deal with social and economic issues that would really require social restructuring to solve. He compares illiteracy to homelessness: homelessness implies that the situation could be fixed if the homeless had a home, but the

problem isn't really the lack of a home, just as it isn't the lack of literacy that makes one poor (297-8). The belief that there is a literacy crisis assumes that there is an underlying unproblematic social reality. Therefore, literacy crises disguise structural inequities that promote racist and ethnic prejudices, as well as maintain social hierarchies. While I discuss the first part of his assertion—the prejudice associated with illiteracy-- in chapter three, I examine his second contention—the connection between class and literacy campaigns—in chapter four.

Using the work of Graff and Holzman, I survey the literacy campaigns taking place in Cleveland, especially those mentioned by my interviewees. I look at the classes that were offered and the promotion of them within the Italian-American community, as well as the work produced in the classes, which two participants saved. As Robert Arnove and Graff show in *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*, literacy campaigns have formed part of larger societal transformations and have been a means to some other ends—a more moral society or a more stable political order. Literacy is almost never itself an isolated or absolute goal. The initiation of a literacy campaign has been associated with major transformations in societal structures and belief systems. Soltow and Stevens, for example, contend literacy training is “a way to impose the values of one group upon another” and mold the character of Americans (10). These scholars believe that this conclusion will be reached when studying the language of instruction, which reveals whose language and values form the medium and content of a literacy campaign. Therefore, by looking at these mechanisms of instruction, I determine the purposes of literacy training or of the sponsorship of Italian-American literacy.

My conclusions in part coincide with those of Graff: I too agree that while the skills of literacy are valued, it is actually developing the moral bases (values, habits, norms) that is the task of schooling and almost all literacy sponsorship. I depart from Graff in that I do not agree that the homogenizing goals of literacy sponsors always lead to the desired conclusion. As Cushman shows in *The Struggle and the Tools*, individuals can adopt literacy practices without valuing them at all. From her study of the literate practices within an African-American community, she concludes that whereas Black English has a cultural value for the residents, white English becomes merely a tool—a means of providing economic stability for children, kin, and community. This is important because it shows that the African Americans she is studying are not functioning under false consciousness as assumed by other critical scholars, but clearly understand the politics behind their linguistic choices. I similarly examine the extent of immigrant's understanding of the purposes and functions of literacy. To do so, I focus on the way my participants discuss using their literacy training to suit their needs and discuss the ways they completed tasks with which we normally believe literacy is a necessity: finding work, dealing with hospitals, sending their children to school, gaining citizenship. Further, as Cremin argues scholars in literacy should, I also focus on multiple sites of literacy training: settlement houses, public schools, night schools, neighborhood, family, and the network of Italian Americans within Cleveland.

This type of study allows me to complement and add to Graff's widely used theory of the "literacy myth." Though Graff admits, "it is possible that such immigrants were aware of the contradictions of the 'literacy myth': the acquisition of literacy and education has by no means served to guarantee individual or collective advancement, and many have advanced without their benefit" (*Literacy Myth* 368), I contend this was more of a reality than a

possibility. I also feel as though he downplays the immigrants' second language literacy in his attempt to study the working class as a whole. For instance, Graff assumes, "With a few exceptions, most among the working class either read very little or tended toward cheap fiction and popular fare," (358), but he is focusing only on his participants' English reading practices. Further, while I agree with Graff that English literacy proved to be of little value to many workers in their chances for higher status in an unequal social structure, I am hesitant to assume that "illiteracy" as a stigma kept these individuals from achievement of what they believed the American Dream was—the freedom to live as one pleases, be able to earn a paycheck without specialized training, and the right to own property. Unfortunately, in trying to understand the working class, the American Dream, and the function of literacy, our own biases about what immigrants should want often tend to taint our vision of the strides they were able to make with a limited understanding of literacy. As such, I think this analysis will also serve to extend our current understanding of the way literacy and the literacy myth function within the working class.

Therefore, chapter four will show that many of the gains the immigrants were able to make were dependent less on the formal literacy training they received and more upon two other factors: their reliance on their own community for support and their rhetorical use of silence to protect their culture. While they are often portrayed as Graff describes them: "Handicapped by illiteracy and heavily burdened by ascriptive characteristics, these men and women often proved themselves resourceful in their abilities to settle, survive, form families, and make their way in environments new and alien to them" (92), in this chapter I hope to prove that rather than being 'handicapped' by their "illiteracy" and "heavily burdened" by their ethnic characteristics, these immigrants were proud of these characteristics and resisted

literacy training as a means of protecting their culture. Hence, they engaged in a purposeful rhetoric of silence as described by Glenn in *Unspoken*, making them active participants in their representation rather than passive victims of it.

In *Traces of a Stream*, Royster argues that one central theme connecting African culture and the church is the idea of communalism—the idea that the group constitutes the main focus of individual lives. While the church did not play as prominent a role in the lives of Italian Americans, the idea of communalism, especially within the family is one that spans the history of Italian culture. Often exaggerated in gangster films, the strong force of family loyalty finds its roots in Italian history, as previously discussed. In America, this sense of loyalty extended to include individuals who immigrated from the same area of Italy and was a bond that many relied upon to find work, obtain housing, gain citizenship and even learn to drive.

All of my participants, for instance, lived in an ethnically isolated environment, chose to patronize Italian-American businesses, socialized with only other Italian Americans, and found work through the members of their community. Therefore, similar to Cushman, who based on three years of ethnographic research in an inner-city, Quayville, shows the way that residents linguistically resist the conforming powers of the “institution,” while using the tools of white English and code switching to meet their desired ends in certain situations, I show how Italian Americans used their connections to the Italian-American community to subsist and also resist gaining literacy in English that they feared would cause them to give up their ethnic identity. Almagno, Reynolds, and Trimbur even show that this type of resistance can be seen in the dietary practices of Italian Americans. They see the maintenance of Italian culture through food as a means of resistance because, during the early 20th Century, social

workers were intent upon assimilating immigrants by changing their eating and cooking habits, especially in settlement houses (178-88). When immigrants refused to change their dietary habits, social workers began teaching their children to cook American meals in an effort to change the family dynamics. However, Italians maintained their culture through cuisine, using it to combat capitalism in some ways by refusing to shop in markets owned by others beside their *paesani* and growing their own foods in their gardens or in the yards of neighbors who owned more property. It is this type of resistive communicative practice that I will investigate within this chapter. As Karen Foss and Sonya Foss contend in *Women Speak*, while these acts are not seen as rhetorical within academia, they are created for an audience, require the use of specific skills, are designed with a purpose in mind and can, therefore, be seen as literate rhetorical acts.

While scholars such as Graff argue that this rejection of English literacy practice and embracing of ethnic traditions “handicapped” immigrants, to some extent this resistance was a necessary means of maintaining their ethnic identity. For instance, through a survey conducted in San Francisco during the 1970s, Correa-Zoli concludes that many second generation Americans were told not to speak Italian or were taught to have negative associations with their home language (246-8). Similarly, as I will show in chapter three, American popular culture presented Italian-American values and beliefs in a negative light, which I believe they responded to by engaging in a purposeful rhetoric of silence and a resistance to English-language literacy teaching.

While the resistance of these Italian-American immigrants successfully enabled them to achieve “the American Dream” and maintain their culture, in the final chapter, I consider the possibility of using these same tactics within our new information economy to create an

ethical workplace pedagogy. In “Sponsors of Literacy,” Brandt discusses how after WWII we shifted from a “thing-making, thing-swapping society to an information-making, service-swapping society” (173). This shift, Brandt explains, caused a waning in the power of workers and the type of literacy they had accumulated. However, because we have never really developed an understanding of the “power of workers” or the types of literacy they have accumulated, it is difficult, if not impossible, to speculate how America and its workers can respond to this challenge. As Brandt reminds us “only recently have we begun to accumulate more systematic and direct accounts of contemporary literacy as it has been experienced. Nevertheless, many current debates about literacy education and policy continue to be based largely on indirect evidence, such as standardized test scores or education levels or surveys of reading habits” (*Literacy* 11). By focusing on lived literacy experiences, this project can help us understand how previous generations of workers responded to the literacy challenges they faced when entering, not only a new workforce, but also a new country, so that we can begin to imagine ways of helping workers approach the changing American workplace.

I believe this is a needed addendum to the work currently being done, as workers, workplaces, and scholars are trying to respond to an economic shift that is accelerating in pace and cannot be avoided or ignored. This shift can be seen in the preponderance of literacy campaigns being launched in the workplace, which describe themselves as responding to “the erosion of entry-level jobs in the manufacturing sector for unskilled workers with little or no formal education,” “a service economy highly dependent on computers and advanced technology, for which the current workforce has not been educated or trained,” and “metropolitan and urban areas in which a greater proportion of the potential

work force is made up of non-English-speaking immigrants, women (many of whom are single mothers), and people of color” (Collins, Balmuth, and Jean 455). The problem is that because of our lack of attention focused on the complexity of the working class, we still do not understand the “extent of the literacy crisis,” the literacy used within the community or the contexts for which workers must be retrained. As such, in the final chapter, I argue that the only way to ethically respond to the crisis at hand is by deconstructing the rhetoric of crisis in public forums, engaging in activist ethnographic research of the communities supposedly responsible for the crisis, and working with these communities to build ethical pedagogical strategies that embrace the skills that they have, those that are needed for economic mobility and those that are desired to resist hegemony.

Chapter 2: Literacy in Italian-Agrarian Lives

“All official institutions are weak and unstable in Italy: the law is flexible and unreliable, the State discredited and easily dominated by powerful persons or groups, and society (as conceived elsewhere) has little influence. And, yet, somehow life around them flows easily: man is not always devoured by man; people do defend themselves; the daily work is done; the country can be considered civilized, in fact it is among the most civilized in the world, although admittedly enjoying a particular civilization of its own.”—Luigi Giorgio Barzini¹

“You have to realize that we cannot talk about Italy, but about our hometown, our community because the difference between us and North Italy and the big cities, Rome, is completely different from us because we were in a small town of 4,000 people. When we talk about 4,000 people the culture and even the mentality is different. What we have to do is concentrate on our hometown and not an industrial area.”—Tony Ruggiero²

Developing out of her earlier works, namely, “Accumulating Literacy” and “Sponsors of Literacy,” Deborah Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* asks scholars to focus on the economic conditions that cause certain types of literacies to lose value and others to gain prominence. Specifically, she shows how the skills required of an information economy differ greatly from those of an industrial economy. Yet, instead of being recognized as new requirements being placed upon workers, these accumulating literacy skills quickly become expectations that are placed upon individuals working during this shift. Her book’s highlighting of the shifting economic values attached to certain literacy practices is an important contribution to the field of both literacy and composition studies, garnering her the Grawemeyer Award in Education, the MLA Mina Shaughnessy Prize, and the CCCC Outstanding Book Award. In the wake of her scholarship, as a cursory glance at the 2006 CCCC’s program will show, there has been an outpouring of scholarly works focusing on the ways economic sponsors impact literacy development within diverse communities. While

¹ Barzini, Luigi Giorgio. *The Italians: A Full Length Portrait Featuring Their Manners and Morals*. New York: Bantam Books, 1964.

² Ruggiero, Antonio. Personal Interview. 31 May 2005.

these applications of Brandt's scholarship are fruitful, my historical study of literacy within an agrarian community in Italy serves to remind us that while literacy—its acquisition, value, uses, and types—is economically informed, other non-economic factors shape the way literacy is experienced and understood by those outside of the academy.

This was certainly the case for my participants. As the two epigraphs above—one from a scholar and one from a participant—show, Italy was a loosely organized country, allowing for multiple educational and economic systems to arise without many standards or a centralized body that required results, test scores, or evidence of successful teaching. Therefore, as I will show by reviewing the historical development of the schools in Latina, although literacy was sponsored as the teachers were paid by the government, much of the control of the schools remained within the hands of the community. Unlike Brandt's findings, literacy within this agrarian community was not necessarily viewed as a “resource—economic, political, intellectual, spiritual—which, like wealth or education, or trade skill or social connections, is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers” (*Literacy* 5). Instead, for many within this particular area, literacy was seen as a goal in and of itself that needed to be obtained, but not always maintained and was often used for personal rather than political or economic reasons.

Nevertheless, the application of Brandt's theory of sponsorship to this region is useful in two ways. First, it highlights the connection between literacy training and economic class and, second, it enables me to question the assumed inherent relationship between economic sponsors and all of literacy training. As Brandt's theoretical framework of “sponsorship” is invoked and applied to various communities, it is important to note that Brandt herself developed this concept by focusing on a particular context—“a society in which virtually

every child attends school and where some kind of print penetrates every corner of existence” (1). Hence, Brandt’s theory of sponsorship has a different meaning when we are studying a culture where text was not a part of daily life and reading was viewed as a privilege rather than an expectation. Though it is now commonplace to locate and label local, global, historical, and present-day sponsors and trace connections between literacy and economic opportunity, this study of literacy within a small, agricultural town in central Italy is meant to remind us of certain limitations that arise when we apply theories developed within one context to a disparate context.

Brandt’s theory of sponsorship, for instance, arises out of a study of literacy during the shift from an industrial to an information economy in America. The context, therefore, lends itself to the conclusion that literacy is sponsored to the extent that it will economically benefit the sponsor or grant economic opportunity to the sponsored. Though this is often the case, it must be recognized that within certain communities there is not always an inherent tie between literacy practices, acquisition, and economic potentiality. Although Brandt’s work allows for this possibility, her work implies that literacy that does not serve a specific end is not sponsored at all. For my participants, however, this was not the case. My participants’ literacy acquisition was sponsored, as this chapter will show; yet, many of their literacy practices were not sanctioned and did not lead the sponsor to “gain advantage by it in some way” (“Sponsors” 166). Their experiences show that while economic factors play a role in determining the extent to which one is offered certain types of literacy, literacy gains and uses are not always already linked to the goals of an economic sponsor. Brandt, herself, acknowledges the limitations of a strict economic understanding of literacy: “I do not wish to imply strict economic determinism nor to understate many other cultural aspects that figure

into literacy” (*Literacy* 7). Yet, while she states this goal in her introduction, her powerful studies of Martha Day, Barbara Hunt, Dwayne Lowery, Johnny Ames, Genna, Sam, and Michael May and the way their literacy is influenced by economic factors tend to overshadow her one sentence acknowledgement of alternative aspects that “figure into literacy” (7). Further, despite her astute caveat, an economically determined view of literacy has been reinforced by the wide use of the term “sponsorship.”

In addition to questioning the role that economic sponsorship plays in determining the type or amount of literacy afforded an individual, focusing on the uses of literacy within this agrarian environment also pushes scholars to consider the importance of nonacademic literacy practices, a shift that Brandt also calls for. While certainly this chapter will discuss formal schooling and the way it shapes my participants’ literate lives, it also focuses on the literacy practices learned and engaged in beyond the walls of the classroom. Though scholars are often tempted to view academic literacy training as the norm and label these alternative contexts of literacy learning “non-traditional” or, as Patricia Bizzell explains, to “conflate literacy-in-general with academic literacy,” for many, especially for the members of the working class, academic literacy is quite the opposite of traditional (319). For the majority of Americans, formal schooling ends with high school,³ making our focus on academic literacy a bit limiting. Within the past ten years, several scholars such as Brandt, Daniell, Street, Rose, and others have similarly asked scholars to look beyond the walls of the academy to develop a more informed sense of literacy. Yet, as Street argues in *Social Literacies*, “literacy has become associated with educational notions of Teaching and Learning and with what teachers and pupils do in schools, at the expense of the many other uses and meanings

³ According to the 2004 United States census, 27% of U.S. citizens over 25 have or are pursuing a Bachelor’s degree.

of literacy evident from comparative ethnographic literature” (106). In the twenty-first century, the movement of our courses towards professional, technical, and new media writing parallels the shift in our economy from industry to information and shows that the value we attach to literacy practices is related to the economic benefit they will grant the seeker and society. This movement, however, also makes us complicit in the accumulation of literacy that Brandt describes: “Contemporary literacy learners—across positions of age, gender, race, class, and language heritage—find themselves having to piece together reading and writing experiences for more and more spheres, creating new and hybrid forms of literacy where once there might have been fewer and more circumscribed forms” (“Accumulating” 651). Hence, this “pedagogization of literacy,” as Street refers to it, not only causes the types of literacy we value to eclipse other types of literacy practices, but also highlights our own perpetuation of the connection between literacy and the economy.

While our training obviously implies that we see a value in literacy practices outside of the ways that they can serve to advance our careers or increase the figure on our paychecks, the developments in the fields of composition and literacy studies often do not reflect our own sense of literacy’s value detached from the economic world. Holding a mirror up to our own field, we can see the preponderance of professional writing and technological literacy courses reflecting our own belief (or, at least, university administrators’ belief) that literacy is necessarily tied to the information economy in which we live. Elspeth Stuckey in *The Violence of Literacy* argues that this type of economically informed teaching results in further class division, preparing the already privileged to be more competitive in a job market that requires an ever-accumulating number of literacy skills. As she explains, “Far from engineering freedom, our current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices

that prevent freedom and limit opportunity” (vii). Stuckey’s call for a change in the way we study and teach literacy unfortunately sets up a dichotomy between linguistic and socioeconomic change, as she asks “why . . . studies of language always result in solutions that are linguistic rather than social or economic?” (41). Instead, I believe that language can lead to the latter types of solutions, but that we need to shift the focus of our studies in order to illustrate these possibilities for social change. Instead of determining what types of literacies will prepare workers for a new workforce, we need to first determine what types of literacies are valued within the working class and why. For my participants, language is powerful. However, the power they derive from language, as this chapter will begin to show, is often distanced from the types of power scholars ascribe to it. For instance, it was within the most economically deprived conditions of WWII when they were the most distanced from any type of formal sponsor that their literacy practices flourished. Further, their experiences within an area that saw heavy combat during World War II show that there are forces beyond a sponsor’s control that can impact an entire generation’s literacy lives and that literacy can often be fostered in an environment entirely absent of sponsors. Though quite useful, the theory of sponsorship cannot account for these types of traumatic events that have a great impact upon the way that literacy is transmitted, received, and used for the millions of people impacted by such events. Through this contextual study of how literacy was taught in schools and lived outside of it, it is clear that the values ascribed to literacy by both the sponsors and the sponsored are as various as the practices that fall under the umbrella term *literacy*.

When studying literacy from a contextual perspective, scholars have determined that, as Brandt explains, “the means and materials through which people acquire literacy (or are

excluded from it) will always be an expression in some way of prevailing ideological climates” (“Accumulating” 654). Schools, one of the largest literacy sponsors, therefore play an important role in shaping the way individuals gain, use, and view literacy within their homeland and the disparate worlds they enter. Similar to literacy, itself, schools and educational systems are contextual and ideologically charged, impacted by the population density of the area, the dominant religious beliefs of the people, the economy, and the support (or lack of support) received from the government, in addition to numerous other factors. When we are considering immigrant literacy, therefore, it is important to consider the educational baggage these travelers do or do not bring with them.

Where Have All the Romans Gone?: Post-Roman Empire Education in Italy

Universitá, St. Augustine, *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, Quintillian, Cicero, *De Oratore*—these are terms that harken back to a Roman Empire focused on education and are associations often drawn by rhetoricians when the issue of Italian education is brought up. While these Roman contributions are widely discussed in academic journals in multiple fields, among historians, rhetoricians, literacy scholars, and educators, there is a daunting silence regarding the educational practices in Italy between the time of the Roman Empire and the Second World War. As I.L. Kandel writes in 1936, “The study of the history of education in Italy is confined in the main to the requirements for the preparation of teachers; there do not exist, as in Germany, centers for the promotion of research in this field” (394). While the lack of these research efforts can partially be attributed to both financial and political issues that this chapter will explore, they are also related to Italian geography and history. In 1985, Stanley Fish explained that literacy and linguistic knowledge are

“contextual rather than abstract, local rather than general, dynamic rather than invariant” (438). This statement proves quite true when studying the development of literacy and education in Italy—a country divided geographically by mountains and water, historically by the multiple foreign powers occupying various regions, and symbolically by the “isms” separating North from South and industrial from agricultural. As Barizini describes, “Italy has often been defined, with only slight exaggeration, as nothing more than a mosaic of millions of families, sticking together by blind instinct, like colonies of insects, an organic formation rather than a rational construction of written statutes and moral imperatives” (190). Given the historically loose organization of this country, a grand understanding of the educational system and its role in the development of individual literacy is impossible, making it necessary to engage in a contextual study. Within this context—a tenant farming town, a war-torn country, a sparse educational system—the “continuities and contradictions” of literacy, as Graff calls them, become clear.

In order to understand how divisions in literacy training between north and south developed and how Italy gave birth to over twenty dialects, some background knowledge about the development of a unified Italy is necessary. The idea of Italy as a cohesive country is, in itself, a bit contradictory to its history. Historically, Italy was a land of city-states, subject to a series of takeovers from disparate regions since the last days of the Roman Empire. The shattering of any sort of national unity in Italy dates almost back to the days of rhetorical glory. Specifically, between the fall of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th Century and the reunification in 1870, Italy was not a single political unit for 1400 years. In the interim, “Italy was fragmented into eight separate states, all but one of them (Piedmont) ruled either by foreign governments or by the Papacy” (Mangione & Morreale 31); sections

of the country were controlled by the Austrian Empire, the French Emperor Napoleon III, and the Spanish Bourbons. The amount of foreign control led to significant linguistic, economic, and educational disparities. As such, the idea of Italy as a unified nation similar to the U.S. or England is a relatively new one. Essentially, the towns were as various as the patron saints for whom they were named. Paradoxically, it was this sense of separateness that led to the eventual unification of the country. For reasons that differed by region, the foreign influences in Italy fostered discontent and led to revolutionary actions that eventually prompted multiple groups to join powers and create a new Italy. Symbolically, Italy was united in 1871 when the *Risorgimento* (uprising) which began in the North liberated Southern Italy from Bourbon tyranny. While the *Risorgimento* is often heroically portrayed as the insurrection that integrated *Italia*, it was actually the end of a very long process beginning with the Italian uprisings from 1820-1821, the First Italian War of Independence (1848-1849), the Franco-Austrian War in 1859, the Austrian-Prussian War of 1866 and, finally, ending with the *Risorgimento* and “the glorious march of Giuseppe Garibaldi” (Codignola 457). It was only after fifty years of rising nationalism and intense battles often led by secret societies, such as the *Carbonari* (Coal Burners), that on March 17, 1871, “Vittoria Emanuele⁴ was proclaimed first King of Italy” (457).

A New Italy in Name, the Same Italy in Spirit

“Que si fa l’Italia o si muore!” (Here we make Italy or we die!)
 —Giuseppe Garibaldi at the battlefield of Catalofimi in Sicily 15 May 1860.

⁴ Victor Emanuel was previously reigning as King of Piedmont and was well-known for signing the Treaty of Milan which made peace with Austria. Since Piedmont was the only constitutional state in Italy recognized until 1861, he was the obvious choice for king of united Italy.

While the crowning of a king was meant to create a sense of national unity in Italy, the schisms between north and south caused by education, industry, and history could not be filled by a symbolic gesture. Though the country had a leader and a flag, it did not have a citizenry that defined itself as “Italian.” In reality, this “unification” did little more than divide Italy into two separate spheres, highlighting the differences between the established North and the struggling South. As Charles Little explains, “To the Romans of 1870 Italy was hardly more than a geographic expression. For them, the population of the country, broadly considered, was divided into ‘Romans’ first and foremost and all the rest merely ‘Italians’” (79). The difference between these two regions was largely economic; while the north (the cities north of Rome) had established an industrial economy, the south largely remained a part of a sharecropping system that consisted of wealthy *latifondisti* (land-owners) and poverty-stricken *contadini* (land workers). Since these economies required different types of knowledge or literacies, the South began to be considered stagnant, and often, rather than being referred to as the *Mezzogiorno*, the prejudices against the people and their customs earned it the title *Italia bassa* (low Italy).

Supporting these beliefs, northern Italians often relied upon anthropological “evidence” that should sound hauntingly familiar to an American audience with an historical memory. For instance, these positivist anthropologists “argued that the darker ‘Mediterranean’ southerners were racially distinct from the lighter ‘Aryan’ northerners because they possessed ‘inferior African blood’ and demonstrated ‘a moral and social structure reminiscent of primitive and even quasibarbarian times, a civilization quite inferior’” (Guglielmo and Salerno 9). While this prejudice was partially due to their class status and their appearance, it was also an issue of location. Since Southern Italy is

positioned as “a crossroads joining Africa, Europe, and the East,” many northerners believed this cradle “had given birth to a people with an ‘inherent racial inferiority’” (9). Therefore, the lack of formal knowledge required by their lifestyle was compounded by their physical characteristics and led to the development of broad stereotypes about southern Italians.

Because the unification kept power, wealth, and government in the north, the south, in many ways, became more heavily burdened, which in turn led to greater impoverishment and prejudice. The unification effectively led to two developments: “the northern Italians became contemptuous of the backward south, and the south was resentful and paranoid about the prospects of exploitation from the north” (Ciongoli and Parini 11). While the north was benefiting from being a part of unified Italy, for the south, unification magnified legal and economic encumbrances. As Alan Kraut explains:

taxes strangled the south and the region was trapped in a maze of increasing debt. While cows and horses, most often the property of the wealthier *latifondisti*, were exempted from taxation, mules and donkeys, crucial to the *contadini*, were taxed heavily. Church lands, confiscated by the new government, were almost always transferred to the *latifondisti*, almost none being distributed to the *contadini* (112)!⁵

This unequal distribution placed many agrarian Italians in the position of living, as many of my participants characterized it, “hand to mouth,” meaning that they understood that they would always work without ever getting ahead—that they would live the life their parents

⁵ These conditions also gave rise to what has been labeled “the mafia” or “the Black Hand.” Beginning with the occupation of foreign powers and increasing with the imposition of new taxes and financial detriments from the north, powerful Italian families began to join together in order to protect themselves and their assets. For more information about the history of the mafia, see Gaia Servadio’s *Mafioso: A History of the Mafia From Its Origins to the Present Day*. (Stein & Day, 1976).

and their grandparents led and that their life would always be tied to the land and the fruits it could or could not produce. No amount of literacy training could combat the forces of history or the pervasive lack of industrialization within the lower part of the country. For these reasons, to Southern Italians, the government was a source of imposition, an attitude that, as we shall see, they would carry over into America. Furthermore, they would also bring with them the stigma that was placed upon them by their northern, industrialized country(wo)men.

This stigma, combined with the government's actions, created an almost unbearable situation for agrarian Italians. In *The Man Farthest Down: A Record of Observation and Study in Europe*, after a visit to Southern Italy, Booker T. Washington even remarked:

The negro is not the man farthest down. The condition of the coloured farmer in the most backward parts of the Southern States in America, even where he has the least education and the least encouragement, is incomparably better than the conditions and opportunities of the agricultural population in Sicily.

(24)⁶

Without the power or the means to revolt, many Southern Italians turned to their only viable alternative: immigration. In fact, the unification of Italy in 1871 effectively resulted in one of the largest migrations recorded in history during the 1890s. The movement away from Southern Italy was so great that it “reduce[ed] Italy’s population by one third” and accounted for “more than 80 percent of all the Italians who came to the United States” (Mangione and Morreale 32).

⁶ To see the notes of all of Washington’s observations in Sicily, see “The Booker T. Washington Papers” archived on the University Illinois Press web site: <http://www.historycooperative.org/btw/>. For information about Sicily see Vol 10: 371-3 and Vol. 11: 220-37.

In addition to creating a divisive Italy that pushed many outside of her grasp, the unification also did little in the way of improving education. For the majority of her history, Italy “held the field in giving education to the privileged few, not only before 1870, but until the past ten years [1920s]” (Little, “The Italian” 135). Similar to the disjointed organization of the various provinces, schooling in Italy was often loosely structured and based on a regional elitism, giving rise to what many have considered one of the largest illiterate populations in Europe. While there are not many works that discuss education in Italy, any work that does broach this topic will often begin by lamenting the limited amount of literacy found within a country with such a rich language tradition. As Southern immigrants began to pour into the shores of America, presses began circulating accounts of the literacy crisis in Italy similar to this one from a 1901 article from *Leslie’s Illustrated*: “Only about forty per cent of the population of Italy can read and write, and even the accuracy of that proportion is often questioned, as for instance, when four thousand men were recently examined for military service it was found that only twenty-six per cent of the number could read” (Armstrong 270). While the sources of such figures are questionable,⁷ even contemporary literacy theorists, such as Graff remark upon this issue:

Throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, literacy rates in Italy were among the lowest in Europe (with the exception of Spain), and the gap between male and female literacy was also wider than usual, reflecting the

⁷ In *Literacy in the United States: Readers and Reading Since 1880*, Kaestle explains that these figures are problematic for several reasons. Often they are based upon the ability of an individual to sign his/her name, revealing little about the extent of one’s literacy and nothing about an individual’s reading capacities. Other statistics are based upon self-reporting, which asks people to assess their own literacy ability and is, therefore, unreliable. Finally, the extent of an individual’s literacy is often determined by a specious connection between grade level and the literacy ability attributed to it. For instance, during WWII an individual was considered functionally literate by the military if s/he had completed the fourth grade, but it is unclear which skills are denoted by this grade level.

lower opportunities available to women in places where traditional attitudes remained strong and where educational development was especially uneven and slow. (*Legacies* 297)

While it is true that there was a strong hierarchical sense of education in literacy based on the class system in place, it is difficult to determine the credence of these proclamations since we lack in-depth studies of the educational practices, policies, and schools in Italy as well as the literacy practices of individual people.

Education After Unification

“What kind of an education did we have? Really?
At that time, we were just like a bunch of hillbillies.” –Ida Casale

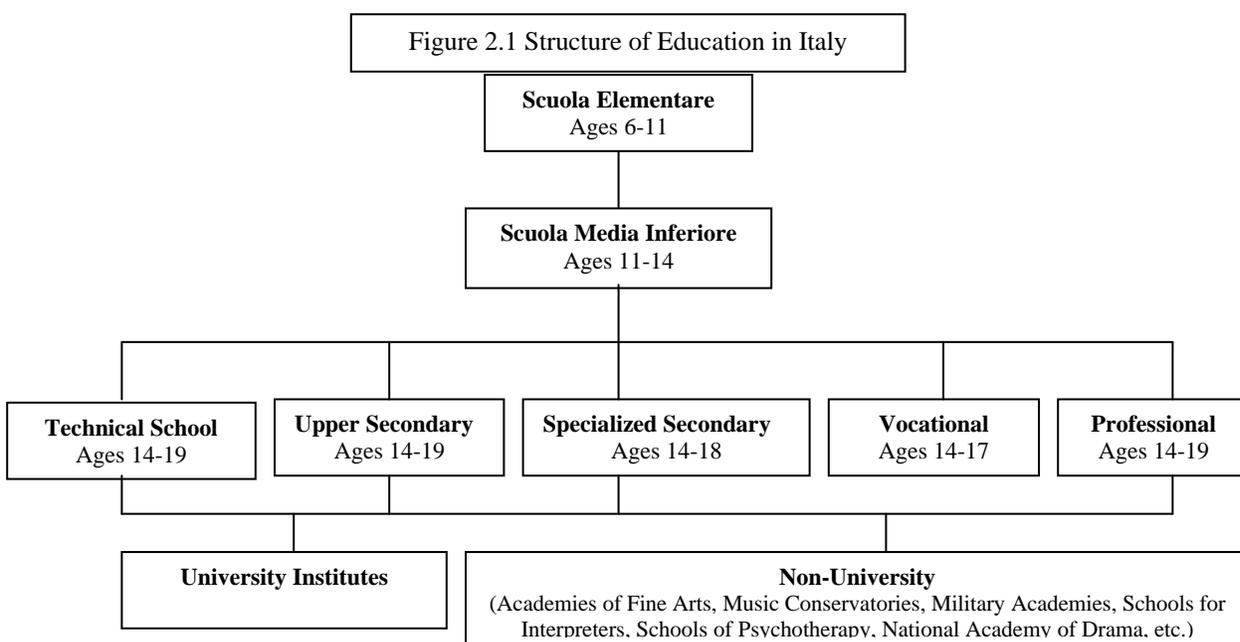
Because of the uneven development of schools and the individual histories of the towns, understanding the history of education in Italy requires an ability on the part of the researcher and reader to think kaleidoscopically⁸ rather than linearly. For, while there were codes and laws in place, the impact of these regulations depended upon one’s location within the country—city, farm, mountain, coast, north, south, island. The fingertips of the law were never long enough to extend into all parts of Italy, but did so unevenly and with large gaps between, just as a hand extends. For instance, the earliest piece of education legislation, the 1859 Casati Law, which completely secularized all public education, changing schools from being preparatory institutions for privileged children, only impacted the cities, which already had educational institutions in place and did not really provide for the building of schools in

⁸ This idea is borrowed from Royster’s *Traces of a Stream*, which explains that to view literacy practices and learning kaleidoscopically “encourages us, above all else, to complicate our thinking, rather than simplify it, in search of greater clarity and also greater interpretative power” (73). To view literacy kaleidoscopically for her means to examine the context, ethos formation, and rhetorical action permitted to a specific cultural group.

less developed areas. As Joseph Justman explains, “The Casati Law of 1859 set up a national system of schools, modeled on the French, which read well on paper” (24). In translation, however, “while Piedmont and Lombardy were perhaps ready for universal education, large regions of Southern Italy were still in the grip of a feudal mentality. Schools were few and far between and, despite government urging, communities could not or would not establish or maintain them” (24). As there was a lack of economic sponsorship from the government because there was little to be gained by educating the masses and limited resources within the towns, these early laws were rarely effectively implemented. Further, since foreign governments still controlled many parts of Italy, there was not a clear sense of how these “secularized schools” would be funded, which was compounded by the fact that there were not many trained teachers, especially within the southern regions of Italy.

Similar issues arose with the legislation that followed the unification of Italy. The 1877 Cappino Law, for example, was meant to decree compulsory education for all children over six but, again, failed to have a real impact because there were no schools being built within particular regions, sufficient teachers were not available in all areas, and there were no sanctions against parents who failed to send their children to school. While the standards for education continued to rise on paper, especially with the passing of the 1904 Orlando Law which “provided elementary courses in two grades of four years for everyone, plus two years for those not going on to secondary studies,” the schooling or lack of schooling within particular provinces largely remained unchanged since the municipalities were responsible for building schools and providing free education (Little, “The Italian” 137). It was not until the Credaro Law was passed in 1911 that concrete changes in education began taking shape in large portions of the country. This law extended compulsory education up to twelve years

of age, but, more importantly, put a system in place whereby 80% of teaching salaries would be paid by the state and only 20% by the municipalities (Little 85). This enabled more towns to develop schools, as teachers began arriving from the city, paid, for the most part, by the government. However, these schools varied in both content and structure depending upon the available means of the neighborhood. For instance, while some schools were held in buildings constructed for that specific purpose and were attended by uniformed pupils, other classrooms were set up within townspeople's homes and had students coming in at different times of the day. Whereas one school would have different grades with students all attending at the same time but in multiple classrooms, other schools taught all children together, regardless of age. The majority of these decisions appeared to rely upon four factors: the number of teachers within an area, the number of students, the school building, and the duties of the children within the family. Therefore, while the government officially sponsored schooling, the type and amount of schooling was often determined by the community and the sponsored, themselves.



By the time the Fascist regime arrived in 1922, there were various educational paths in place, and one's track often depended upon his or her class and location. The pre-war impact of having a stronger governmental force actually led to the creation of an educational system that became even more hierarchical and conservative. The Minister of Education, Giovanni Gentile, not only instituted the compulsory teaching of Catholic religion and raised the compulsory age to 14, but also created a new vocational school. Belying the title, the previous technical school was aimed at preparing individuals to rise to a higher level of education. The new vocational/technical school, on the other hand, "was no longer to be preparatory to the higher technical institute but must aim at completing the training for minor occupations" (Little 139). As one can see from the following diagram, this sort of schooling became an end in itself and did not enable the student to reach for any goal beyond a technical certificate. As David Scanlon explains, "Education until the end of World War II had been thought of as limited to a selective humanistic curriculum. Some provisions were made for general and prevocational training, but these were sketchy and for many years did not constitute 'education'" (32). Though the creation of a new technical school did not have the impact that Gentile imagined, the Facist government was able to supply the country with the most stable period of education that it had known. The schools differed in structure and content, but in all regions, children were expected to attend *Scuola Elementare* (Primary School), and many boys began attending the *Scuola Media Inferiore* (Middle School). However, few within agrarian towns, such as the towns of my participants, would make it to the third tier of the education ladder. Yet, while their education was no doubt limited by their economic context, my participants were receiving a sponsored education that was not meant

to suit them for an economic or political end. Rather, for the majority of my participants, education was seen as an end in itself.

Sponsoring Literacy, but for What Ends? : Literacy in Latina

“For both rich and poor, plumbing did not exist until well into the twentieth century. Children defecated and urinated in the streets. At night, urinals and pots were emptied into those same streets” (Mangione and Morreale 37).

“It was so green, and it seemed to go on forever.”
–Ida Casale remembering life in Latina



Fig. 2.2 Picture of San Cosma e Damiano courtesy of Maria Romanelli.

The two towns my participants hail from, San Cosma e Damiano and Coreno, lie within the province of Latina and the neighboring Ausonió—an area that looks as though a green crevice erupted from the jagged mountains surrounding it. A forty-five minute walk away from the closest city, these towns were a place where “everybody knew everybody” and “nobody would bother you” (Romanelli). While this area is relatively close to Rome, the geographical features separating it from the city and providing for a fertile agricultural cradle aligned the close to 4,000 inhabitants with the lot of most Southern Italians. From the unification in the 1870s to the 1930s, when the majority of my participants were growing up in Italy, there was little change in the class system, which remained as rigid as the mountains surrounding them. As Maria Falso explains, “We had rich and poor. There was no medium.

We were poor.” Essentially, being “rich” within this area meant that you owned land on which others worked and that your quality of life was far superior. “The rich people had a palace,” Maria Romanelli describes. “They had people that cleaned their house, cooked their meals. They had a car. The poor people were lucky to have a donkey.” A donkey was as important in Latina as a car would be in America; it enabled the person to move around, work on various pieces of property, and reduced the burden of hauling crops across the farm and back and forth to the city.

With few exceptions, no other work was available in the area aside from farming, which meant that the individual had to rely upon the *laitfondisti* and, more importantly, the land itself, as there was no pay for work received. Antonio Ianniello found himself in exactly this situation, working on the land of Don Carlo: “See we work to get the bread and the eggs. That’s it. No money. You grow wheat, corn, beans. When you take this after three or four months, this is the wage.” Not surprisingly, as food became the means of exchange, meals, for many Southern Italians, were viewed as a sort of communion—the sharing of the products of the entire family’s labor, a connotation that still survives within many Italian-American families. After several months of work, the harvest would be divided, and whatever the land owner decided was the appropriate amount would become the primary means of subsistence for the family; some of it would be taken to the city and traded for salt or some other staple; some of the families sold a little in the city in order to create a bit of savings, but the majority of it would be consumed.

Relationships between land owners and workers remained congenial “as long as you did what they want you to do and they paid you nothing” (Romanelli). However, it was not

always a secure relationship; as Tony Parente noted, there was no assurance that you would be paid at all:

Over there, you wait two or three months before you get money. I used to have a lot of argument with my father. He used to work for people on the fields. You know, you go work this year and there is no pay. They don't have no pay. They say, "I going to pay you later" because there was no money. Then, a year later, they call you again. I told my father, "they still got to pay you for last year. What do you want to go work for him? For what? For nothing?" See that was the problem. You go to work. You want the work. You work. If they pay you, they pay you. If they don't, they don't. It's a chance. I still am owed some money. Really!

While there were police in Latina, as was mentioned earlier, there was not a firm set of laws in place to protect the people working the land, and the government rarely intervened in this type of business transaction. When asked about the government's involvement in their lives, Romanelli replied, "there was no tax or government. There was a government in Rome, but they didn't bother with us. They didn't know if we were alive or dead." Forty years after the unification, it seems the reach of the government did not extend into the mountains.

As a solid exchange system was not in place, a family's "success" was mostly defined by the amount of crops they could bring in or the number of animals they could tend. In accordance with Soltow and Stevens's findings regarding nineteenth-century labor and education in America's south, "the economic value of *young* children was greater in farm families because the division of labor among family members easily accommodated different age-groups," making the farm child "a 'producer durable' contributing to the income of the

family” (111). Hence, literacy training was valued to the extent that it still enabled the child to produce goods for the family’s sustenance. However, unlike the children Soltow and Stevens studied, children from Latina were not engaging in “light labor” (111). Among my participants, a typical day followed as Maria Romanelli describes:

when I was about five I had to get up early in the morning. I had a goat, chicken, piggy, rabbit. I had to feed all that. My mom and dad went to work on the farm. And I had to go to school, but before I went to school . . . my grandma had olive tree on both side of the street and olive used to fall on the street, and we had to pick them up before the people would walk and smash it. So, after we did that I used to go to school and then I would go home and make sure I had dinner ready for when parents get home. That was my day.

Even when a family owned their own land, as Joe Russo and Bernardina Corte’s family did, the children would still engage in labor when they were not at school. Corte explains:

I did all kind of work. I work on the farm. I did a little bit everything. We used to dig. I used to help my father plant stuff. Over there we used to own our own land and when you own your own land, you know, usually people come and work for us. But I used to help pick up stuff—green beans, and all of the stuff. I do a little bit of everything.

Whether they were taking care of sheep in the mountains, as Pasqualina Casale did, cleaning the house and cooking dinner, or working on the farm as the rest of my participants did, the children spent a large portion of their time working.

Though this unstable, physically draining and sometimes currency-free lifestyle may not appeal to those entrenched in modern comforts, for the most part, my participants recall

their time in Latina as a time of community and happiness. Work was done together: “we used to change days. You help me today, I come help you tomorrow” (Romanelli). And, as none of them were part of the upper class, they viewed each other as equals, and each family supported the others as though there was only one family: “Everybody was happy even so there is no money in the pocket. The people sing. The people sing. The people play the accordion. They do everything. They go together as a group, a bunch of boys, a bunch of girls. If you have a dollar in the bank, then you have it. If you don’t have it, then you don’t buy” (Ruggiero). Growing up without running water, without electricity, without the luxury of a bathroom and the security of a weekly paycheck, my participants developed a set of values quite different from those they would encounter across the ocean. The family was the only stable force within the lives of Southern Italians. According to Barizini, “The Italian family is a stronghold in hostile land: within its walls and among its members, the individual finds consolation, help, advice, provisions, loans, weapons, allies, and accomplices to aid him in his pursuits” (190). For these reasons, my participants, similar to many Italians, valued their families and the connections within the neighborhood above any material goods or social status. The centrality of the family was codified in a rigid set of rules often unstated but lived by, which have come to be called *l’ordine della famiglia*. According to these rules, the family not only consisted of the immediate members, but also third or fourth degree relatives as well as neighbors. As Raymond Belliotti explains, “The exact degree of kinship determined reciprocal duties and privileges. The welfare of the family, taken in the extended sense, was the primary responsibility of each member” (2).⁹ Regardless of hardship, the

⁹ For a primarily oral culture, *L’ordine della famiglia*, a development of the Mezzogiorno, was quite complex. According to its rules, the family included “coparents” or “godparents” who acted as “a limited check and balance to family policies and practices” (Belliotti 2). “Intimate friendships were permanent” (Belliotti 2). While friends could choose to end relationships, they “could not sever what were meant to be enduring bonds”

majority of Southern Italians remained loyal to their families and did not view themselves as oppressed because of the lifestyles they led, but as maintaining family tradition. For instance, though they were obviously engaging in heavy labor, when asked if they worked in Italy, four participants gave the same exact answer: “no, there were no factories in Italy” (Romanelli, Casale, Romano, Corte). They did not perceive themselves to be workers, but as providers whose labors were often not attached to an economic end, but to sustaining the family and the community as a whole.

Given this loyalty, the majority of my participants saw themselves as being responsible for taking over the same land previous generations had worked, keeping them tied to their hometown as well as an agrarian lifestyle. This resulted in a different type of education than one would find in the city at the same time. Life on the farm did not require the type of literacy skills we attribute to schooling. Business was often based on the trading of goods rather than the attainment of money, so little record keeping was necessary. This is not meant to imply that rural life did not require its own type of literacy. Participants could readily recall the months when certain vegetables were planted and harvested, could graphically explain the most humane ways of decapitating a chicken, and were as skilled at producing their crops as they were at selling them in the market. Clearly, their lifestyle had a literacy of its own, but it often did not involve the academic literacy practices of reading and writing. When asked if her parents read or wrote, Romanelli replied:

No, honey. My parents didn't have time to do anything. They work on the farm. They come home late, full of dirt. Try to wash up as best they can and

(2). Friendly acquaintances were considered *amici della cappello*, those to whom one tips one's hat, their name reflecting the action expected when in their company. This idea of the family order persists in America within many Italian-American families.

go to bed because at five in the morning they had to get up and work the farm and they had to walk two to three hours to get to the farm. So they worked from sun up to sun down.

Similarly, the children were not using many of the literacy skills they would learn in school at home, as Romanelli recalls, “I did my homework, but that’s all” (Interview). Not only were they not practicing the written word within the home, but they often were not even using the same language that they were learning in school. According to Joe Russo, Standard Italian was used “just at school, that’s it because every village at that time had a dialect. . . . At ten years old most finished the school and that’s it. And then you don’t talk no more Italian; it’s all dialect.” While linguistic schooling did not serve much purpose outside of the schools and, in most cases, especially for women, literacy training was not viewed as a “resource” that “is pursued for the opportunities and protections that it potentially grants its seekers” (Brandt, *Literacy* 5), in most cases, it was pursued and sponsored nonetheless and later would serve entirely non-economic purposes when time permitted.

With one exception, all of my participants attended some type of formal schooling. The only one who did not, Pasqualina Casale, lived too far away from the school for it to be a possibility. Since her family raised sheep high in the mountains, Casale was a two-hour walk away from the school—a four-hour round-trip journey too treacherous for a six-year-old to make on a daily basis. Schooling within this agrarian region, as Casale’s experience shows, remained the choice of the parents and was usually more a decision based on location than economics, though there were laws in place making schooling mandatory. The majority of the parents, though not for an economic gain or a hope that their children would move away from the farm, placed a certain level of importance on education, as all of the rest of my

participants attended primary school. They did not, however, all attend the same school. Bernardina Corte, born in 1938, attended a school in Coreno that was attached to a church and run mostly by nuns. School lasted for about three hours a day, from nine until noon during which time they learned “a little bit of everything: a little bit about the math, a little bit the Italian language—the most important thing over there was the math, Italian language, and history and gym.” Born in the same town only eight years earlier, Antonio Ruggiero, because he was further up in the mountains, was forced to attend the same school as the rest of my participants—a one-room school located within, interestingly enough, my great-great grandmother, Colomba Stavole’s house. As Ruggiero explains, “During that time, the majority of the old people do not know how to read and write because the school was five mile and there was no car. You had to walk from one village to another village. I go to Maria [Romanelli’s] community to go to school. And you had to walk a lot, about five mile.” However, while Pasqualina Casale’s family did not think her capable of this trek, Ruggiero’s parents expected him to make this trip daily.



Fig. 2.3 School in San Cosma e Damiano at Colomba Stavole's house.

Photo courtesy of Joe Russo.

This image also appears in Erasmo Falso's *Ventosa: Antico Paese Del Sud*,_54.

The school itself, though small in size, was rich with expectations. Within its walls, first, second, and third grade classes were conducted daily by the same teacher—third grade was in the morning, followed by first, and ending with second. By the time they completed second grade, students in this agrarian town had acquired skills on par with contemporary American children. As Romanelli recalls, “We learned. Second grade we could do division. We could do fraction. We could read the tables, backwards, forwards. Reading, writing, fractions, division—everything.” In addition to these formal skills, as Soltow and Stevens found with American education, schooling in Mussolini’s time resulted “in an ideology of literacy which linked the traditional values of home and religion to an emerging nationalism” (148). Not only were these students learning a language that they did not use in any other context—Standard Italian—but they were also required to engage in prayers periodically throughout the day and were taught discipline through strict punishment. When students misbehaved, “they put the dry corn on the floor and you kneel on it until you got blisters”

(Ruggiero). These types of punishments were reinforced in the home, as Ruggiero explains: “you could go home and tell your mom and dad, but they know if they put you on the floor, you must have done something wrong. So, you don’t tell” because then the punishment would only be doubly received. While these lessons were being received, and the religious and behavioral lessons were reinforced within the home, the literacy teachings would later be lost because of a lack of use. Therefore, though the country was geographically unified in 1871, linguistically and culturally it remained a diverse land. As daily life required a knowledge of an oral dialect that differed from the traditional Tuscan dialect, Standard Italian was something that was learned, but not always maintained, and, if it was, it was not serving an end other than the personal goals or needs of the sponsored.

This was especially true for women for whom education typically ended with the third grade. “Usually,” Romanelli explains, “men and boys used to go to the city. Girls didn’t because the girls, I don’t know, they didn’t believe girls should go to school so much. All they had to do was get married, and have children, and work on the farm.” Since the only real way for townspeople to move outside of an agrarian lifestyle was to join the military or become a police officer—options not available to women—women were not expected to receive more than a minimal education, even when their interests and abilities exceeded the offerings in the primary school. Maria Romano found herself in this conundrum: “I was excellent in reading and in art. But the thing is, the way we did it, we don’t have high school like you have got here. We make first, secondo, third, fourth if you want to do it. Fourth you got to go in the city. My mama no allow us to go in the city.” Higher education for women was further restricted because it was not free and, as there was no financial gain to come from their extended education, it was seen as even less essential to their development. As

Bernardina Corte explains, “I got just through the third grade and I really like it a lot, but there was no finance, you know. My parents don’t believe I can go in you know high school, but I was really like to go to school.” Essentially, though their primary education was received without a sponsor’s expectation of a specific end, their economic conditions and lack of sponsorship limited their literacy development.

As they were being taught to read and write a language that they often did not use on a daily basis, the amount of learning they retained depended upon their own decision to practice speaking, reading, and writing in Standard Italian.¹⁰ Usually, any continuing education that went on for women occurred because of the influence of some other literacy sponsor. Corte, for example, grew quite fond of reading because she had several schoolteachers in her family who would supply her with books. This occasion was a rarity, which is indicated by both the amount of gratitude Corte expresses for being granted this opportunity—“I was very blessed because all of my cousins was teachers and I got a couple of doctor in the family. And I learn a lot. A lot of books”—and the lack of this type of sponsor in other female participant’s lives.

For these reasons, it is unclear exactly why the women were sent to primary school; it did not make them more competitive economically, and the behavior mandates were just as firmly taught within the homes as they were in the schools. Distinct from Soltow and Stevens’ findings about socialization in schools, I found that my participants were not being trained to behave in ways expected by a new workplace—their workplace was established by the time their great-great grandparents were born, and the expected behaviors were being

¹⁰ Similar to Brandt, I found that both men and women remembered reading more often and more fondly than writing. As Corte expresses, “I don’t care too much about the writing. I just love to read” (Interview).

taught mostly outside of the school. Further, their learning did not really contribute to a larger sort of national unity as they did not continue to use the national language outside of the school. Therefore, though their education was sponsored, the only incentive for literacy learning was, as Romanelli puts it, “because we want to know how to read.”

For boys, on the other hand, there were, sometimes, economic motivations for their learning. Some were sent into the city to attend the *scuola media* to become police officers, serve in the military, or receive agricultural training. For them, literacy served more of the function Brandt describes—it became a “resource” that could help them secure a job off of the farm and even out of the town, but this was a possibility that arose primarily with Mussolini and was not widely open to previous generations. This fact did not go unrecognized by my participants as can be seen in Antonio Ianniello’s description of his upper-division school: “Six days a week, I go to school in Mussolini time. They had a half a day on the Saturday.” While these options were available to men, because of family loyalties and the educational focus of schools in the area, many of them chose to concentrate on becoming more productive agricultural workers. For instance, in Ianniello’s upper-division school, they attended eight hours of school a day: “Five hours school—class. After that, they take you out. They bring you work. You seed and you plant too. Not when I was little. This was in the sixth grade. We had to practice for work on the farm three hours a day, not on Saturday, just the weekday.” Often, before going to school and after attending class, Ianniello and the other students would have to perform these same labors on their families’ land. However, it wasn’t that the government had chosen to train students this way and thus maintain a prescribed class system; there really was not another economic arena to prepare

male students for at this age. Before WWII, all of Italy was an agriculturally based economy with small sectors of industry in the north. Trades were taught through an apprenticeship, and the only other option was to join the military¹¹ or the *polizia* and leave the family behind. Therefore, while their literacy training was tied to the economy and offered limited opportunities for mobility, reading and writing were not being taught to make workers more productive. If that were the goal, they would have been working on the farm the whole day rather than half of it. Instead, again, their literacy attainment seemed to be an expectation without a real connection to a predetermined end.

Upper-division education for men, it seems, was meant to serve more of a functional purpose. As early as the age of twelve, their paths and, in a certain sense, their class were already chosen for them. Though they had opportunities that exceeded those of the women in these two towns, only one of them was able to go on to college. The rest either stopped at the *scuola media* or engaged in some sort of unauthorized, apprentice-like training. For instance, two of the participants were trained as barbers, but this type of schooling took place in the barber shop, watching and working alongside those engaging in this type of labor. However, it was clear from some of the memories they were able to easily conjure that the literacy activities of men were more enthusiastically encouraged. For instance, Tony Ianiello vividly recalls why he continues to read as much as he can: “because I remember one of my professor, my mathematics professor, he used to tell me: ‘When you find a piece of paper on the street, don’t kick it with your foot. Pick it up and see what it says. You read a little bit. If you don’t want to read all of it, but read a little bit and then throw it away, but you got to read a piece of paper.’” Literacy, as Ianiello remembers, appears to have been seen as valuable not

¹¹ The Italian military at the time required a fifth grade certificate.

because of the economic opportunities it could bring, but because of the personal role it played in the development of individual identity. Though encouraged, because of the lifestyle they had, their literate practices were limited and would not flourish until they were provided with the time to engage in literate acts.

Therefore, though the paths differed, for both men and women their avenues of education were finite and their professional options limited from birth. Women were to become farmers, wives, mothers, and, if they were firmly committed to their studies, nuns. Yet, they attended and enjoyed schooling, explaining that it was a chance to meet with other children in the community. Though their literacy was not “sponsored” to enable them to gain some sort of economic success or to create national cohesion, the discipline of the home was reinforced in the schools, and they were practicing their religious beliefs—the only ones available to them in their small town—on more than just Sundays. The rise of Mussolini enabled some men to move off of the farm but not too far from their working-class roots. Further this limited mobility often came at the cost of their freedoms, as their choices outside of agrarianism often consisted of joining the army or working in a government post, policing an area outside of their hometown.¹² The experiences of my eleven participants do not appear to diverge much from that of many Italians, as into the 1960s, scholars were lamenting: “Only a few years ago children who completed the elementary cycle (grades one through five) tended to fall into three general groups: approximately one third terminated formal education at the age of eleven, one third found its way into prevocational schools and the remaining third was admitted, after careful scrutiny, to the middle schools” (Soda 199). The

¹² In Italy, police officers were not allowed to work in or near the town in which they grew up, as it was feared that their familial and neighborly loyalties would conflict with their ability to uphold the law.

available opportunities, however, made little difference to this group because, for many of them, schooling ended as soon as it began.

The Emergence of Literacy Barriers

My father said: “Oh my god. Oh my god. Arriva la guarra! Arriva la guarra!”
—Maria Falso, Interview

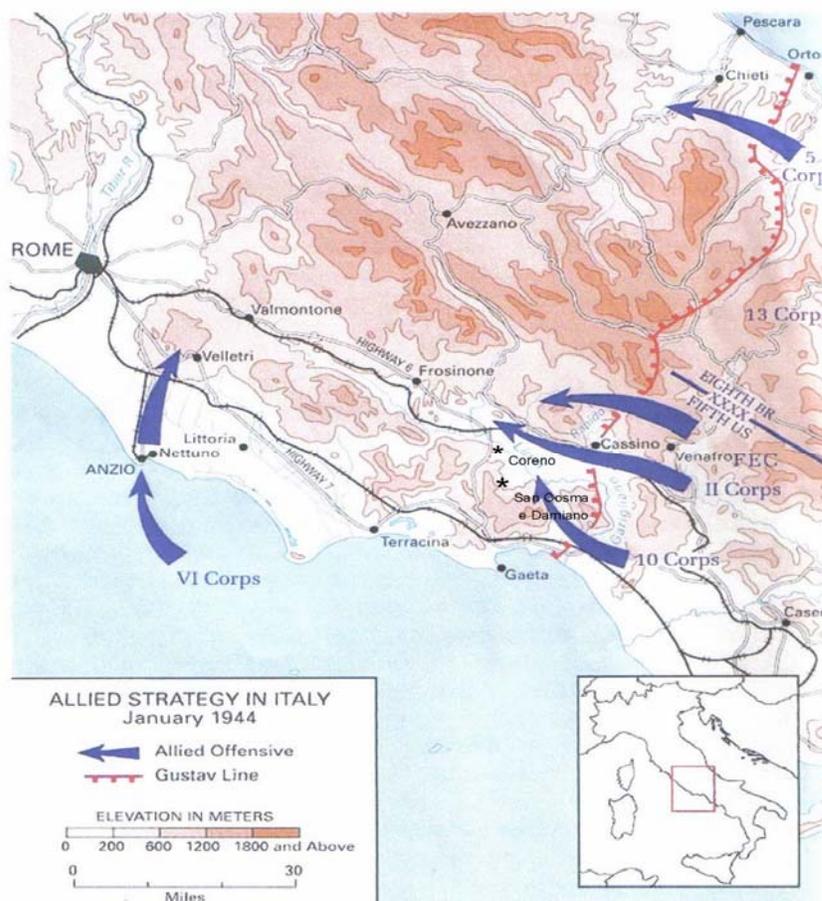


Fig. 2.4 Map of Allied Strategy¹³

When I first began to try to understand this region of Italy, I paid a visit to Little Italy in Cleveland, Ohio. In one of the shops, there was a large topographical map of Italy. I

¹³ Map courtesy of The Perry-Castaneda Map Collection at the University of Texas. Available online at: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/historical/italy_strategy_1944.jpg>. According to the collection, the original map is from the Rome-Arno Campaign Brochure by Clayton D. Laurie. I have added the towns of San Cosma e Damiano and Coreno for clarification.

touched the Mezzogiorno and began tracing my finger up from Naples, a little bit to the right until I felt a sharp spike push gently on my fingertips. San Cosma e Damiano. Coreno. My fingers dipped and traveled up the grooves of the mountains, and I pictured life there at an altitude far above the bustling cities oft mentioned in history books and on the Travel Channel. Just as it feels to the touch, the mountains acted as a barrier keeping life above for the most part stable in its instability and keeping information down in the hands of the wealthy inhabiting the cities. To the people from this region, World War II was something happening over *there*: “We never believed the war was going to come into your house, my house. We believed the war was started in Africa. You know, but little by little Mussolini and Hitler lose ground little bit everyday. You know the war is coming over into my house, too” (Ianiello). And it was coming, much quicker than they would know. Word does not travel fast in the mountains:

We don't have no radio. We don't have no TV. We don't have no telephone either—there was no phone, no radio, no TV. In the meantime, we only know from word of mouth that the war was coming, but we never figure they were come in our place because you know we were a quiet, nice place, and we couldn't believe what we hear about it. (Casale)

Within the schools, war was discussed as an issue, but not a daily disruption. News about the war was limited, perpetuating the belief that the conflict was still lingering somewhere far from home. The newspapers that traced the movement of the troops rarely made the trip over the steep walls of the mountain, and when they did, they often landed in the hands of the *latifondisti* and beyond the grasp of the *contadini*. “In the town, rich people had the paper. We had no paper” (Falso). Without the circulation of information, it was difficult for them to

understand that the war was daily becoming more of a reality for them. 1941, the lands were still being tended. 1942, the children were walking through green grass to school. 1943, “The people sing. The people sing. The people play the accordion” (Ruggiero). And then the Germans came.

The mountain towns with their rock shields and hidden caverns acted as a barrier to foreign influence. From one side, there was a clear view of the river Garigliano and the city below; this perch kept the townspeople beyond the view of the government and a number of the foreign factions historically vying for a piece of the boot. Within the safe shields of rock, a dialect was born and an agrarian culture flourished. Ironically, it would be this same security that would ultimately lead to the demise of these towns. Though the Italians officially surrendered on September 8, 1943, their country was already quickly becoming a battleground for the other players in the war. British and American soldiers had already invaded Sicily, pushing the Germans further north into Italy’s mainland. On the tenth of September, the Germans took Rome and began moving south, where they would meet with their fellow troops who were retreating north. Together, the German troops would find a land with a river on one side and cliffs on all others—a land far enough above sea level that there was a clear view of all that surrounded it. Recognizing the protection offered within these towns near Monte Cassino (Coreno Ausonio, and San Cosma e Damiano among others), the Germans, during the same month that Italy formally surrendered, decided to overtake them and establish what is called the Gustav or Winter Line.¹⁴ Crossing this line would prove a challenge for American and British troops. Because of the mountains, the river, and the winter weather, the battle for Monte Cassino would persist for nine months (from September

¹⁴ According to Matthew Parker in *Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of WWII* and the accounts of my participants, the Germans began occupying these towns as early as July of 1943 (Parker 27).

until late April). Suddenly, a land without electricity and the luxuries of technology became a land of military maneuvering:

I mean I remember clear as sky we were in the front yard and everybody says “my god, the Germans coming.” We were looking down at the ocean where these people were coming and they said they was stopping maybe not even a quarter mile from my house. And they set up all the tent down there . . . and we were not allowed to go down there anymore. So everybody says, you know, “you not allowed to go over there because the Germans coming and they gonna shoot you.” And then that’s how they did—they put up these tents. They put up a bunch of wires for the telephone. So we were look up to my mama’s property when we was, gosh, you know, eight years old. I mean we did not think that would happen such a thing. (Casale)

However, the landscape of the isolated world they thought they lived in would quickly change and would bring with it changes in lifestyle, changes in mentality as well as changes in the realm of literacy.

Get up, feed the animals, pick the olives, dig the holes, go to school, come home, cook dinner: the regimented life of the children bred a sort of curiosity about the world beyond the village, and the commotion within the town at first aroused excitement. Quickly after their arrival in the towns, the Germans began building concrete trenches, setting up communication lines, and slowing the movement of American soldiers by lining the path to Monte Cassino with mines. The Americans, however, chose another route into the city, occupying airfields in Southern Italy. Within several months, Americans commenced bombing. Between the German introduction of technology to Latina and the air shows

performed by the Americans, the children at first felt more intrigue than fear. As Ianiello remembers:

When the airplanes drop the bombs during the night and the day, I never believed that the bombs was going to kill the people. And I remember, I used to go up on the sun porch. It was on top of the house because we dried figs up there. And I hear the plane. Kids fourteen, fifteen years old, they want to go up on top of the house because they want to see the plane. My mom used to scream: “Ahh, they going to kill you! They going to kill you! They going to kill you!” I wasn’t scared. I say, “They not going to kill me.” Little by little I find out when I see a lot of the people getting killed. I say, “Ah, they kill you.” The war is no good.

However, the Americans flying above were only part of problem. The lessons of the war would heighten as the Germans moved outside of their tents and into the homes and daily lives of the Italian people.

With American troops stopped by the river Garigliano and bombing from above on an almost daily basis, the Germans had effectively stranded themselves within the town as well as within what was labeled “a strong and exceedingly well-camouflaged fortress” (Sulzberger 1). In American newspapers, the battle for Cassino was described as “the bitterest fight our boys have fought in the Mediterranean” (McCormick 18).¹⁵ As the battle intensified and supplies and food began running low, the German camp began creeping up the mountain into the towns of San Cosma e Damiano and Coreno among others. This is where the story gets blurry, where it is hard to tell who is allied with whom. Italy as a

¹⁵ For a complete account of the four battles for Monte Cassino, see Ken Ford and Howard Gerrard’s *Cassino 1944: Breaking the Gustav Line*.

country had switched allegiances during the war following their defeat in Ethiopia and the overthrow of Mussolini. Germany shifted from being the ally to being the enemy. To the townspeople, cut off from a global sense of the war, the Germans rapidly became if not the enemies, the feared interlopers. Both Romanelli and Romano remember the day the Germans entered their homes: “they said that was their house, not my house anymore. They took everything we had—the food. They told us we had to go” (Romanelli). Similarly, Romano recalls:

Before the Americans came over, the Germans treated us very, very bad. They treat us like slaves. They take everything we had: the chicken, wine, bread, everything. . . . When they come in your house, they take all the food and broke all the glasses and dishes in the house and we had to keep our mouths shut. If we open our mouths or say anything, they would shoot us. At night, we would hide whatever we had to eat under rocks in the holes of trees. We had to go get water at night to drink during the day. If we couldn't find anything at night, for the day we had to be without eat or drink. . . . They leave the children and everyone in hunger and they would take everything away.

With children starving and families being displaced, needless to say, schooling was abruptly halted. However, a new type of education was just beginning.

As their world was being taken over by new languages and disparate cultures, the families had to learn new means of communication. They learned to differentiate between the Americans and Germans by their clothing. As Casale explains, “The German was dressed up with different uniform. They had a different kind of boots. The Americans had a different

kind of boots. So you really didn't know, but you could tell the clothes. I mean I didn't know, but my daddy, the old people, they knew better. They would look at the boots and say 'that's German.'" However, as the groups came into greater conflict, the Germans became aware of this identifying characteristic. The more the Italians grew weary of their treatment at the hands of the Germans, the more the Germans tried to disguise their identity. Casale remembers, "The Germans want to make it look like America, wherever there is a will is the way. They will find the clothes because you know American people got killed too. So they take their clothes." However, the townspeople were beginning to notice another large difference. "You notice the tone of the voice. The tone of the voice is different from the German and the America. You could tell the German was more bitter, you know, more aggressive. The American people were more in a nice way" (Casale). Slowly they were able to move beyond just recognizing the tone of the Germans and were able to pick up on certain phrases or words; the majority of communication, though, occurred via "hands and signs" (Romano and Parente). Certainly, though not sponsored, a multilingual literacy was being developed, and communication survival skills that would later aid them across the ocean were being fostered by the intrusion of multiple cultures within their homes.

The first communicative exchanges between the Americans, Germans, and my participants were, obviously, evacuation notices that took a myriad of forms. Several of the participants such as Casale recall the American soldiers visiting before the Germans arrived and handing her family a letter. She explains: "They told my mama, 'here is this little piece of paper that says get in this truck, get your kids, and move, leave.' I says, 'Ma, we not goin' to leave.' I took the piece of paper and I did [tear it] in a thousand pieces. I mean, my mom said, 'What are you doing?' I says, 'Ma, we not goin' to leave.' And we didn't left. I wish

that we did, but we didn't." Most of the families chose not to leave because the danger of their situation was not clearly articulated to them, as the letters were not always in their language and, if they were in Italian, they were written in Standard Italian and not the dialect of the agrarian adults. Many times the Americans and Germans would resort to motioning with their hands to try to get them to leave. The participants recognized this language barrier: "they try to tell us, 'you got to leave,' but we don't understand the German. We don't understand America. We don't understand the Japan. You know that was the worst part; you don't know what these people are telling you" (Casale). Suddenly, the townspeople who often only had a limited literacy in Standard Italian were being expected to communicate in multiple languages and make choices based on these communicative acts that often had grave consequences. Casale had no idea what kind of danger the Germans were implying when she tore up the note; she only knew that a foreign person was in her home telling her to get on a truck and leave behind her home.

These communicative barriers were also an issue as they were unsure of *where* they were going. Many who crossed the front line (the Garigliano River separating the Germans and the Americans) early were either taken north to Rome or south to Calabria, but living conditions in these towns were difficult to manage. Without land to work, the refugees had to rely upon the support of the government or the people within the town; however, as is evident from the history of Italy, support was often not to be found. Many of the evacuees were taken to distant cities and were often left to fend for themselves, as Tony Parente experienced:

Well, they took us back to close to Rome when they evacuated the town.

Some of the family, they split up because some of them hide and they can't

get together. We stayed over there about three days close to Rome. They put us into the building. We have no water. Nobody feed us. We went back to our home town again. Three days walking through the mountain to get back home again.

Without their basic needs being met, some of these evacuees, similar to Parente, chose to return to the place that made them feel safe: their hometown. Though the land was swarming with Germans, and bombs rained through the mountains, the majority of the participants remained in their mountain town for three reasons: the danger and the alternatives were not clearly expressed nor managed well, there was a great fear of where they would end up and under whose control they would find themselves, and, finally, because they did not want to give up the homes and the land that had been in their families for generations.

Most of the fear surrounded the German evacuation of the cities. After the Germans forcefully removed individuals from their homes, the townspeople were afraid to get on the German trucks headed to a camp away from the tumultuousness of the front line. Tony Ruggiero, though he recognized the consequences of staying, viewed a move under the direction of the Germans as being more perilous:

we not supposed to be there. This is the front line. We were not allowed to stay there. We supposed to go to concentration camp. We supposed to go there, but we don't want to go there because you die in a concentration camp. There is a cup of soup all day. The old people, the sick people die. The baby die. They don't give you no food. The German camp don't give you any food. Maybe a little bit of soup. You lucky if you get a piece of bread. The healthy people survive somehow. The sick people, the children, they die.

Though records of these camps are difficult to come by,¹⁶ because of the Germans' turbulent entrance to the town, it is understandable why they would distrust the prospects awaiting them at the camps.

While the fear of the treatment at the German camps kept many from aligning with them, the fear of the Germans also kept many from making it over to the American side. Some of the German soldiers threatened anyone whom they believed was attempting to cross over to the American side. Ruggiero, for instance, recalls:

Anso Popi came to the house where we were fifteen family together and he ask questions like: 'Did you see anyone cross the front line?' Everybody said, 'No we didn't see anyone.' This guy was a young man, seventeen years old. He had a toothache and he had a scarf around his mouth. This guy asked him, 'Did you see anybody cross the front line.' The guy didn't answer. The guy get the gun and go boom. He killed him right there. There were bad guy and good guy. The majority of the German were good, but there were bad guy too.

The combined fears of the Germans led to a state of stasis—people were afraid that any move they made towards the German or American side would lead to negative consequences. As Ida Caslae puts the conundrum, "If you go, I'll shoot you. If you stay, I'll stab you. One way or the other, we would have got killed, so we couldn't go nowhere." This state of stasis led my participants to engage in a rhetorical act that had already become part of their daily life: silence.

While traditionally we think of silence as a passive act, Glenn's *Unspoken* points out

¹⁶ While information about internment camps in Rome, Florence, Milan, Genoa, and Trieste exist, the information focuses on the relocation of Jewish Italians to these camps, many of whom were later sent back to Germany when Italy surrendered. As the relocation of Italian citizens only lasted several months and was hurriedly carried out at the end of the war, it is possible that there are not records of these relocations.

the ways that silence can be a means of controlling information and, therefore, an active rhetorical technique. As explained in chapter one, silence was a rhetorical act that Italians had been taught from a young age. Throughout the turbulent history of the country, silence was the primary means of communication outside of the family—an entity that encompassed neighbors and friends as well as blood relatives. Silence in Italian culture did not refer to the act of not speaking but in carefully selecting what was spoken. Secrets were a way of protecting the family and the communal way of life from outside scrutiny. During the war, silence of this type acted as a means of exerting control and managing the situations these individuals faced. They revealed little to either the Germans or the Americans and bit their tongues in moments where vocalizing their feelings could have cost them their lives. Further, silence became a means of survival as they were trying to respond to questions spoken in languages they could not understand. Responses were often limited to nods, shrugs, and/or a shake of the head, but many of the participants explained that the less you expressed, the less interaction you had, the better chance you had to survive—an important idea that they would bring with them into the New World.

Silence or the purposeful physical hiding and lack of interaction enabled them to stay within their homes, which, to them, represented their livelihood and their identities. “It was all we ever knew. We don’t want to leave. You know, you got stuff there. Even if there was bombing, it was still something standing that you want to keep for yourself” (Casale). In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Americans gained a greater understanding of the complex reasons why people choose to remain in their home—in their region—even in the face of grave danger. One of these reasons is that in a period of instability, the home is the one stable force individuals can cling to. In an area such as San Cosma e Damiano, where individuals

worked the same lands for hundreds of years and built their homes with their own hands, their sense of connection to their home was too great for even bombs to drive them away. Casale's house, however, would not stand for long. Her home was blocking the view the Germans had of the Americans below and, as such, was one of the first homes destroyed in the town.

While the adults were clearly tied to their homes and the life they had built within their walls, the children, because of their parents' reaction, were also leary of leaving their hometown. Bernardina Corte, for example, was put on a truck headed out of the war-torn region. As she recalls, "The truck was full. My mother took me down and the German soldier put me up and I say, 'Oh God, what am I goin' to do over here.' You know, all at once I jump. Thank God, I don't get no hurt. And then we went back in my grandmother house on the farm." Though none of them were able to remain within their own homes, they all chose to stay in or return to their hometowns. Life within their hometown was quickly changing, though, and all the forces of stability they had known there—the land, the farm, the schools, and, even, the family—were quickly disappearing.

As Corte's experience shows, crossing also posed another danger: the division of the family. Since the family in Italy was viewed throughout history as the source of one's unswerving loyalty, the break-up of the familial unit was especially frightening to them. However, many of the participants had to face this reality, especially when attempting to cross the front line. Twelve-year-old Maria Falso was one of the children separated from her family. When the war arrived, her family attempted to cross early, but she was the only one who managed to make it to the American side. "After seven months," when the war was finished, "the American people brought" her from "Palermo to Sicilia." When she arrived,

“the police chief of the city” put her picture “in the newspaper because [she] was lost.” A police officer in the town her father was in saw the ad and told him, “Pietro, Pietro Casale, I find your daughter! I find your daughter!” Her father went to pick her up at the convent, but, as he did not have any identification, they would not allow her to leave with him. Because of the disruption caused by the war, it took two months before he could get the paperwork and claim his daughter.

Separation, however, was also a consequence of remaining within the town. After the Germans realized that many of the families were not going to leave, they began “recruiting” workers from those who remained. With the exception of elderly men and boys under the age of twelve, the men were told they could either work for the Germans “or they would shoot you” (Parente). Again, intercultural communication was an issue. As Tony Parente explains, “Of course, you don’t understand nothing. They show you with their hands you got to work if they want you to work for them. I was about twelve-years-old and I had to work for the Germans.” This type of work was quite dangerous, not only because it forced the Italians to be in opposition to the Americans, but also because the work itself was risky. “They went and took them to dig to put the bomb [mine] in there. They made them work. Not just them, but other people too. They give you some sign that say you work for them. If you don’t be careful, the way you walk and how you walk, how you put the stuff in there, you would get killed” (Casale). As the men and the boys were being taken from the home to work, the family was again divided. Casale remembers, “I mean for eight days we did not see my dad; we did not see my brother. We really were cry because we thought my daddy was dead. Because, I mean, you could hear the bombs going. You could hear all the stuff going.”

Brothers, fathers, sons were cut off from the rest of the family because they either were taken to work or hid in the mountains to avoid this doubly precarious labor. The men in Ruggiero's family chose the latter, as he describes:

Myself, my mother, my sister, my younger brother stayed together. My other brother, they were hiding far away because they were afraid the Germans would trap them and make them fight against the America. What happened is, one of my brother run away to the mountain. My other two brother and my dad, they took them up to northern Italy, Perugia. So me, my mother, my sister and my younger brother, we stay there in the fighting. So my family was divided. God bless everybody because they all came safe and sound after the war.

This form of conscription also was a driving force pushing men over the front line, leaving the female members and the children of the family behind in the worn-torn towns. For some of my participants, it would be almost ten years before they would see their male relatives again. Among choices that were all life-threatening, many chose to cross the line. After hiding in the mountains, Antonio Ianiello and eighteen other teens and fathers decided to try to make it across the front line because they could no longer live in the mountains without food and the Germans "com[ing] everyday looking for people for work" (Ianiello). Their journey across the river was not without peril. As the eighteen men were crossing under a bridge at two o'clock in the morning, they heard the "boom, boom, boom" of the German steel-toed boots overhead (Ianiello). As the two soldiers stopped overhead, Ianiello describes the event:

We quiet. Nobody talks. We have three people that can't speak and can't hear—deaf people—one old guy and two other young guys. We do like this [puts his finger to his mouth and points upward] and they know it's the Germans. We no move and after about ten minutes they start to walk again. When we don't hear them walk no more, we start moving. We go on the top of the one house, not too far from the river, on the roof before the light in the morning. It's still dark a little bit, early in the morning. We went on the top of the roof. This old lady, she come and get us and she take us down to the river and we cross the river.

Since the men were working, hiding or able to cross the line, the households on the front line were mainly defended and run by women, and the consequences for them were quite different.

As the families were evicted from their homes, the women had to try to adapt to the situation. Many women decided to set up house within the caves formed out of the mountains because they provided a shelter from the bombs and enabled the families to hide from the German soldiers. Pasqualina Parente, Maria Falso, Pasqualina Casale, Maria Romanelli, and their families traveled through the mountains together and eventually settled in the same cave. Living conditions were harsh:

We live in the mountain like animals under the cave. We had no clothes. Whatever our parents grabbed, that's what we had. So we used to go at night, sometime, and steal some of our food in the dark. If they catch you, they would have killed you. It was rough. We pick dandelion. . . . We had some corn and we used to turn that stone by hand to smash some of that corn to

make polenta—in other words like mush. No salt. Water, dirty water—we had no clean water because it was all pollute with bombs and dead animals, dead people. We moved from cave to cave for about a year. (Romanelli).

For nine months, the family would “run from one place to another,” avoiding the bombs and the German soldiers.

As the food supply diminished and hopes for rescue grew dim, the families chose to move in two separate directions. Pasqualina Parente and Maria Falso’s families chose to attempt to cross the front line. As their participation in this project indicates, their attempt was successful, but for Falso her safety came at the cost of another woman’s life. When they were crossing the path that led to the American’s side, her father told her, “I lost your mom. I lost your sister. If I step on the mine, don’t wait for me. Let me die. Just keep crossing” (Falso). As they were crossing, “a woman who stepped on the mine and was killed” (Falso). Her father told her, “‘Don’t worry about who is dead. Just keep going. Don’t look on the side’ because there was a lot of people dead” (Falso). Together, they eventually made it to the other side. After a barrage of questions from the American soldiers about the location of the Germans, they were put on a train headed south.

The two families that stayed behind the Garigliano River chose to move out of the mountains and into the city and ended up living in a large basement with over a hundred other people. Families would sleep together on the floor with hay. Because the city placed them close to the water, the older women took this opportunity to wash the clothes that many of them had been wearing for a little over two to three months. Romanelli’s mother and Pasqualina Casale’s mother, sister, and two cousins were among a group of thirteen women who went out in the morning to do the wash. While the women were dipping the clothing and

chatting with the women they had met or reconnected with since their arrival, there was a rumbling followed by a loud blast. The sound brought the children out of the basement where they would find the bodies of these women—their mothers and aunts, cousins and sisters—lying in silence. An American plane flying overhead mistook this cluster of women and reacted by bombing the area, killing all of the women except Romanelli’s mother. That night the living “slept next to dead people because [they] couldn’t bury them because there was too many bomb come that day. The next day [they] buried them under the orange trees on this little farm” (Romanelli).

Civilian casualties such as these rarely make the pages of history as histories are often written by the victors rather than the victims of such events. Though this argument is often made about history in general, the point is crystallized in the comparison of the stories participants recall about the war and the popular memory of U.S. and German military involvement in Italy. As historian James Sadkovich argues:

History is above all else informed, based on an array of available and ascertainable information which the historian weighs carefully before assembling the most significant into a coherent narrative or a comprehensible analysis. . . . Data tend to be sifted through a patriotic sieve that lets pass only that which is compatible with the national honour and consonant with the nation’s image of itself, a sort of selective sifting that is particularly evident in Anglo-American works on Italy during both major wars in this century. (27)

Civilian casualties and the blame they inherently ascribe do not fit within the cultural myths perpetuated in histories. Further, as the history of the country itself shows, the inhabitants of this region in Italy were marginalized because of their lifestyles and economic position, a

stigma that, as the next chapter shows, was well publicized in the U.S. prior to the war. As members of *Italia bassa*, their losses were more palatable to the writers of history. Yet, it is not just the memory of the peasants' struggles during the war that is often overlooked. While many know Italy was involved in the war, there is little written about the battles actually taking place on Italian soil because the country was never viewed as the greatest threat nor the easiest target for American aversion. The war itself was viewed as being one of ideology—good vs. evil, fascism vs. democracy. While Mussolini aligned himself and his country with Germany and the historical representative of fascism, Hitler, “the Italian war effort is still viewed as vacillating between tragedy and farce; Mussolini is seen as a nasty little dictator and a bit of a mental featherweight incapable of fathoming the industrial and economic exigencies of war or of matching Hitler’s tactical genius” (27). Between the Holocaust and the bombing of Pearl Harbor and Hiroshima, the death toll in Italy and the aftershock of the battles fought in the region do not seem to register on the historical seismograph.

Though often not recorded, costly mistakes such as the one that took place at the river were not a rare occurrence from either side during the war. For instance, Maria Romano living in a house in town with twenty other people, was shocked when her mother went out to get water and “all of a sudden [they] heard a gun shot followed by a voice screaming ‘Run, run, Maria Carmella got killed!’” (Romano). As Romano remembers:

a German guy about 300 yards away from my mom had shot her. The shot went through her breast in her front and came out the back. When the bullet came out, it hit a rock and made a hole in the rock. My brother and sister ran and my mother was laying on the ground completely dead. We cry, we cry,

we cry all. We thought she was completely dead. She didn't look like herself; she looked like a mess. She looked like a little animal they tried to kill, full of blood, strange.

When her brother went to ask the soldier why he shot his mother—a woman who was only trying to get water—the soldier's only reply was “that he was sorry” (Romano). Family members were being shot by the soldiers who were supposedly allied with Italy. The group that was being described as the saviors—the Americans—were also responsible for the deaths of many of the Italians. Yet we hear so little about war in Italy aside from the mention of Mussolini and debates surrounding the invasion of Ethiopia. I posit that one reason for this continuing erasure, in addition to those mentioned above, is that throughout the war many Italians were participating rhetorically in a way that had been passed down by the generations who came before: they were engaging in a purposeful rhetoric of silence.

Even after the war was long past, my participants were reluctant to share with me their experiences during the war and refrained from taking any side or placing blame. When asked which side they were on, there was a chorus of “there were no sides; it was just war” (Romanelli, Antonio Parente, Corte). On each side “there were good people and bad people,” and there were only subtle hints that any of them at all faulted the Americans (Parente). Certainly, to this group, who was cut off from a global sense of the ideological battles taking place in their homeland, the first priority throughout the war was survival. Yet it is hard to imagine that there was no resentment felt towards the two armies responsible for destroying their livelihood and, in many cases, killing members of their family. Though hushed, there is a sense that this resentment exists in the description of their literacy practices. For instance, when Corte describes why she did not desire to learn English, she explains, “I used to read,

but I never want to learn in English. It was bad, bad news. During the second war, you see too many things and you say who wants. I don't want to learn English. My mother she used to love America, not me." However, quickly after this statement, she turned to remark, "Now, thank God, I love United States" (Interview). Though, as I will explore in chapter four, this use of literacy resistance was prevalent among the group when they came to America, because of their need for survival within their new country, the rationale behind their linguistic choices is often veiled. Within literacy studies, it is difficult to imagine that immigrants would choose not to learn English, which has assumed global dominance within our current economic structure. While this type of silence is often misunderstood as ignorance, these subtle acts of resistance became a means of cultural survival across the ocean. Throughout history, war, and immigration, by remaining silent or, at least, by speaking only their mother tongue and often only to one another, they maintained their loyalty only to their family and often were able to survive literally as individuals and culturally as a group by not speaking.

Nevertheless, this silence also comes at a cost. For instance, despite my research before this project, not only had I heard little about WWII in Italy, I also had never heard anything of the event that the majority of my participants, especially the women, recall as one of the most horrific experiences of the war. The event took place following the allied victory in Cassino in the spring of 1944. As my participants recall, the Moroccan army arrived shortly after the Americans were able to defeat the German army.¹⁷ Upon their

¹⁷ Morrocans or Guams, as they are referred to in many histories of the war, are often credited with breaking through the Gustav line in the spring of 1944 in Operation Diadem, clearing the way for the American and British troops who had been stalemated there for almost nine months. For more information about the Morrocans involvement in the war, see Edward Bimberg's *The Moroccan Goums: Tribal Warriors in a Modern War*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1999.

landing, “the commander gave them twenty-four hours liberty” (Romanelli). According to Antonio Ruggiero, “They were bad for the women. They got the women, they raped. I’m sorry to say that, but that’s the way it was. There was a danger that young girls they had to hide somewhere under the ground.” This memory was corroborated by the experiences of two of my female participants,¹⁸ as the following dialogue shows:

Ida: The Marocchini were the worse. They got the woman, they rape them, they cut the breast off.

Maria Romanelli: They would find every young girl from fifteen and up and they rape them right in front of the parents.

Ida: Yeah, yeah.

Maria: I remember when they did that where we live. They put a gun to my grandfather and my father and they rape a girl, seventeen. We were little, scroungy looking things, but my cousin [who is presently] in Canada, she jumped from a second floor. She said, ‘I’d rather be dead, than be raped by you.’ The commander heard and he ran. And there was two girls, I don’t know if you heard...

Ida: Yeah.

Maria: There were two girls the Germans shot seven times in the mouth because they would not go to bed with them. Both girls and they were buried together.

The silences surrounding these sexual violations remain one of the dirtiest secrets about the

¹⁸ It has also been corroborated by academic sources, the most descriptive of which is Ignazio Silone’s article, “Reflections on the Welfare State” which was originally published in the 1960 issue of *Tempo Presente* but was later translated and published in *Dissent* 8.2 (Spring 1991). This event has also been depicted in the Italian film, *La Ciociara* known in the U.S. as *Two Women*.

war. Women from this region are without a forum to discuss the crimes committed against their bodies, through their bodies and are often left as silent as the two girls buried on a hill in San Cosma e Damiano.

Such traumatic events led to verbal silence, but ironically produced a flurry of non-sponsored literacy activity that was foreign within the day-to-day lives of a number of my participants. While some of these literacy acts were communicative, the majority of them served a therapeutic purpose often overlooked in academic settings. Not only were letters and notes being exchanged between the troops and the people, the people and their families, but several of the children also kept extensive journals throughout the war similar to the one Maria Romano describes:

I start to have a diary in the wartime. It was like this [holding up my copy of *Literacy in American Lives*]—three hundred and fifty page. We didn't have nothing to do so I write. After that, because I mentioned so many names, I tear it up. All the time—where we been, where we sleep, what we eat—everything day and night. A diary, you know? After that, I said forget it. Forget about it.

Interestingly, the code of silence caused her to tear up a diary inspired by the act of breaking silence in such a tumultuous time. Half of the participants, male and female, similarly kept journals and destroyed them in the war's aftermath or lost them as Ianiello did: "I write in the war time, all the war time. A diary. I don't know what happened to it. I lost it. I come in the United States, I left it over there, but still the memories are in my mind, if I don't lose my mind." As shown in both the act of keeping the journal and tearing it up, my participants understand the power of literacy but in a way that diverges from popular academic conversations about the purposes of literacy. For them, writing became a means of recording

their experiences so they could share them later, as they did from memory, often noting specific dates and, sometimes, even the exact location where events occurred. It also became a therapeutic means of distancing themselves from the fighting surrounding them and a means of emotional release as they witnessed the deaths of relatives and friends. Their literacy practices serve as a powerful reminder of the functions literacy can serve even when divorced from market force. While not economically advantageous, their literacy was empowering because it enabled them to shape and control their identity in a time when all aspects of their daily lives were beyond their control.

In addition to the flourishing writing activity and survival training that was taking place in the 1940s, the children were also learning other skills and engaging in other literacy practices. While in the cave, Bernardina Corte “learn[ed] to knit because there was no play, no do nothing else, just knit. My best time was to knit because you know during the war what could you do? We have no thread or nothing. One lady used to make socks because at the time there was no clothes—nothing. And she always say ‘please, please I want you to learn to do that’ and I really learn pretty good.”¹⁹ Additionally, several of the children also mentioned reading any romances they could find. Corte passionately remembers her favorite of these romances: “The best thing in my life in the second war--I used to cry--I still love it today, *Gone With the Wind*. That was the best romance and I read a couple of times and everyone makea fun of me, but I love the way they end the book: ‘Tomorrow gonna be

¹⁹ I include this detail because the knitting of the socks later took on a rhetorical meaning for Corte, as described by Karen and Sonya Foss in *Women Speak: the Eloquence of Women's Lives*. For Foss and Foss, rhetorical acts are not always argumentative; especially for women, rhetoric involves non-oral means of communication such as quilting, cooking or knitting that women have found when rhetorical training was denied them or deemed “unfeminine.” It became clear to me that Corte’s knitting of socks was meant as a communicative act when she made me two pairs at the close of this project: one just because and the other as a Christmas present. She was not only verbally passing on her story to me, but she was also providing with a symbolic remembrance of her story in the form of the only positive memory she has of the war.

another day.’ I love it.” Interestingly, the disruption that led to the closing of the schools, at the same time led to a rise in literacy activity. The war provided them with the component of literacy learning many of them lacked in their daily lives: time. Hiding in caves, in the basements of home, the children had to find a way to entertain themselves, and the majority of them chose to learn a trade skill, write, and/or read. Though our contemporary understandings of literacy are often shaped by our focus on schooling, it was outside of the schools where my participants, future members of our working class, found an outlet and an opportunity to engage in the types of practices we would associate with academic settings. However, this small opportunity that the war provided them would be taken away in its aftermath.

Postwar Learning and Living

“Tomorrow gonna be another day.”
 –Bernardina Corte quoting *Gone With the Wind*

At the close of the war, this group who came from an isolated environment found themselves scattered in a landscape that hardly resembled the Italy of the previous year. They encountered foreign people and worked to make sense of what was happening to them and around them. Parts of their identities had been stripped from them, symbolized by the invasion of their land and the literal stripping of their clothes and hair when they finally reached safety. A large number of the Southern Italians were living within the stone and dirt walls of the mountains for almost a year, and the Americans feared they would spread lice, ticks, and disease. Typhoid was spreading rapidly, and three of the participants suffered for several months trying to recover from this illness. Therefore, upon reaching the American side, which was directly across the Garigliano River, “they would spray them because there was a lot of bugs. So, they spray everybody nude. They took all your clothes. They burned all

your clothes. They spray them and put them on the trucks to Calabria or Sicily” (Russo). “They check our hair and they cut our hair off because we had lice. They spray us with that dust because we were full of lice” (Romanelli). “They took us in this big room and they wash us” (Casale). With their lands, their loved ones, and their pride gone, the focus was on new beginnings or rather getting back to their past—life on the farm, school, family, but getting back has been a lifelong process.

People who had been able to cross the line were wandering around Southern Italy without permanent homes or incomes. For instance, Pasqualina Parente found herself in Calabria traveling from house to house until her family found a place to live. With twelve people in one room “without beds, without nothing,” her family was doing what it could to remain together and survive. Rather than attending school or working the farm the children would “go and, what do you call it? We’d go beg for food” (Pasqualina Parente). Families sent away from their hometown lived in these tenuous conditions for anywhere from a couple of months to up to three years (Tony Parente).

When they returned to the towns of San Cosma e Damiano and Coreno, they learned what those who stayed behind already knew: “Everything was destroyed” (Pasqualina Parente). “After that war, nobody had nothing in Coreno. No goat, no cow, no chicken, nothing. Start over from scratch” (Ruggiero). The lands bore no crops, and the homes consisted of piles of bricks and rubble. Pasqualina Parente’s family lived in a tent while they began to rebuild their home, and Pasqualina Casale’s family managed to salvage only the first floor of their home, but the main issue they all faced was that the work they had engaged in for their entire lives was gone and so was their major source of subsistence.

Once again, the children's education was put aside as the families sought out means of economic survival. Without agrarian labor, some families chose to illegally use the resources around them. For instance, Joe Russo explains: "I remember I was nine years old. I would trade salt for American cigarettes. We used to go to the sea, get the water, boil it, and make salt. And sell the salt. Then, my father used to sell the cigarettes. Not by the packs, by one cigarette, individual. And that's the way we made money over there." In Italy, this type of trading is a serious offense to the government, as Russo quickly learned: "We made a living. Then, we got caught and almost everybody end up in jail because salt and tobacco that's monopoly of the state in Italy. It's not like here. That belongs to the state. The salt and tobacco. So you couldn't do that. . . . But you had to make a living somehow."

Most of the children, however, found work with the American and English armies. This was a new type of labor that was paid in what many thought was money, hence making it attractive to those who had worked under previously unstable pay conditions. As Ianiello describes, "I remember this man ask me, 'You like work with the English army?' I was the young one working over there. I said, 'Yeah.' He asked me, 'Se contento?' And I answered him, 'Contentissimo.'" At fifty lire a day, this was not a bad paying job in comparison to the previous work the children had done (Ianiello). Italians would eventually learn that they weren't exactly being paid "fifty liras." As Ianiello explains, the stores were also ignorant of this fact: "They paid me fifty lire a day, not money but piece of paper with the number like coupons and the store--they don't know it wasn't money. They want this kind of money because they think someday they worth more than the Italian money, but it's not true because when the war is over, it's not good anymore." The money, apparently, was a form of emergency scrip handed out by the American government that would later have no value.

According to the Professional Coin Grading Service, these emergency paper funds were used in Europe as well as in Japan following the war (Giedroyc para. 8). Yet, while it lasted, with each family member working, they were able to rebuild their homes and could afford enough food to survive.

The pay, however, was not the only change that came with this type of work. Rather than pulling food from the earth, children instead found themselves pulling out the wreckage of war. Light labor consisted of collecting shrapnel and selling the shells. Pasqualina Parente's family, for instance, "lived for a few years [with] the money [they] made from the shells." The majority of the children such as Maria Romanelli and Antonio Ianiello, though, found themselves pulling something quite disturbing out of the ground:

We pick up the dead on the hills. I worked with the cemetery of the English Army to bury the soldier. . . . Then, it was easy because I was seventeen at the time. They take these dead bodies. On the smaller people, they give the light one. The big people, they give the heavy one. All the time I get the light one because I was small. We come down the hills. You put in the truck over there and you get a little food. (Ianiello)

At twelve, Romanelli was hauling these bodies down the mountain, working for a hundred lire a day on farms outside her town, picking up shrapnel in her spare time and selling it in the city. With her father jailed because he was caught working for the German army during the war,²⁰ her brother killed by a mine, and her mother injured because of the bombing on the day she was laundering their clothes, at twelve, she was the primary breadwinner for the family.

²⁰ Romanelli wanted to make clear that her father had the choice to either work for the army or to be killed.

Education in the Aftermath

“Despite the strides Italy has made since the *Risorgimento*, the 1951 census showed that 12.9 percent of the population did not know how to read and write”

--Lamberto Borghi and Anthony Scaragello, “Italy’s Ten-Year Education Plan”²¹

“This is a commendable action but one might question if this is what Italy needs at a time when 30 per cent of her people in some areas are still illiterate.”

--David Scanlon, “Some Comparative Reflections on German and Italian School Reforms”²²

Juxtaposing these quotes with the narratives that have proceeded them helps us question statistics making broad claims about a population’s literacy. Certainly, Italy had sponsorship issues before the war began, providing limited free education to the masses and charging prohibitive sums for any further education, which, though it enabled the participants to choose their own ends for their education, limited their options for doing so; however, the war was arguably the largest hindrance to the education process. When a country that is already behind in its educational developments becomes a heated battlefield with destroyed buildings and displaced people, an expectation for a higher literacy rate seems unrealistic. Further, rather than aiding Italy in its pursuit of a more equitable education system, as shown in the next chapter, reports such as those above were used as a basis upon which to perpetuate the stereotyping of Italian immigrants. While disparaging the education of Italian citizens, these sources, both from education journals, make little mention of the war, instead blaming the educational issues in the area on the class divides in Italy and the limited effects of unification within the country. However, as Theodore Huebner explains in *Italica*,

²¹ Borghi, Lamberto, and Anthony Scaragello. “Italy’s Ten-Year Education Plan.” *Comparative Education Review* 4.1 (June 1960). 26-32:26.

²² Scanlon, David. “Some Comparative Reflections on German and Italian School Reforms” *Comparative Education Review*. 4.1 (Jun 1960). 31-4.

At the end of the war—as in many other European countries—school conditions in Italy were extremely discouraging. Equipment had been destroyed, buildings had been requisitioned and trained teachers were lacking. Due to the socially disruptive effects of the war, illiteracy and juvenile delinquency had increased considerably. (143)

In this conclusion, Huebner hints that behind every statistic is a story that can help us understand illiteracy and, consequently, literacy.

As scholars within the field of literacy studies, we need to explore these stories in order to understand how we can best respond to literacy crises. Oftentimes, crises become linked to economics, as is the case within Brandt's works *Literacy in American Lives*, "Sponsors of Literacy," and "Accumulating Literacy." These narratives depicting lived literacy experiences, however, exemplify that the roots of these crises are embedded much further into cultural experiences. My participants' experiences during the war, for instance, show that, sponsored or not, literacy can be largely impacted by forces beyond the control of an individual or a specific entity and that literacy, though certainly tied to the economy, is not solely dependent upon economic sponsorship for survival. Hurricanes, wars, terrorist attacks, a shift in governing or economic systems, and any number of other large social events can act as literacy encouragement as the increased literate acts during the war show. Yet, they can simultaneously act as barriers to literacy that are, regardless of the sponsor, difficult to overcome. Therefore, while in many cases there are "sponsors" who "set the terms for access to literacy" and who act as "delivery systems for the economies of literacy," sometimes larger socio-cultural events interfere with these delivery systems (Brandt, *Literacy* 19). In this specific case, the war impacted the education of an entire generation and had consequences for future literacy development in the United States as well as in Italy.

If we are to understand the crisis that is currently occurring in our workplace, then it is essential that we trace the backgrounds of those who make up the working class for, as this example shows, it can enable us to understand not only the types of literacies individuals bring with them, but also the beliefs about literacy that they hold. As I will discuss in greater depth in chapter four, the experiences from my participants' backgrounds explored in this chapter greatly influenced their decisions about literacy as they entered the U.S. and an industrial workplace that was as foreign to them as the country providing it. Further, we must also interrogate these moments of crisis themselves, whether it is the war that impacted my participants or the economic shift that is impacting current members of the working class. By focusing on the crisis rather than the victims of it, we are able to recognize that "literacy practices are specific to the political and ideological context and their consequences vary situationally" (Street 24). This allows us to shift our focus from the individuals being blamed for the crisis, which are typically the already disenfranchised and, instead, focus on the situational changes that are leading to calls for greater literacy skills. In the particular case under investigation, as the next chapter will show, it was the Italian immigrants who suffered because of their limited literacy training, and there was little thought given as to why this "crisis" was emerging on either side of the ocean.

While such crises were being lamented in the U.S., the development of any viable educational path for the surviving children in Italy, for the most part, took too long to reach children in the mountains and, according to statistics, too long to reach most in the country. Several of my interviewees couldn't attend school as they had to support their families. Similar to Maria Romanelli, Pasqualina Parente explained that she could not go to school after the war because she had "no time. There was no time. Because after the war, I got to go

pick up the steel and sell it in the city. [Laughs].” By the time people had returned to their hometowns after the war and began to get back on their feet, the children had forgotten much of their learning: “I didn’t even know the “e” and the “I,” nothing. I forget completely because I was so scared. [Laughs].” And, unfortunately, because of the amount of time that had passed during the war and in recovering from its aftermath, many of the children were deemed too old to return to their grade level.

Though the actual battle for Cassino lasted a little less than a year, with a majority of the buildings in the town destroyed and a large number of the residents displaced, it would take close to two additional years before the schools in town would begin admitting students. Therefore, those whose education was halted at the age of nine would recommence schooling at the age of twelve—two years beyond what was demanded by the compulsory school laws. For this reason, though Ida Casale and Pasqualina Parente both tried to return to school, they were either told or felt that they were too old to return to the classroom. As Casale illustrates:

We was going to school, the war came and that was it. You know and we cannot go nowhere. When we came back from La Calabria, really, we really was about eleven years old, you know, the time went by. We went to school my sister and I. And as far as I went was not even the fourth grade because I was too old to go to school. Like my uncle said when I came here, “you too young to retire. Too old to go to school.” So we had to go to work. That’s the way. The fourth grade, I didn’t even pass the fourth grade.

Similarly, Parente chose to stop going back to school because they made her start all over again. “By that time, after WWII,” Parente explains, “I was almost ten, eleven years old, they put me with the first grade because I forgot everything. I didn’t know nothing anymore. So I

had to go with the first grade kids and I was uncomfortable. You had me up here and the other kids down there. I stayed two years and said ‘Uh uh.’ After two years, I quit school.”

Financial concerns in the aftermath of the war became the other primary blockade to continuing education. Many of the boys’ dreams of upper-division education were stopped short because, as Ianiello comments, “I was supposed to go back to school, but my parents were broke.” As Italy was still charging for upper-level schools, families who had lost everything during the war were kept from sending their children to school.

This is not to say that there was no educating taking place in the years directly following the war. Basically, in the aftermath of the war, there appears to have been two different approaches to gain higher levels of literacy: 1) struggle to take advantage of the remedial offerings available at night or 2) find a different type of literacy sponsor and subvert their intentions. Antonio Ruggiero chose the former. Before the war began, Ruggiero was in the second grade. At the close of the war, Ruggiero was fifteen-- too old to return to the second grade. Instead, he chose to go to a night school program that the government began in the town in order to help those whose education had been disrupted catch up and gain a fifth grade certificate, which was to them the equivalent to completing the eighth grade in the U.S. (Ruggiero).²³ Since Ruggiero did not live in the town,

I walk to night school from my farmland to this area. . . . During the day I work, whatever has to be done, and during the night, I go to school. What happened is to go to that school was all farmland. What you had to do was

²³ Before the war, night schools were developed as a way to educate male children who had to work on the farms during the day. The government would pay teachers from the city to hold classes at night for farm children within a home in the town. However, after the war, because of the damage to the buildings, the government sponsored night classes in the city schoolhouse for children whose education had been disrupted by the war.

walk with a lantern because you had to walk. There is no other way you could get there. And we walked there, a bunch of us, not just me. Sometimes it was raining and you get wet, soaking wet. Even so you carry an umbrella. The road are so rough. It's not like over here. . . . Over there you walk in the mud and when you come home, you almost come home without shoes. Most of the people who live on the farmland, which is about five mile from the town, they had to walk. . . . For me, it was a sacrifice, but a bunch of us walk together. We joke around. We didn't think about it because when you grew up with that culture, it don't bother you. If you had to do that today, you say "Are you crazy?" But our time, it's o.k. Some drop out. Some didn't even go to the fifth grade.

The walk, though, was not the most difficult aspect of returning to school and probably not the main hindrance causing many to drop out.

Instead, it was balancing the work that was required to live in the mountains and the work one was expected to do for school. After walking five miles home from school in the middle of the night, the children had to get to bed to prepare for the next day's work. During the day, they would work the land, collect shrapnel, or engage in a myriad of other money-making endeavors, and it was only in stolen moments that they were able to maintain the literacy learning that was taking place in the schools. As Ruggiero explains:

You study the next day between time. When you came home it was already dark. And you know something, some of these houses on the farm land, they didn't even have electric. You put the candle up above the shack and you do some of the homework. . . . The kids who live on the farm were a little bit on

the dumb side because they had no opportunity to function in the city life or the town life.

Not only were they outside of the literacy epicenter, the city, but the children were “absolutely not” able to read or write outside of school unless it came with great sacrifice (Ruggiero). What drove them to make these sacrifices appears to be the desire to overcome the stigmas many held about the farm children. “Then the thing of it is,” according to Ruggiero:

when you do your homework on your own you better make it good. Because when you go to the class the other kids got a nice homework done and he answers all the questions about the history, the mathematica, the geography. Then you feel like an idiot if you don’t study and the guys know everything you look like a dummy. So the kids sacrifice a little bit more even though there was no time to study. They sacrificed a little more to study to make them feel good with the rest of the guy.

Therefore, literacy was seen as benefiting an individual not because it would grant them greater opportunity, but because it became part of their identity. As Justman explains, “The individuality of the Italian reveals itself in insistence that he be recognized as a person, that he be granted dignity, respect, and a chance for expression” (15). Literacy was certainly part of this goal for the farm children after the war when they were forced to mingle with the city schoolchildren in the night schools.

Night school was not the only means some of the participants used to obtain higher education after the war. For both men and women, another viable way to gain access to literacy skills was to use the literacy sponsors surrounding them to their own advantage. As

most would suspect, in Italy the strongest literacy sponsors tended to be tied to the church. While the Catholic Church sponsored the education of young teens who applied, the goal was not the attainment of literacy for the individual, but the attainment of clergy and nuns for the church. Yet, while this goal was made quite clear to those entering the walls of the seminary or convent, in the case of some of my participants, “the goals of the sponsor and the sponsored [did not] converge,” and though this particular sponsor did “wield powerful incentives for compliance,” the participants were able to gain what they wanted without meeting the demands of the sponsor (Brandt, *Literacy* 19).

Joe Russo, for example, wanted to gain an education after the war, but because of the destruction in his town, there were few families and children left (Interview). As such, upon completion of the fifth grade, with a strong desire to continue his learning, he entered the seminary at the age of fifteen. It was his desire to gain a higher level of literacy and not his desire to lead the life of a priest that drove him to the church. As he explains, “I went over there to study really because there weren’t any schools around.” Understanding the role of his sponsor did not weigh into his choice. Russo, instead, put his own goals before that of the sponsor: “I didn’t go really with the vocation to become a priest, just for education.” True to his intentions, upon gaining a stronger ability to read and write, Russo left the monastery and began a life in Rome. Using what he gained from the seminary, he was the only participant able to attend college.

Though not with the same goal, Ida Casale also decided to seek out the church as a literacy sponsor because, in the aftermath of the war, “it was a good life. They have a beautiful home, a beautiful church, they have things that we don’t have” (Casale). Along with her three friends, she traveled to the convent in Minturno in an attempt to get out of her

war-torn hometown. While there, as she describes, “I went to school. I went with the nuns in the kitchen, work in the kitchen, work in the church. I did a lot a lot of things.” Though she did not go directly to pursue a higher level of education, as she “never liked school,” she was receiving an education nonetheless as well as a home and was able to engage in labor that was far superior to the working conditions in her hometown—decorating the altar as opposed to digging holes for crops, searching for shrapnel, or dragging bodies down the mountain. However, as conditions began to improve, she was on her way back to the convent from a visit with a doctor in Rome, when as she explains, “it dawned on me. I don’t want to be a nun anymore.” That night, instead of telling her mother about her new career, she told her: “mom, forget it, I’m over with that.”

While these individuals were able to subvert the intentions of their sponsors and others were willing to struggle to gain access to literacy training, for the majority, post-war education remained unobtainable. Those who continued a life of work over a life of education appear to have been in the majority. Similar to the pre-war history of Italian education, developments after the war read well on paper, but often the goals were lost in translation from theory to reality. Following the war, there were several developments in education, stemming mostly from the Ten Year Plan, developed in 1956 and put into action in 1958. Described as the deployment of “an educational army efficiently making a gallant assault on illiteracy” (Little 86), similar to the development of public education in the U.S., this plan’s goals were to create an informed citizenry that would function well in a contractarian society. As described by scholars, these goals included “provid[ing] adequate education for all Italian youth at least until the fourteenth year in order to render effective the constitutional requirement and to create a base of communication among all classes of Italian

society, thus leading toward a better-informed electorate” (Borghi and Scarangelo 27). Certainly, again on paper, there was an extended sense of education in Italy as schools were made mandatory from the ages of 6-11 and were, more importantly, made free (Huebner 143). However, while there were high expectations that this plan would help reorganize the schools in Italy and, thereby, extend education, in reality, the plan resulted in an “allotment of money” that “place[d] great emphasis on the expansion of universities” (Scanlon 32). Though the language of the plan made it appear as an attempt to democratize education and grant greater access to information to those previously excluded from it, many educational theorists criticized the government and the plan they developed as not having “any explicit intention of bringing about [education’s] reconstruction and progress, or of improving the conditions that make the Italian people largely identifiable with nations of retarded cultural development” (Borghi and Scarangelo 27).

While certainly the educational system in Italy has made strides in recent decades, these changes were quite slow. Into the early sixties, education theorists were still ranking Italy at the bottom of the European ladder of education. The limited amount of education provided for the agrarian was often seen as the factor contributing to the poverty found in Southern Italy. As David Scanlon proclaimed in 1960, “As one of the less developed countries of Western Europe, Italy has had a school system that has reached fewer people than any other country in Europe with the exception of Spain. And like other less developed societies Italy found herself in the vicious circle of being unable to expand her education because of a lack of money and unable to expand her economy because of a lack of trained personnel” (Scanlon 32). My examination of their culture and their lifestyle, however, highlights another factor that shows that the government was not entirely to blame for the

lack of literacy within certain areas of Italy. Instead, it seems clear that in conjunction with the scarcity literacy tools, these individuals were also not convinced that literacy was a necessity. Before the war, my participants were content with the labor required by their daily life, and the majority of them did not express any distress because of the limitations placed on their literacy. Rather than longing for more access to literate skills, the participants seem simply not to have been believers in the literacy myth. Hence, as I will discuss in the next chapter, though they were certainly discriminated against because of their presumed “illiteracy” as Graff hypothesized, “it is possible that such immigrants were aware of the contradictions of the ‘literacy myth’” (*Legacies* 368). For my participants, at least, “the acquisition of literacy and education has by no means served to guarantee individual or collective advancement, and many have advanced without their benefit” (368). In fact, it would be just this belief—that literacy did not matter and could not restrict an individual—that would lead them across the ocean.

Following a Dreaming, Finding a Reality

“They way they used to say is that you get off in New York, you find money in the streets. So, when I get off in New York, I was looking for money, but I didn’t find any money. They had nothing there” --Maria Romanelli



Fig. 2.5 Maria Romanelli's Passport

In the wake of the war with the main form of subsistence gone and the world around them in rubble, “the dream of America was thriving as a quasi-religious vision of a paradise on earth—a comfort for the miseria of their lot” (Mangione and Morreale 45). Maria Romanelli was not alone in assuming that there was money to be found lying around the streets; Tony Parente, too, remembers hearing this tale: “They [Italians] think America was the most beautiful thing in the world. They think over here there’s money on the street, but we came over here and you got to work.” As neighbors who had made the trek to America began to return with fancy clothing, American money to spend, and stories of their financial glories overseas, the belief that America was a land of opportunity open to anyone quickly spread throughout the farms. As Mangione and Morreale explain, “The dream grew into a myth fueled by other travelers: the occasional returning immigrant might give it substance and shape through stories that became increasingly elaborate and vivid with each retelling” (45). The long ride in the steerage class of a ship began to be seen as a means of escaping an agrarian lifestyle in a land where men were employed to remove mines from the farmland with sticks. “The only reason we tried to come in United States,” Ruggiero explains, “was because you don’t want to work on the farm your whole life. You want a better future. America in those days was a big thing. American dollar! American dollar! American dollar! You come here and you think it’s a better future, a better opportunity for you, a better house, a better job, a better living.”

When immigration requirements were growing ever stricter, people sought any means possible to cross the ocean in a time. In 1952, the number of immigrants allowed from each nationality was decreased from 3% of foreign born of that nationality to 1% (Simon and Alexander 15). Hence, one of the only ways to make the cut and do so promptly was to marry

an American citizen. As many of the parents and grandparents had earlier immigrated following the unification of the country in the 1870s in order to earn money to buy land, there were several American citizens living in Coreno and San Cosma e Damiano. In the drive to make it into what was being circulated as a utopian land, people began searching for spouses who could serve as a boarding pass—a system that was, no doubt, flawed. Romanelli highlights some of these flaws in her discussion with a fellow participant: “Men married girls just to come here. Her young sister, she was sixteen. She married a guy. He pay her trip to come here [to America] and that stupid, jack ass guy, after he come here, he left that poor girl and went with another girl. He used her just to come in America.” In the fervor to cross a new line, marriages were taking place, relatives were being contacted, and dreams continued to be fueled.

Fueling this myth was the idea that America was a place with work for those who had been restricted to the farm. Work, it was believed, was available regardless of literacy: “America you could work. In America you could buy a house. If you want to work, you could do anything you want. You could be anybody you want. There I couldn’t be anybody I want; I only had third grade education”—a tale that continues to persist today (Romanelli). More importantly, this work would provide them with the means to recover from the war they had just experienced. As Ianiello describes, “That’s why we cross the Atlantic: to make the money. See people that have a good life over there now, they not coming over here. We come over here because we don’t have anything.” As time passed, the stories continued to grow until it was believed that “what you eat at Christmas Day in Italy, in the United States, they eat everyday like that. You see in the United States at that time, years and years ago, people think it was like Christmas everyday. In Italy, it is once a year. Over here, they have it

everyday” (Ianniello). Carrying this dream to the bottom of a ship, my participants faced a new world with an excitement that could turn even steerage into an attractive place: “Oh, it was my best ten days of my life because I don’t have to cook. I don’t have to do nothing. I change myself. I got just a few clothes. . . . I got my best good time. I love to go in the boat. I come in the United States it was 22 October 1964. It was a beautiful day. It was a Tuesday. Sunshine. I said this is a new life” (Corte). However, when they would awake in America, they would find a reality that strongly diverged from the dream that had brought them across the ocean.

Chapter 3: America Cannot Speak for Them: The Discourse of Ethnicity

“Ain’t nothing but trash, every one of them . . . dago . . . greasy wop . . . we don’t need your kind”
 --Citizens of New Orleans (voice-over opening to *Vendetta*)

Though none of my participants had ever heard his name, all of them believed the story Horatio Alger told. It is a story of an America without prejudice, with endless opportunities, where the success of the individual is almost guaranteed—it is a story that persists in grade schools and is still believed by many who now consider themselves Americans. Despite my participants’ dream of a new start in a country where everyone was granted a fair chance and where, with hard work, any goal was obtainable, the reality was that Italians coming into America post-WWII were entering with a situated ethos or an imbalance of power relationships that made communicating effectively and upward mobility daunting, if not improbable. Italians, therefore, “came to the New World almost predestined for serious trouble” (Lopreato 100).

During the past two hundred years, Italians went from being welcomed additions to American culture to despised foreigners of a swarthy stock and, finally, to being considered Americans themselves. Correlating with these shifting notions of color and desirability is the class status of the immigrants. The class differences between early and later Italian immigrants are due to the originating location of the two groups as well as the rationale these two disparate populations had for immigrating. Those who immigrated from Italy before the great migration in the 1890s tended to be from Northern Italian stock and were usually coming to either put their education to use or gain further schooling, and as such, Mangione and Morreale explain: were “generally regarded . . . as a civilizing influence on a society that was largely dependent on Europe for cultural guidance” (25). In comparison, Southern Italians from an agricultural background became a threat as they arrived in the late nineteenth

and early twentieth century with the stigma of illiteracy and low wage expectations and “as Mexicans often do today, as part of a surplus labor flow—young and sometimes not so young men, shuttling money and themselves back and forth across the Atlantic” (Ferraro 77).

As more Italians chose to make America their permanent home, the media-fueled aversion to their group increased considerably. Racial epithets such as “wop,” “guinea,” and “dago” became part of the American vocabulary. Old Stock Americans began to refer to the Italians “as the ‘Chinese of Europe’ and ‘just as bad as the Negroes.’ In the Southern states some Italians were forced to attend all-black schools, and in both the North and the South they were victimized by brutality” (Dinnerstein and Reimers 2). Some movie theaters, social groups, labor unions, and even churches were segregated, keeping Italians and native-born Americans separated (Guglielmo and Salerno 11). Fights in Italian neighborhoods between mainstream Americans and Italian Americans were often considered race riots, and the largest lynching in American history was of eleven Italian Americans in New Orleans. Put summarily:

Many Anglo-Americans questioned that those swarthy sons of sunny Italy were really white. Employers and labor leaders referred to them as ‘black labor,’ while the color line was invoked to keep them out of certain neighborhoods, schools, and organizations. Nor was this particular to the South. I recently discovered the charter of the Washington League of Knights and Ladies of Minneapolis, established in 1902, which specifically excluded Negroes and Italians. (Vecoli, “Are” 317)

Yet, somehow, Italians became white. Though from the 1890s to the 1950s, Italian Americans were physically marked as “other,” as they became more socially mobile and politically

accepted by mainstream Americans, the same people once described as “swarthy people with low foreheads who stood out by virtue of their dark complexions” transformed into a group whose “physical differences were not perceived as so radically different” (Waters 76). And with this “disappearance” of marked ethnic features, unfortunately, so did much of the memory of the treatment of Italian Americans, too, disappear.

Scholars within the field of women’s rhetorics, however, have reminded us of the importance of listening to these silences. Extending Krista Ratcliffe’s point that “mythic erasure represses women’s lives, stories, and meanings from traditions of history, literature, politics, theology, folklore, society, and so on” (77), I argue that this type of erasure or silencing can be damaging to any minority group as it enables a society to move forward without the growth and understanding that critical reflection encourages. Interrogating these moments of silence allows us to ask the question: “What forces, including who is (not) speaking, made particular speaking subjects (im)possible?” (3). And the answer to this question outlines how oppression is created, maintained, and disrupted. Whiteness as a category promotes the idea that color is fixed and that what is white has always been accepted as such. Hence, “ ‘whiteness’ remains a largely uninterrogated construct” (McMillan 138). Not coincidentally, then, as studies of silence began to emerge, so did studies of “whiteness” and scholars began to ask, as Glenn does: “How can ‘white’ . . . speak to the various categories it supposedly constitutes, when only a hundred years ago, Slavs, Celts, Italians, and Jews were not ‘white’?” (xx). Certainly discrimination directed towards white ethnics never reached the magnitude that African Americans or other racialized groups faced throughout history and continue to face today. This study is not meant to be a comparison or a rallying cry. Instead it is an opportunity to learn how discrimination

functions, is created, and overcome. This study invites us to interrogate the role languages and class play in the maintenance and disruption of discriminatory attitudes. The interest lies not in the fact that Italians were once considered “black” similar to the Irish, the Jewish, and almost every other ethnic group at the time of their entrance into the working class, but how rhetorically Italians became black and eventually became white in the eyes of native-born Americans and how this shift in perception helps us understand the complexity of social class. As such, the focus of this chapter is a cultural analysis of the historical representations of Italian Americans in textual and visual media. By examining these texts/films through a rhetorical lens, it is clear that a discourse about Italian Americans developed, leaving them with a situated ethos in America. Italian Americans’ responses to this established discourse of ethnicity in literature, film, and, as I will show in chapter four, their daily lives reflect their awareness of the ways that these circulating stereotypes rhetorically situated them.

Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism is helpful in understanding the role that rhetoric played in this evolution from white to black to white. Said defines Orientalism as a mainly “British and French cultural enterprise” of describing, defining, and representing the Orient in the west as the Other and giving rise to “an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that has given it reality and presence in and for the West” (5). Orientalism is an act of representation meant to “understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even incorporate what is a manifestly different world” (12). The means of controlling a culture, according to Said, is through the creation of a discourse that mixes fiction, myth, and truth, and requires perceived political, intellectual, cultural, and moral dominance in order to be formidable (5-7, 12). Orientalism, then, is a construction, which “involves establishing opposites and ‘others’ whose actuality is always subject to the

continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from ‘us’” (332). Just as “European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self,” so, too, did white America treat the immigrant as the Other, the scapegoat, and the basis of comparison (3). Just a cursory glance at the appended list of films depicting Italian Americans as the degenerate, criminal “other” shows¹ that mainstream America was committed to creating a discourse by which to define and control what was known about Italian Americans. While this discourse about Italian Americans entered the public realm and cast a dark shadow over a culture entering mainstream America, I argue that once Italian Americans gained voice by moving from the working to the middle class, they used this discourse to become white or, at least, to become more socially acceptable as ethnics. By working from previously understood constructions of Italian Americans, they critiqued the structure of American society and gained control over their own representation. As this chapter shows, the result is what Thomas Ferraro, in *Feeling Italian: The Art of Ethnicity in America*, describes as a dialectic of ethnicity whereby Americans get to “feel” Italian by both creating a definition of Italians and becoming insiders to Italian culture through representations created by Italians. Italian ethnicity, on the other hand, becomes a chosen identity because of the passage of time, the gaining of social and political clout, and the movement from the working to the middle class (203-4). Extending Ferraro’s concept of the dialectic of ethnicity, I complicate his notions of ethnicity, class, and the interplay between these two categories.

Representations of Italian-American culture, it must be remembered, tell us little about Italian culture, since, whether coming from native-born Americans or Italian

¹ See appended list of films at the end of the chapter.

Americans, they are using a discourse created to depict the Italian-American experience. However, tracing the historic representations of Italian Americans is important because it allows us to see beyond our traditional notions of race, so that we might recognize “what many people with white privilege often forget: that race is marked on Anglo-American [men and] women as well as African American or Native American women or Chicana women, and that particular differences exist *within* each of these categories” (Ratcliffe 10). It is essential to understand these differences, especially as they exist within what has been generically labeled “the working class,” so that we might be able to better understand the disparate linguistic choices made by members of this group. As Rudolph Vecoli argues, such examination provides the possibility for “the creation of the ability to define ourselves, ‘distinguished by our unique experience’ that is not ‘white, nor black, nor brown, nor red, nor yellow’” (Vecoli qtd. in Gardaphe ix). Further, gaining this nuanced understanding of the members of the working class will help us to see that ethnic aversion towards Latin Americans and Asian Americans, similar to that aimed at the Irish and Italians who came before, can often be traced to issues of class and language. As this study will show, instead of being based entirely on physical appearance, racialization, “prejudice and conflict thrive on linguistic, religious, and occupational” differences (Lopreato 8). While the first two tend to be markers used to identify and discriminate against certain groups, the occupational differences—the class status of the immigrants—I argue is the main cause of ethnic aversion.

The Great Migration and Its Capitalist Backing

“Common labor, white \$1.30 to \$1.50. Common labor, colored, 1.25 to \$1.40. Common labor, Italian \$1.15 to \$1.25.”

--Public notice of daily wages for workers on New York City’s Croton Reservoir in 1895²

² Cited by Richard Gambino, *Blood of My Blood*, 77 and Peter Bondanella, *Hollywood Italians*, 17.

Though for European ethnics whiteness is often taken for granted, “before immigrants could qualify as ‘our kind of people’ measurable shades of differentness and visibility had to be reconciled” (Rolle 105). For Italians, this difference was physical as well as linguistic. Starting with the great migration, traits were being noted on naturalization papers that demarcated a boundary between “whiteness” and “provisional whiteness.” For instance, Louise DeSalvo was surprised to see that on her naturalization papers, her grandmother was considered “white,” but her complexion was recorded as “dark” (25). DeSalvo argues that this noted difference in complexion is evidence that “agents of the government were using their power to *create* rather than *record* difference in physical appearance” (27). Hence, they were creating the type of discourse to “other” Italian Americans that Said describes in *Orientalism*. Interestingly, as Said notes, this creation of the “other” is often driven by the fear of the “other.” Ironically, it is often those most ill-equipped for social mobility in this country who are most feared by the dominant culture. Not because it is feared that their illiteracy and lack of tangible skills will create some form of amoral chaos, but because it is feared that they will be willing to do the same job for less.

In part, this is true. Whenever one can replace skilled labor with unskilled labor, wages are typically driven down. “Almost 90 per cent of South Italians,” for example, “earned less than \$600 [a year]; a figure less than 45 per cent of native workers’ income” (Pisani 91). Yet, what is often not taken into consideration is who sponsors these employment practices and what types of jobs are being undertaken by the immigrants. Italian Americans were not working class because of their language skills or lack thereof—they were working class before they even stepped foot on American soil. As Ferraro explains, “At the end of the nineteenth century, America was seeking cheap labor—expendable,

expandable labor—for its booming industries and burgeoning cities” (9). Coincidentally, because of the depressed economy in southern Italy due to a draught that destroyed many vineyards, there was a dramatic increase in Italian immigration after 1880. America at this time, however, was not chosen to be the new homeland based on a set of ideals held by European immigrants about the land of the free and the home of the brave; immigrants from countries such as Italy were being actively recruited by immigration agents sponsored by states or private companies to support the quickly expanding industrial landscape of the U.S. (Pisani 48). Though this may be “a new idea to those who view this country as always the pursued and never the pursuer,” Pisani goes on to explain, “America’s sources of immigration from northwestern Europe were slowing down. At the same time, native Americans, taught under compulsory education laws, came out of school with no desire to perform the underpaid, unskilled, and often menial jobs” (48). Therefore, it was not so much that immigrants were crossing the ocean to cut wages and “steal work”—a public outcry whose echoes we can still hear today; rather they were taking the jobs deemed undesirable by native-born workers.

Yet, even in the earliest descriptions of their arrival, the first markers placed on Italians were those of class. For instance, in an 1884 article entitled “Our Italians” from *The New York Times*, the reporter describes the newcomers as follows: “These people are nearly all of the working or peasant class. It is very rare that any one of them learns English, and, as the great majority of them come from the Neapolitan provinces, their dialect very nearly renders them foreigners to the few educated Italians who reside here” (4). While criticized for accepting such low wages (as if they would not have attempted to gain higher wages if they could), the Italians really had little impact on the overall labor market. Though they

were sent in as strikebreakers, there is no evidence to suggest that they displaced native labor in large numbers, drove wages down, or hindered the development of improved working conditions and a higher standard of living, “for there was no serious unemployment, except in times of depression when the factor of Italian laborers played only an insignificant part” (Pisani 92). Though much of the native fear of this foreign population’s impact on the economy was unfounded, it was their class status that rendered the Italians unacceptable and led to the development of discriminatory attitudes about the entire population.

Emigrant Italians left their country with the belief—inspired by recruiting agents—that their presence was desired in America. Without widespread news in the countryside, the immigrants knew little of the country they were travelling to, but the promise of gainful employment was enough to have them boarding ships at a steady pace. Even judging from the Italy my participants described in the ‘40s and ‘50s, it is clear that “by crossing the Atlantic, the immigrant was traversing several centuries in time as well as thousands of miles in distance—from the illiterate peasant communities holding to semi-feudal ways to an industrial, urban, mass society emerging into the twentieth century” (Parenti 27). Not only were they entering a land where the language and culture were disparate, but also the type of employment, the sense of time, and the value of the individual were expressly foreign to them. The immigrants did not have a sense of stability when they boarded the boats, but they could not have expected the amount of insecurity they would feel after they had arrived.³ In large cities, such as New York, newly arrived immigrants were often given a guidebook to help them negotiate American culture. The books were often printed in English, making it

³ As I will discuss later in this chapter and to a greater extent in chapter four, the insecurity immigrants experienced upon their arrival often influenced their settlement patterns. Given the aversion of many mainstream Americans to Italian Americans, the immigrants found strength in numbers and often settled as collectives rather than individuals.

impossible for the immigrant to understand. This was a fortunate circumstance for the immigrants, for if they had read the book in its entirety, they surely would have longed for the land they had left. Judging from the two guidebooks I encountered, Pisani summarizes the contents quite accurately:

The Italian must beware of swindling expressmen, cabmen, guides, agents of steamships and hotels, notaries, solicitors, and men who claimed to be journalists or lawyers. He was not to trust a stranger who came to him and declared himself a protector in the strange land, or offered to change money or buy railroad tickets. Real estate agents would try to sell him worthless land, mining companies advertising in Italian papers would try to defraud him, and unlicensed employment agencies would misrepresent the jobs to which they would send him. Private bankers would embezzle his funds, and patent medicine makers would sell him harmful drugs. Porters would represent themselves as agents of the railroad and charge fantastic fees for carrying baggage. Ignorance of American law might innocently embroil him with the police. (59)

Given the sense of isolation and paranoia with which the immigrant must have entered this country, it makes sense that she or he would take the first employment offered or sometimes even accept employment promised by a recruiter back in Italy. However, Italians' low-employment standards led to the first characterization of their culture as suspect—the *padrone*.

Padroni, in America, were labor contractors whose own livelihood was the exploitation of immigrant workers.⁴ Using an Italian term, *padrone*, the media and the government cast the figure as an Italian phenomenon, though, in reality, there was no equivalent occupation in Italy.⁵ Interestingly, *padroni* were most often depicted as proud Italian immigrants, paradoxically willing to turn their *paisanos* into their victims, exploiting the latter's limited English skills and their penchant for accepting low wages. For instance, in his 1872 text titled *The Dangerous Class of New York and Twenty Years Work Among Them*, Charles Loring Brace describes the immigrant/*padrone* relationship as resulting from the Italians' limited education:

Owing to their ignorance of our language and their street-trades, they never attended school, and seldom a religious service, and seemed growing up only for these wretched occupations. Some of these little ones suffered severely from being indentured by their parents in Italy to a "Bureau" in Paris, which

⁴ I focus specifically here on American representations of the *padrone* figure. Historically, however, this figure draws from a myriad of representations of labor exploiters that appeared during other periods of cultural anxiety. One forerunner for the *padrone* was the madam of the eighteenth century. In London during the eighteenth century the status quo was challenged with the emergence of the public woman who, according to Rechelle Christie "dared to step outside the female sphere, the domestic sphere, and into the public eye as both consumer and entrepreneur" (1). Because of the anxieties surrounding women's movement outside of the home, writers and artists such as William Hogarth responded by portraying the public woman as a sexual tyrant. Specifically, in *Harlot's Progress*, Hogarth, through visual narratives, tells the story of Moll, a hard-working seamstress who is preyed upon by the syphilitic madam, Mother Elizabeth Needham, and lured into a life of prostitution because of her rural background and limited education. As with narratives of the victims of *padroni*, Moll ultimately meets her demise because she succumbs to the flattery of the madam and her hope of gaining financial independence (Christie 1-14). Similar to the representations of the madam in the eighteenth century are narratives of the evil Jewish financiers which were incited by anxieties about their religious otherness as well as their commercial success. Examples of such depictions can be found in *Sketches of Boz*, *Pickwick Papers*, and the widely read, *Oliver Twist*, where Fagin, a Jewish criminal, takes in (and also kidnaps) orphaned boys, trains them in thievery, and benefits economically because of their crimes. It is also important to note that this labor-exploiter figure is not only historical, but also has relevance for us today. In contemporary stories of illegal immigration, two figures similar to the *padrone* have emerged: the Mexican coyote and the Chinese snakehead. Both of these figures engage in smuggling individuals over the U.S. border, exacting a large fee and often causing the deaths of these individuals by leaving them in crowded conditions without food or water.

⁵ Giving the false genealogy credence, *padroni* in novels such as those written by Horatio Alger bore Italian names.

sent them out over the world with their “padrone,” or master, usually a villainous-looking individual with an enormous harp. The lad would be frequently sent forth by his *padrone*, late at night, to excite the compassions of our citizens, and play the harp. I used to meet these boys sometimes on winter-nights half frozen and stiff with cold. (195)⁶

As more Italians began to cross the border, the descriptions became more voluminous and the *padroni* more villainous until it reached the point that “in the eyes of many nativist Americans, virtually any middle-class immigrant was tainted with suspicion of being a padrone” (Peck 18). In fact, the fear that Italians were creating their own slave trade in the U.S. spread so rampantly that it eventually led to a bill presented in Congress in 1886 which read as follows:

Sec. 5. That every Italian padrone or his manutengolo (accomplice), or any other person or persons, who shall sell or contract, or cause to be sold or contracted, into any condition of involuntary servitude, any other person or persons for any term whatever, and any contractor, subcontractor, foreman or poliziotto notturno (nightwatchman) who shall hold and watch to involuntary service any persons so sold or contracted for, shall be deemed guilty of a felony, and, upon conviction thereof, shall be imprisoned for a term not

⁶ According to John Zucchi in *Little Slaves of the Harp: Italian Child Street Musicians in Nineteenth-Century Paris, London, and New York*, although the harp became a symbol of Ireland and immigrants from all countries served as street performers in these large cities, Italian children were most associated with street music. Though, historically, Italian children would often be found playing the hand-organ as “without talent or training” they could play this instrument and “make a little money by playing in the street” (Bremner 278), complaints of noise pollution in both England and France caused *padroni* to seek out instruments that were less cacophonous. This arrangement was also more attractive to parents, as they were told that their children would be outfitted “with a harp or violin,” trained musically, and returned home in two years with their instrument, gaining a new trade (279).

exceeding ten years and shall pay a fine not exceeding ten thousand dollars.

(United States, Congress)⁷

Certainly there were *padroni* of Italian descent whose longer residence in the U.S. rendered them better able to traverse the lingual and cultural distance that kept newly arrived immigrants isolated from mainstream America. In addition to being able to live off wages they themselves had never earned, “*padrones* also exacted cultural fees that were not monetary but no less real, as when they claimed the assets of whiteness, manhood, and citizenship, gaining respectability in American eyes at the expense of their ‘unwashed’ brethren who remain nonwhite, emasculated, and alien in the eyes of most native-born Americans” (Peck 2). What is not true, however, is the representation of *padroni* as being an Italian or even a European phenomenon or the victims being primarily all of Italian descent.

While it is true that the *padrone* system “flourished among Italian, Greek, Syrian, Bulgarian, Turkish, Japanese, German and Mexican immigrants” (22), it was, in actuality, an American phenomenon. Mainstream Americans, therefore, had something at stake in presenting this problem as a European or, more specifically, an Italian one. In order to present capitalism as an ideal economic model, those greedily exploiting the system had to be represented as “others.” Therefore, “middle-class reformers, dime novelists, and immigration authorities in the United States explained the *padrone*’s presence in North America by severing . . . any links between *padrones* and the North American landscapes they inhabited” (16-17). In his work, however, Peck shows that not only was the *padrone* position filled by members of disparate ethnic communities (his work he focuses on Italian, Greek and Mexican *padroni*), but he also shows that *padroni* were supported by the American system of

⁷ I first discovered this bill cited in LaGumina, 61.

free labor and were often employed by large corporations to recruit and regulate the workforce. As he explains, while “the Thirteenth Amendment may have officially ended all forms of slavery and coercive labor in the United States, . . . it did little to secure the precise meaning of wage labor for growing numbers of newly dependent wage earners. For middle-class reformers, the distance between free and unfree labor had to be constantly reaffirmed and made visible, a task for which the *padrone* seemed eminently suited” (23). During the period he studied, 1880-1930, which corresponds with the great migration from Italy, it is clear that “free” labor was an ideal that could not realistically be put into practice for immigrants. For transient workers, the only real means of survival was to accept the first wage work they could find, as many had sold all of their personal affects to pay for their trip across the ocean and usually entered with enough money to survive, meagerly, for a few days. An injury or failure could leave one to starve and, hence, “wage labor relations during this half century were not truly free but comprised a spectrum of consensual and coercive elements” (8) that resulted in a *padrone* system that “was by no means antithetical to capitalism” and “had no direct prototype in Italy” (18). In essence, Peck concludes that many of the *padroni* were hired by companies to recruit workers who would be subservient and accept the wages and work offered—the methods *padroni* employed to coerce the immigrants were left ambiguous, their skimming of the employees’ wages remained unspoken. Though, symbolically, the American government fought against this phenomenon through such avenues as the Foran Act and bills passed in Congress, the system never disappeared nor was immigration from Europe slowed as a result.

Actively recruited, the new members of the working class did, however, face gate-keeping tactics, though at the doors of the university rather than those protecting the U.S. As

James Berlin argues, “In 1874 they [universities] developed a written entrance exam to function as a gate-keeping mechanism: the test in English ensured that the new open university would not become too open, allowing the new immigrants, for example, to earn degrees in science or mathematics without demonstrating by their use of language that they belong to the middle class” (23). While they were criticized for becoming willing members of the new working class, and their language skills were often touted as a legitimate reason to discriminate against the new immigrants, attempts to become socially mobile were often blocked as Berlin explains, making the *padrone* system one that at least provided job security. Unfortunately, even after the threat of the *padroni* had died down in the media, its legacy and representations lived on and flourished, especially, as we shall see, with the advent of the silent movie when the *padrone* became the predecessor of or maybe even the maestro for a little group called the black hand and, later, the mafia.⁸

In addition to the circulating fear of an Italian slave trade, Italians, because of their class status and resulting lifestyle, continually acquired the scorn of native-born Americans. Particularly in urban areas, Italians were criticized for their dirty living conditions so often that “Italian” almost became synonymous with “filth.” The tenement houses were particularly targets of distaste, as Brace describes:

Here, in large tenement houses, were packed hundreds of poor Italians, mostly engaged in carrying through the city and the country “the everlasting hand-organ,’ or selling statuettes. In the same room, I would find monkeys, children, men and women, with organs and plaster-casts, all huddled together;

⁸ As time passed representations of the Italian-American *padrone* began connecting the figure to organized crime. Though originally described as adopting children from poverty-stricken parents, eventually *padroni* were accused of kidnapping children and forcing them into labor. By the time films such as *Black Hand*

but the women contriving still, in the crowded rooms, to roll their dirty macaroni, and all talking excitedly; a bedlam of sounds, and a combination of odors from garlic, monkeys, and most dirty human persons. They were, without exception, the dirtiest population I had met with. (194)

In depictions of Italian Americans during the late 18th and early 19th century, it was not rare that the symbol of the hand organ and the monkey would be included. Together these objects represented the *padrone* system and the preponderance of Italian-American street musicians who were often accompanied by performing monkeys. Not surprisingly, as the hand organ required little musical talent and the word *monkey* was already used as a racist/ethnic slur indicating that the individual was neither as intelligent or hygienic as the Caucasian, these objects also symbolically implicate the Italian Americans as being in all ways inferior to mainstream Americans. Interestingly, what was often left unmentioned was that these large, dirty tenement houses were the same ones used to house the Irish, the Germans, and, later, the Jewish—the groups that are often held responsible for fueling the aversion of the Italians. As Joseph Lopreato found in his study, “It was with the Irish, their immediate predecessors in the procession of immigrant groups, that the Italians clashed most bitterly” (110). Similarly, in his ethnographic study of Italian-Americans’ political involvement, Michael Parenti notes that “fourteen of our eighteen respondents single out the Irish as the group most hostile toward Italians” (81). Because of their earlier migration and their language practices, the Irish certainly enjoyed predominance. However, their former tenuous status fueled inter-group rivalries in the workplace and, especially, the church. The more Italians became singled out as the least desirable of the new immigrant batch, the more the Irish, German, and

appeared on the screen, *padroni* were kidnapping children and adults, extorting money from their families for their safe return.

Jewish immigrants tried to separate themselves from this group that was quickly gaining a reputation for being poor, illiterate, “criminals, radicals, and buffoons” (Candeloro 174) or, as one news report entitled “Our Future Citizens” described them: “There has never been since New York was founded so low and ignorant a class among the immigrants who poured in here as the Southern Italians” (6). Eventually, however, the reactionary tactic of separating themselves from the group below them is one the Italians would learn quickly, especially in the South.

Though there is evidence of the racialization of Italian Americans in the urban centers of America, in the South, prejudicial attitudes often turned to direct discrimination and violence. Again, rather than being related to a real physical difference, these attitudes were rooted in the class status of the immigrants. As Matthew Jacobson describes in *Whiteness of a Different Color*, in both the north and south “it was not just that Italians did not look white to certain social arbiters, but that they did not *act white*” (57). Though in the North it was their acceptance of low wages, their crowded living quarters, and their perceived threat to earlier immigrants or native-born members of the working class that led to discrimination of them, in the South, it was their willingness to live and work among African Americans that was “taken as confirmation of the Italians’ ambiguous racial status. Once they became aware of the terrible price to be paid for being ‘black,’ they hastened to distance themselves from African Americans and to be accepted as white” (Vecoli, “Are” 318). Yet, it would take quite a bit of violence before these acts of separation began to occur.

At first, immigrants from Southern Italy arrived without as deeply imbedded racism as they encountered in America and settled in Mississippi, Alabama, and, especially, Louisiana, interacting freely with their black coworkers while retaining their separate ethnic

identity apart from both white Americans and African Americans. Since they shared the same low socioeconomic status as laborers in a rural community, the camaraderie built between the two groups should have been expected, no matter how “unnatural” it seemed to native-born southerners. This association, however, had harsh consequences for Italian Americans. As Ferraro describes, “Sicilians worked side by side with African Americans in the cotton and sugar fields, upon occasion bunking with them, and upon occasion getting lynched, too” (163). In one recorded incident during the early 1900s, when a group of Italians and African Americans became enmeshed, it enraged Louisiana citizens so greatly that they picked a fight with five Italian Americans over a goat—a quarrel that ended with the five men being lynched (Mangione, “On Being” 40). Widespread aversion to this new group of immigrants who freely interacted, worked with, and, sometimes even bunked with African Americans, led to similar treatment of the two. An event that has been titled “the largest lynching in the U.S.,” took place in 1891 when David Hennessy, the New Orleans police chief, was killed in October. Eleven Italian Americans were brought in for questioning related to the incident, but none of them made it to the courtroom; they were all lynched while being held in prison (Mangione and Morreale 209-12). Lynchings, though the most extreme, were not the only form of open discrimination practiced in the South: “In some parts of the South, Italian children were forbidden by law to attend white schools. And in South Carolina a state law prevented Italians from migrating to that state” (Mangione, “On Being” 40).

During the first wave of immigration, from *padroni*, illustrations of Italian Americans as organ grinders, depictions of their living quarters as filthy, to the lynchings based on the notion that Italians were natural criminals, it is clear that a discourse by which mainstream America could control the representation and treatment of Italian Americans was developing.

Understanding the creation of this discourse makes two incongruous points clear. First, class status can traverse the color line and often create bonds between groups.⁹ Yet, at the same time, outsiders' homogenization of the disparate members of the working class and the discrimination that results from it cause working class individuals to distance themselves from those they see as facing the harshest discrimination. Essentially, racialization is a process where being labeled "black" causes groups such as Italian Americans to seek out the label "white" to escape discrimination. This emulation of the recently recast white population is observable in details such as the Italian Americans' erasure of their children's Italian names in favor of Irish names—an act described as "a well known and amusing fact" at the time (Pomeroy 54). Yet, it would take much more than renaming before the Italians would be considered "white" by mainstream America.

⁹ This may be why contemporary African Americans, such as bell hooks explain: "Personally, I find many of my deepest friendships and feminist bonds are formed with white women who come from working class backgrounds or who are working class and understand the impact of poverty and deprivation" (106).

The Early Years: Representations and Restrictions



Fig. 3.1: Cartoon from the 27 May 1882 issue of *Judge*¹⁰

During the booming twenty years of immigration (1890-1910) from Italy to America, a discourse about the newly arrived was not only created but also codified in a set of stereotypes that have come to be viewed as tropes of Italian Americanism. By the early 1900s, “Americans grasped at the newly arrived foreign-born as the cause of growing urban slums, depressed wages, and labor unrest—situations that otherwise seemed inexplicable to descendents of a frontier democracy” (LaGumina 13) and often used the anger fueled by these beliefs to develop a portrait of Italian Americans. As the ties between ethnicity and class became clearer to the general public, so too did the discourse regarding Italian Americans become intertwined with the ideas labeled by Graff as “the literacy myth.” With

¹⁰ This image is reprinted in LaGumina, 57.

the birth of silent films, new techniques were employed to try to understand foreign cultures. Movie screens blazed with Native-American warriors, Chinese laborers, and Italian criminals. In fact, it was during this time that the first of what would become the rather large genre of Italian-American gangster films, *Black Hand: True Story of a Recent Occurrence in the Italian Quarter of New York*, (1906) appeared. As fear of the padrone system rang out in the headlines, films such as *Black Hand* began to depict Italian padrones as not only enlisting workers from Italy, but of kidnapping mainstream Americans as well as Italians and using them to extort money. From the opening of the film, there is a clear connection drawn between Italian Americans, criminality, and illiteracy. Two caricatured Italian men throw back glasses of wine as they collaboratively compose the following letter: “BEWAR!! WE ARE DESPERUT! MISTER ANGELO WE MUST HAVE \$1,000.00, GIVE IT TO US OR WE WILL TAKE YOUR MARIA AND BLOW UP YOUR SHOP. BLACK HAND” (qtd. in Bondanella 176). While perhaps meant to be comedic, the broken English of the letter symbolizes what many believed was the real issue with immigration or, more aptly, with immigrants—their lack of education.

Similar to the cries for English-only education heard loudly in the southern and western U.S. today and echoed throughout the country, during the early part of the twentieth century, many Americans believed either that with literacy requirements immigrants would cease to be immigrants or that if English literacy was forced upon them, they would stop coming to the United States. As Rita Simon and Susan Alexander point out in *The Ambivalent Welcome: Print Media, Public Opinion, and Immigration*, “In the two decades between 1896 and 1917, Congress grappled with literacy requirements as a means of restricting immigration. From 1896 until 1910, four literacy bills were debated in Congress

and passed in one of the houses” (13). This was after the Dillingham Commission, established by Congress in 1907, studied the relationship between literacy and deviance, determining that the aliens most likely to make the best citizens were those fluent in the language of the land (Simon and Alexander 12; Lopreato 16). The result of this study and the four literacy bills was the Immigration Act passed on February 5, 1917, which, among other provisions, established an immigrant literacy test. In accordance with the Dillingham Commission’s “findings,” “though on its face a quality test, [the literacy test] was in reality the first legal step toward a restrictive and selective policy as applied to Europeans. It favored the northern western Nordic groups and limited the southern and eastern European peoples not considered as desirable” (LoGatto 14). While the test may have been developed as a means of separating the desirable from the undesirable, “the numbers of immigrants did not decline, nor was there a change in the countries of origin of the immigrants. It was the lack of effectiveness of the literacy requirements that led Congress to adopt another criterion for restricting immigration: national quotas” (Simon and Alexander 14). While the literacy requirement may not have slowed Italian immigration during this time, it certainly made them aware of the stigma surrounding their culture.

In addition to being considered among the least educated of their contemporary ethnic groups, Italian Americans also quickly gained the reputation of being the least hygienic. From the aforementioned stories of the overpopulated, filthy living quarters Italian Americans shared, came stories of diseases erupting from Italy and spreading within the urban slums. In *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and The Immigrant Menace*, Alan Kraut explains that rumors spread that polio “had been brought by immigrants from Italy to the United States rather than contracted here by the newcomers” (109). Despite the U.S. Public

Health Service dispelling these rumors, “some were still prepared to connect this particular immigrant group to the epidemic, arguing that Italians’ poor hygiene and unhealthy lifestyles made them vulnerable to polio, which they then spread to natives and other newcomers alike” (109). As Said argues in *Orientalism*, this type of scapegoating is an attempt by the dominant culture to fortify its own identity.

It was in the early 1900s in the midst of the scapegoating, the beginnings of the gangster mythology, and the start of the literacy requirement, that droves of Italian Americans began to live and work on the shores of Lake Erie, making them latecomers to the city of Cleveland in comparison to other ethnic populations (Vernosi 173). In urban areas such as Cleveland, the newly arrived stood out as they often emerged from the same towns in Italy and immigrated to the same state, city, street, and, sometimes, even the same house. According to Vernosi’s study, “three-quarters of all Italians migrating to Cleveland proceeded along a well-traversed course” from a specific town in Italy to a specific location within the city of Cleveland (174), similar to the path my participants trod. By 1910, two particular Italian settlements had developed—Big Italy, the nickname for the neighborhood that ran from Woodland Avenue to East 40th Street, and Little Italy, an area located on Mayfield Road between Euclid Avenue and Murray Hill. (See maps on following page.) This settlement pattern, however, created a bit of a conundrum. “Cleveland had, as of 1910, the dubious distinction of leading the nation in percentage of immigrants unable to speak the English language; furthermore, Cleveland was second only to Philadelphia in the percentage of aliens who had not taken out citizenship papers” (Stillman 37). While ghettoizing the immigrants meant that the dominant culture did not have to openly interact with an “other” they were beginning to despise, for reasons described in the next chapter, it also led to the

establishment of a community without any vested interest in becoming English-speaking “Americans.”

Fig. 3.2 Map of Big Italy

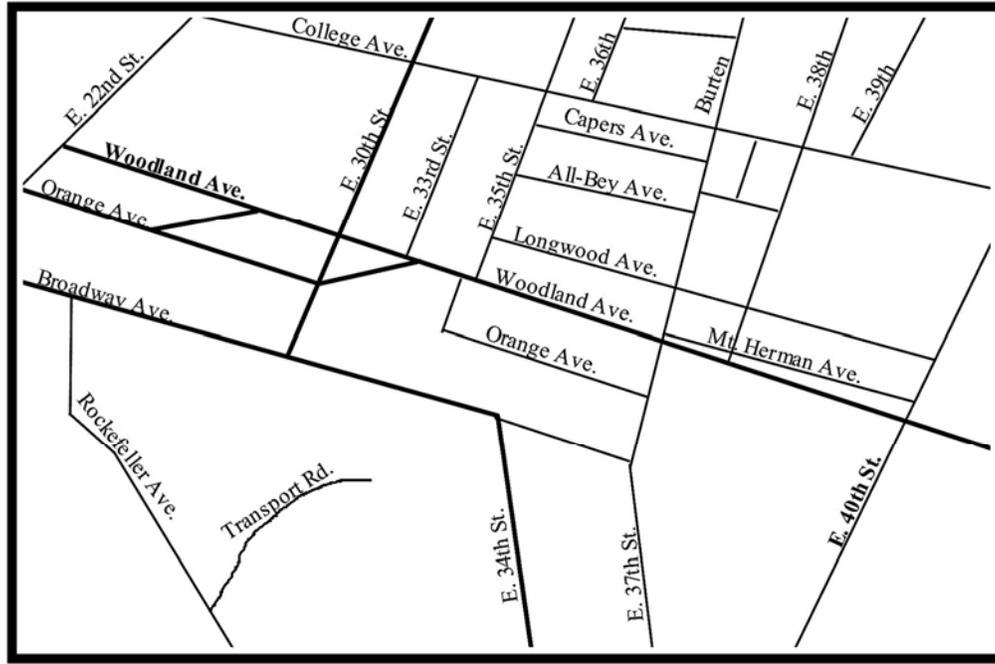
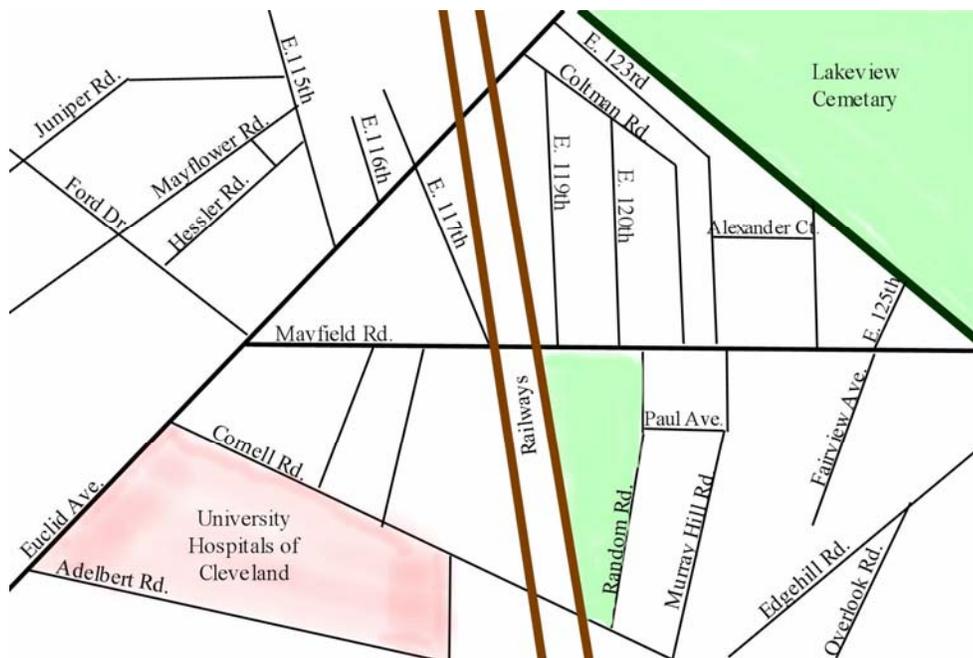


Fig. 3.3 Map of Little Italy



Attempts were made to counter this growing ethnic isolation. In the downtown public library, copies of the “Immigrant’s Guide,” a document given to immigrants before their arrival in Cleveland, can still be found. Unlike other guides, this one was printed in nine different languages and provided basic information about monetary values, health care, laws, but also did not fail to try to Clevelandize the new immigrants by promoting citizenship classes as well as English language courses in association with the Cleveland Board of Education (Veronesi 184). In the wake of WWI, these efforts would be minimized as “in 1918 the law closed the doors of the public schools to the immigrants” (Stillman 39) in Cleveland until new schools could be established within the ethnic enclaves of the city. The rationale for this decision was that immigrant children required special assistance that distracted the mainstream American children. As explored in the next chapter, this bifurcation resulted in the development of two separate types of schooling: parochial schools which enabled immigrant children to maintain their home culture and public schools within the ethnic neighborhood, which aimed to teach children not only the English language and American history, but also the American way of life.

The 1920s: The Rise of the Gangster, The Fall of Prohibition, The Beginnings of Italian-American Politics

Whatever steps Italian Americans had taken in Cleveland’s Little Italy (also known as Murray Hill), the temperance movement disrupted the path to Americanization. The area had quickly turned from an experiment in assimilation into a wart the city desperately wanted removed. As Veronesi describes:

In Murray Hill during the late 1920s the safety forces formed a roadblock at all the entrances to the neighborhood, searching cars and persons for liquor

without warrants. Protests to the mayor, the chief of police and the papers had no effect. This neighborhood had “earned” the reputation of being a major source for “bootleg” liquor and drastic measures had to be assumed to curb this threat. It was but one step to stigmatizing the entire community for the activities of some within its boundaries.” (245).

If there were any doubt about Italian-Americans’ ambiguous racial status upon their arrival, the Prohibition period saw their “otherness” crystallize. It was not uncommon for Italians to be described as another race particular to themselves. For instance, a fight between “mainstream” Americans and Italians that broke out in Illinois, was described as follows:

SPRINGFIELD, Ill., Aug. 5—Governor Frank O.

Lowden at 10:30 o’clock tonight received a call from West

Frankfurt for troops. The message was from Mayor Lon

Fox of West Frankfurt and Sheriff Robert Watkins of

Franklin County and read:

“Race riot here. Italian people are being assaulted and

their property destroyed. This situation is out of control of

the city and county officials. Troops are needed at once.” (“Strikers” 1)

As a whole, the temperance movement has been characterized as “being tinged with ethnic and racial prejudice” and as “primarily a rural, Protestant, native-born movement that tried to fend off perceived threats from urban Catholic immigrants” (Bizzell and Herzberg 1118). At this time, Italian Americans began being singled out as the largest “urban Catholic threat.”

They were not, however, the only group singled out by temperance activists as a basis of comparison. As early as 1863, as Karlyn Kohrs Campbell explains, “with passage of the

Fourteenth Amendment, many suffragists, including Cady Stanton and Anthony, in frustration and anger, made highly racist statements that attacked Afro-Americans as well as recent immigrants” (xxii). These reactionary statements often were focused on comparing educated women to uneducated ethnics who were able to vote. In her “Speech at the Seneca Falls Convention,” for instance, Elizabeth Cady Stanton argues for women’s suffrage by disparaging the fact that “the ignorant Irishman in the ditch has all the rights he has” (54). While statements similar to this one are often aptly described as being based on racial and ethnic prejudice, this terse explanation shadows over implications about literacy and class that such statements also support. First, in all of the comparisons made between middle-class, white women and immigrants, the implicit conclusion is that literacy, particularly English-language literacy, makes an individual a more valuable or capable citizen in a democracy. Illiteracy, as Graff argues, is characterized as amoral. In speeches from the period, charges of illiteracy are often made alongside descriptions of immigrants as public drunkards or criminals—all three portrayed as a reason why middle-class women make better citizens than the newly arrived immigrants. Second, these statements also show early feminists’ inability to grasp the complexities of class. Statements such as the one made by Stanton reflect the commonly held beliefs that those “in the ditch” are uneducated and, in some way, foreign. While there is evidence that early feminists viewed the working class as a homogenous group, the rhetorical moves made in the majority of speeches from the movement also show that they believed their needs and desires were the same as those of the upper and middle classes.

While the feminist movement became more inclusive as time passed, the depiction of immigrants during the Prohibition era had a lasting impact, especially on the Italian-

American community. The depictions of violent Italian-American bootleggers really came to life because of the combination of sound in films and a growing distrust of European ethnics. Whereas with the combination of intertitles, makeup, and lighting, silent films could mask the ethnic identities of stars, “the talkies foregrounded ethnicity as difference since voice rather than body suddenly made these actors legible” (Lunde 21). As a result, ethnic film stars of the silent era often had the choice to either become vamps,¹¹ criminals, or buffoons or leave the silver screen altogether. Rather than offering social analysis, talkies generally focused on sensationalizing crime, as Carlos Cortès notes: “only the whoops of Hollywood’s blood-thirsty Indians could rival Italian-Americans’ machine guns as movie’s contribution to ethnic violence” (111). Within the city of Cleveland, crime certainly was on the upsurge during Prohibition. However, in contrast to the gun fights and the underground speakeasys in Little Italy depicted on movie screens across the country, a majority of those arrested were not of Italian descent. According to the 1928 report of the Cleveland House of Corrections, Italians had the second lowest population of incarcerated ethnics in the city:

Total Prisoners in House of Correction—1928

Americans, 7304	Hungarians, 169
Austrians, 433	Russians, 124
Irish, 430	Italians, 124
Poles, 268	Germans, 122 (Veronesi 246)

¹¹ While a majority of the works discussing the impact of sound in film for ethnics focus on the creation of the criminalized male, Diane Negra’s work *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* analyzes “the packaging, promotion, and performances” of several ethnic actresses and concludes that filmic ethnic women either become the sexualized, exotic vamp or symbolic of the consistency of the American Dream by analyzing the packaging, promotion, and performances” of ethnic actresses (11). Her chapter on Pola Negri, for instance, focuses specifically on the issues posed by the transition from silent films to talkies. Negri, though at first successfully making the transition, could not escape her early silent film caricature as a vamp in print media, which eventually led her to return to Germany during WWII.

Certainly crimes were committed by Italian Americans during the Prohibition era, but Italian-American proclivity for crime was grounded in the discourse created about them rather than reality. This discourse, however, was quite powerful. In one of the most controversial court cases in U.S. history, Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti were executed in 1927 “after a highly prejudicial and inconclusive trial for the shooting of two men during a 1920 robbery” (Guglielmo 10). The sentencing of Sacco and Venzetti began to make Italian Americans aware of the impact the negative stereotypes about their lifestyles could have—it “demonstrated to many Italians the costs of revolutionary culture and racialized criminalization in the United States” (10).

Many argue that in the twenties Italian-American discrimination was at its peak, changing from visual and verbal representations to the basis of actions against the community. It was also during this period that Italian Americans broke their silence and began entering the arena of politics in more solid numbers. “By the early 1930s,” according to Ferroni, “newly emerging Italian leadership had gained support of Italo-Americans who finally realized the significance of a political voice in community affairs” (3). In Cleveland, the first Italian-American politician, Alexander DeMaioribus, was elected as the city councilman for Ward 19, Little Italy, in 1927. Throughout his twenty-year reign on the city council, he argued that it was the discourse created about Italian Americans that led to his election and continued re-election:

Yes, Italians did join together because of discrimination during Prohibition and the Depression. They supported me because they felt they had no representation. I fought against the search of homes and the destruction of property. During the Depression I fought against the discrimination of the

quota system used to employ people. Little Italy was way behind. I pushed to get more employed. (qtd. in Veronesi 250)

Though DeMaioribus would continue to succeed in Cleveland politics, the more footing Italian Americans gained within the political world, the more challenges they encountered. As Ferroni explains, “While conditions resulting from prohibition and the depression were stimulating Cleveland’s Italo-Americans to an increased involvement in American society, the restrictive immigration legislation of the late 1920s was beginning to curb Italian immigration into Cleveland” (3). Though talks of building a wall around the U.S. are now becoming a reality, there has always been an invisible wall used to keep certain people out. The National Origins law, for example, acted as a wall, keeping the numbers of certain ethnic groups at bay. Reducing the 3% quota of 1921 to 2%, the act appeared to restrict immigration across the board. Yet it “openly discriminated against southern and eastern Europeans by making the census of 1890 (rather than that of 1910 or 1920) the basis for its quota” (LoGatto 15). Since immigration from Italy really began in the 1880s, taking the census from 1890 as the basis for the limitations had a large impact on the flow of immigration from Italy to the U.S. By 1924, for instance, “Italy’s quota was reduced to 3,845” (Lopreato 17). In addition to the immigration restrictions, the political strides made by Italian Americans in the 1920s would be further impeded by the impending war and the fear of fascism.

The 1930s: The Rise of Ethnic Nationalism

Though Italian Americans had gained a minor voice in politics and also in labor unions, social unrest during the 1930s further fueled “othering” of Italian Americans. In the

wake of the Great Depression, efforts were put forth to organize the working class, and the relations of the members of this social strata were also improved. As a result of the New Deal, a more homogenous American working class was forged “out of previously divided ethnic groups that came to perceive the Democratic party as a common cross-ethnic institution through which laborers could jointly further their mutual class interests regardless of their differing races and national ancestries” (Luconi 133). Falling under this umbrella, Italian Americans also saw improvements, which were often driven by organizations gaining prominence such as the Order of the Sons of Italy. For example in 1934 when the Sons of Italy demanded that the Cleveland Public Schools adopt the teaching of the Italian language, they made “it known that they would support only those board members who were favorable to this addition. The schools ultimately decided to add this language course to their curriculum” (Veronesi 255). Yet, the homogenization of the working class and the small victories of the Italian-American community were overshadowed by the negative sentiments directed towards the Italian-American community during Prohibition combined with the Italian-Americans’ early support of fascism.

Though Prohibition was repealed in 1933, the Cleveland *Plain Dealer* promulgated a fear that an epidemic of Italian racketeers had gained power by bootlegging liquor. In part, this charge was true. During the 1920s several Italian-American men had prospered by selling corn sugar—an ingredient necessary to make bootleg booze. The Lonardo and Porrello families had risen quickly from poor immigrants to sugar barons—a rise that involved the murder of small-time competitors, mostly other bootleggers or sugar barons (Porrello). Inciting the violence was the rise of another bootlegging gang, “The Mayfield

Road Mob.” The two groups vied for control of Cleveland street corners, a fight that ended with the death of the Porrello brothers and the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment (Porrello). Though by 1933 the Cleveland mafia had moved on to Las Vegas, because without Prohibition there was little profit to be made from crime in Cleveland, their activities marred the reputation of Little Italy for years to come. Frank Merrick, “the city’s former Director of Public Safety, offered his observation in an article entitled ‘Giving the Low Down on Cleveland’s Racketeers.’ In this review of the city’s criminal element it was the Italians who were singled out for blame” (Veronesi 247). Reports of violence in Murray Hill appeared so often, the neighborhood merchants were beginning to suffer as patrons refused to enter the neighborhood. To combat the stereotypes, the Mayfield Merchant’s Association “invited a *Cleveland News* reporter to visit the area and write about his first-hand experience for his Cleveland readers. In July of 1935 Jack Kennon of the *News* began to walk among the people of Little Italy, listening to their problems and observing their life style” (248). After spending several days with the immigrants, he countered the popular belief that Murray Hill was a denizen of crime, concluding that “the only title which Murray Hill did merit was Little Italy and nothing else” (qtd. in Veronesi 248).

In addition to the lingering fear of Italian-American criminality, the anti-fascist atmosphere of the 1930s propelled prejudice against the community (LaGumina 249). As was shown in the previous chapter, Italians had little sense of a nationally unified Italy. In fact, it was often not until they had crossed the Atlantic that they began to view themselves as Italians or speak a common dialect. Within America, as the following image from *Guide for the Immigrant Italian in the United States of America* shows, Italy was viewed as a small and inferior country.

Fig.3.4



Hence, when Italians within America began to see their homeland gaining power and prestige because of the turn to fascism, it evoked a certain amount of pride. Under Mussolini, as discussed in the preceding chapter, schools were open and regulated, taxes were collected, industrial employment began, and, as my participants put it, “under Mussolini, the trains ran on time” (Romanelli and Ianiello). Seeing the developments within their country, the Italian Americans began to explicitly express their national pride. For instance, in 1933 the *Mayfield Herald*, a press in Little Italy, reported: “We, of Italian parentage, cannot help but admire the progress being made in the land of our fathers. The Italians have been accomplishing miracles when one considers that these have been trying years indeed for countries far wealthier than Italy” (1.3).

Similarly, another local Italian press, *La Voce*, carried articles favorable to the fascist government. As Veronesi found when he was researching 1936 articles from *La Voce*

microfilmed at the Western Reserve Historical Society, the paper was “a firm supporter of the fascist government” (Veronesi 252). Clearly, there were nationalistic divisions within the Italian-American community evidenced by actions resulting from their loyalties: “By September of 1936 Cleveland’s Italian organizations donated \$12,404.21 to the Italian Red Cross. Some 1000 Cleveland Italians also donated their gold wedding rings to Italy for ‘this holy and patriotic cause,’ and received steel bands from Mussolini to wear as symbols of their faith to Italy” (258). The climate of Italian ethnicity would, however, take a sharp turn following the invasion of Ethiopia and America’s entrance into WWII.

The War Years: Relocation, POWs, and Prospering Entertainers



Fig 3.5 12

As imagined, when Italy and Germany joined forces, the prestige of Italian Americans declined rapidly. Italy’s invasion of France in 1940 especially led to some of the

¹² This poster depicting Hitler, Mussolini and Hirohito was hung in federal buildings, discouraging the speaking of German, Japanese, and Italian. The poster is featured in the travelling exhibition, “*Una Storia Segreta*,” a showcase of historical materials relating to the internment of Italian Americans during WWII. It also appears on their website: <http://hcom.csumb.edu/segreta/introduction.html>.

most caustic anti-Italian sentiment and perpetuated the discourse about the “amoral culture” that seemed in the late-1920s to be declining. Any reason for Italians to feel nationalistic ties to their homeland was dispelled by mainstream American writers. For instance, Westbrook Pegler of the *Chicago Daily News* and *The Washington Post* published numerous invectives about any display of ethnic pride during the war years. As Veronesi argues, Pegler was especially pernicious to Italian Americans, once even writing that “the Americans of Italian birth or blood have no reason to love Italy,” where “extortion and terrorism was a native peculiarity . . . as characteristic as garlic” (qtd. in Veronesi 152). Because they were often branded, accurately or inaccurately, as the least assimilable of the immigrants, during the war, the Italian-American community was held under much scrutiny. Though we hear few stories about the treatment of Italian Americans during WWII, they were one of the most feared ethnic groups in America. Throughout the war, it was a common belief that fascist Italians “exercise a much stronger influence over their racial groups in the United States than do the German Nazis. The solidarity of the Italian groups in large American cities and their resisting to the melting-pot process undoubtedly provide a favorable field for fascist propaganda” (Fox 35). Out of fear, however, many Italians sought quick assimilation as a sign of loyalty to their new homeland.

Just as quickly as the Italians in the United States embraced fascism, they also discarded their nationalistic ties to Italy once the U.S. entered the war. As LaGumina explains, “Virtually the entire Italian-American community dropped whatever lingering support there was for Mussolini and strongly endorsed the American war effort” (249). This was especially true in Cleveland where the Italian language disappeared from the schools without complaint from the Sons of Italy, who even changed the names of their lodges from

the names of Italian royalty to names such as Abraham Lincoln and Betsy Ross (Veronesi 263). In fact, instead of fighting the Americanization they had deterred for so long, The Sons of Italy seemed to enjoy their new role as American patriots. “Six days before Pearl Harbor,” for example, “Cleveland’s Sons of Italy announced that they would invest \$101,900 in defense bonds as a first step toward full support of President Roosevelt’s defense program” (263). As Americans became more heavily involved in the war, signs of ethnicity within Little Italy vanished. “The once popular street parades noticeably disappeared,” according to Ferroni, and “the Italian language newspapers counted their last days” (6). Similar to all ethnic groups within the U.S., Italians began sending their sons to fight in the war. Unfortunately, several ended up fighting in their former homeland, making the strain between native land and new world all the greater. Evidence of the struggle between ethnicity and assimilation can be found in letters written home by Italian troops. For instance, Lieutenant Victor Cereno wrote to his parents: “‘Recently, I flew over the beautiful hometown of Dr. Romano on a bombing mission. I was sorry to see a nice town like that bombed but there was nothing I could do about it. I performed my duty as an American would do, dropped my bombs and with an aching heart observed the terrific blasting’” (qtd. in Veronesi 264). Yet even with these acts of patriotism, in accordance with America’s war effort, the loyalty of Italian Americans was still called into question, especially because of their literacy practices.

As Italian Americans’ maintenance of Italian as their language of choice led to extensive circulation of Italian newspapers, “one of the principal concerns of anti-Fascists was the popularity of the foreign language media; not the German American press, which for the most part steered clear of Germany’s politics, but Italian-American journalists whose

‘politically impassioned newspapers’ were an important source of ethnic solidarity” (Fox 33). Similarly, as many of the immigrants could neither read English or standard Italian, Italian radio broadcasts were also a major source of information. What was taken for granted during this time by non-Italians was that Italians supported the ideas that they read and heard, evidenced by their continued reading and listening to pro-fascist media. What was not taken into consideration, however, was that for non-English reading or speaking Italians, this fascist radio was one of the only sources of information that they had during the war. Since their access to literate materials was restricted by their linguistic practices, Italians’ owning pro-fascist documents written in Italian should not be taken as evidence of their support for a fascist ideology. It is difficult to speculate, based on the information they had, how much the immigrants really understood about the war. In *The Unknown Internment*, Stephen Fox argues that, within cities in Illinois,

illiterate immigrants lived in a close, familial Italian American community on which they depended for information. Their understanding of the war in 1942 was vague and nebulous; perhaps England was to blame, they thought, although they did not even know where England was. Their understanding of Fascism went no deeper than their knowledge that it was the government of Italy and Mussolini was its president. (8)

Yet, at this time in history, literacy practices in combination with the discourse about Italians as natural criminals, illiterates, and radicals were enough for mainstream Americans to assume guilt by association.

With the bombing of Pearl Harbor, all Italians who had not completed the naturalization process were considered enemy aliens. On December 7, 1941, Germans,

Italians, and Japanese appearing on FBI Director Hoover's Custodial Detention List were arrested by the FBI (Distasi, "Internment" para. 1-3). Because of Franklin Roosevelt's signing of Proclamation 2527¹³, 600,000 Italian Americans were branded "enemy aliens" and were forced to register at the post office and obtain enemy alien identification cards. Two weeks after December 8, "the Justice Department warned enemy aliens that they would have to give up their firearms or be interned."¹⁴ Two weeks later it was cameras and radios" (Fox 59). As the war pressed on, numerous other items, including ammunition, maps, signaling devices, codes, "and papers, documents or books in which there may be invisible writing" were added to the list (61). According to *Una Storia Segreta*, even naturalized citizens were often forced to give up any items that were included on the contraband list. By February 24, the first curfew was established; between the hours of 9pm and 6am all enemy aliens had to be in their homes and were only able to travel four miles from their work or home at all other times (Fox 62, 88). By June of 1942, according to the American Italian Historical Association, 250 Italians were interned for up to two years and 1,521 were arrested by the FBI (Distasi, "Internment" para. 3). Because many of the historical documents about the internment are still considered classified, it is difficult to gauge its extent. What is known is that approximately 1,600 Italians were taken to camps in Montana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, and another 10,000 were forced to leave their homes in California out of fear that an attack on the coast was being planned. Just as images and texts can be used to create a

¹³ The Presidential Proclamation can be read in full in *The American Journal of International Law*. 36.4 (Oct. 1942). 236-43.

¹⁴ While there is still much to be learned about the internment, there is evidence that the idea for relocation came from both the government and the public. In his book, Fox finds that in 1942 "the Los Angeles Council of California Women's Clubs adopted a resolution . . . to place all enemy aliens in concentration camps immediately, and the Young Democratic Club of Los Angeles went a step further, passing a resolution that demanded the removal of American-born Italians and Germans from the Pacific Coast" (50).

reality, so too can silence. By repressing information that would cast a negative shadow over the dominant culture, the dominant group is able to maintain power. Though unquestionably the realities of WWII for Italians in America should be uncovered, this project is concerned more with the rationale behind relocation and the failure to enact the relocation more thoroughly as both the rationale and the failure tie back into issues of language and class.

Similar to the secrecy surrounding the relocation and restrictions imposed on Italian Americans, there is a silence regarding the existence of P.O.W camps within the U.S.. As the government wanted Italian-American support during the war and many Italian Americans were already fighting for the U.S. overseas, it was decided that the presence of Italian POWs within the U.S. should be a topic of censure; as such “the U.S. Department’s Office of Censorship had asked the nation’s newspapers and radio stations to ignore POW arrivals” (Keefer 36). Over the course of three years, 50,000 Italian soldiers, airmen, and sailors captured overseas were transferred to the U.S. (1).¹⁵ According to the 1929 Geneva Convention, POWs are to be properly clothed, fed, quartered, able to send and receive mail, given proper medical treatment, treated with respect, and quickly removed from war zones. Depending upon the version of history one encounters, most of these stipulations were followed. It is known, however, that “ultimately, the U.S. Army kept far more Italian POWs in the war zone than it brought to America: As of September 1943, it held about 82,000 in North Africa and Sicily, but only 48,000 in the United States” (28). While this went against the Geneva Convention, the truth was that the Allies were not prepared to handle the enormous numbers of prisoners (17).

¹⁵ Most POWs were kept out of the United States. It was not until after “prolonged talks” that the decision was made that “all Axis prisoners captured in North America after the 1942 allied landings (Operation Touch) would be considered ‘American-owned’” (Keefer 28). The majority arrived in the spring and summer of 1943.

The lack of planning for the arrival of the POWs led to a disparate conclusion about how they were treated once they arrived, if they arrived. Many died travelling by sea; “in the New York National Cemetery at Farmingdale, New York, are interred together the remains of thirty-six unknown Italian POWs” (25). After the Italians arrived, they were transferred to camps; the most well-known is the camp in Hereford, Texas. Yet, even portrayals of life in this camp are at odds with one another. Two texts dealing with the subject, Louis Keefer’s *Italian Prisoners of War in America 1942-1946: Captives or Allies?* and Donald Williams’s *Interlude in Umbarger: Italian POWs and a Texas Church* diverge on several points.

Depending upon which version of POW camp-life one believes, for instance, food was either abundant (Keefer) or prisoners were left hungry (Williams). For all of Keefer’s stories of abundance, Williams’s portrait of life at Hereford, Texas is much more detailed:

“Scrounging, theft, and improvisation became aids to survival. Not much of the outside food consisted of dogs and cats. A roast small animal makes an entrée for only very few men. The same is true of rattlesnakes, which several officers ate. Grasshoppers provided good protein, but very little of it” (Williams 40). Though both Keefer and Williams’s texts are based upon oral histories, the lenses through which they gauge these stories diverge. Keefer is reviewing these narratives from the perspective of someone who served in the U.S. Army from 1945-1946, whereas as Williams interprets these stories as both a journalist and a professor of English. While Keefer describes the POWs as being treated like allies more than prisoners, the stories told in Williams’s text call Keefer’s representation into question. For instance, the experiences recalled by an Italian second lieutenant, Frank DiBello, in Williams’s study show no signs that the Italian prisoners viewed themselves as allies:

In a matter of days, food and all items on sale at the PX [Post Exchange] were cut down to almost nothing and we found ourselves deprived not only of the necessary nourishment, but also of the possibility to exercise any activities. Many of us thought it was not worthy of the Americans acting like that and the new treatment was to be temporary. But it wasn't and things went on that way till we left the U.S. After two or three months of this absurd policy our life in the Camp had become really tough and miserable: people began to fall sick (five of them would have died in the following months), quite a few began to show mental disorders, most of us spent the entire day in bed and many became prey to distrust and pessimism. (qtd. in Williams 4-5)

Stories of the treatment of Italians who were either interned or became prisoners during the war years are slowly becoming more accessible as documents are released and individuals are beginning to relate these incidents, as DiBello did. Many speculate that the reason for the sixty-year silence relates to the literacy practices of Italian Americans or the lack thereof. Because many did not read, write, and, sometimes, even speak English, they did not have the means to express their experiences to an English-speaking audience. Similarly, they were functioning with a situated ethos, preconceived notions of their beliefs, culture, and behavior that made the communicative distance between the immigrants and the mainstream Americans even more difficult to traverse. Finally, many of the immigrants were still engaging in *omerta*, the purposeful silencing practiced in Italy. Airing grievances is thought to be a show of weakness, as an expectation of remuneration is a sign that the family could not overcome struggle and survive on its own.

Obviously in this environment where Italy was an enemy, Italians were prisoners, and many Italian Americans were labeled enemy aliens, attempts were made by Italian Americans to whitewash ethnic markers. Throughout WWII and continuing into the 1950s, “ethnicity was something you were supposed to leave behind, if not entirely then at least when you went out in public” (Ferraro 91). Hence, during this time, many Italian-American entertainers anglicized their names and their appearances. Bobby Darrin, Frankie Avalon, Dean Martin, Tony Bennett, Vic Damone, Connie Francis, and Jerry Vale are names that come to mind. Interestingly, however, this period also gave rise to an icon within the Italian-American community and the American country at large, who capitalized on, rather than hid, his ethnic identity.

Growing up, I never really understood the appeal of Frank Sinatra, but within the family it was common to see his picture hanging next to one of Jesus. To me, Sinatra was music. He was a song playing in Nonna’s kitchen at a time when I would much rather be listening to musical geniuses like Weird Al Yankovich. What I could not see or, rather, hear, was why he was heralded within the Italian-American community as a god-like figure. To use a feminist metaphor, Sinatra was an example of using the master’s tools to dismantle the master’s house. In each song, there is a blending of speech and singing, a mix of cultural critique and American-as-apple-pie lyrics that show Sinatra’s “refusal to be embarrassed by his background, but also his willingness to countenance offending the genteel sensibilities of an Anglo-American cultural elite that was otherwise taken, for good reason, with the classiness of his singing” (Ferraro 95). Sinatra, therefore, was embraced within the Italian-American community for maintaining his ethnicity and still being accepted within the culture at large or, as Thomas Ferraro puts it, “Sinatra was celebrated for demonstrating that you

could leave the corner without leaving its values behind” (95). For Italian Americans not wanting to assimilate, not feeling accepted, “My Way” became an anthem they could get behind. In song after song, Sinatra could simultaneously belt out a love song written for a woman and jab at the values in the song with his voice, his slurs, and his trademark lyrical talking. It was his ability to enmesh his own values with those of the traditional lyrics that made him attractive to both audiences. As Ferraro concludes, “Italian Americans took courage from Sinatra’s witchcraft, his ability to hold the American masses spellbound without becoming whitewashed” (106).

Post-WWII: The Participants’ Arrival in Context

By the time my participants arrived in America, there was already an established discourse about Italian Americans as being whites of a darker complexion with a looser set of moral values. Because of the checkered history of Italian Americans—discrimination in the workplace, a public discourse tying them to crime, and the impact of Italy aligning with Germany in WWII contrasted by the entrance of Italians in the world of politics, the rise of Italian entertainers, and the return of Italian-American soldiers—“anti-Italianism found the post-World War II period a curious and puzzling one” (LaGumina 16). Much of the open discrimination had ended; with few exceptions, Italian Americans were being paid the same hourly wage as other members of the working class, posted segregation notices removed “Italian Americans” from the “keep out” list, and all of the restrictions that came with Proclamation 2527 were removed. Though these improvements were made, a discourse about Italian Americans persisted, impacting mainstream Americans’ perception of them.

Throughout Cleveland’s Little Italy, the perception of Italian Americans blanketed the entire neighborhood. Public opinion of Murray Hill and its residents was so low that in

1947 it was thought that a boost of morale was needed within the neighborhood. As such, Bill Veeck, the owner of the Cleveland Indians, and Paul Bellamy, editor of the *Plain Dealer*, were both invited to the citizenship assembly at the Murray Hill school (Ferroni 225-6). Veeck, in turn, invited some players to visit as well, knowing this would bring more of a media presence into the neighborhood. In his speech, Veeck told the Italian-American children: “Out in this neighborhood, you have had a long time bum rap--bum raps in different areas. People make it harder to win. But you know how and I want to instill some of that championship spirit in my athletes. When they come out here, give them a lesson in winning for me, please” (Veeck qtd. in Ferroni 226). While the visit energized the neighborhood, it did little to change Italian-Americans’ public persona.

When asked if, upon her arrival, Americans were nice to her, Pasqualina Parente responded, “No” and laughed. Arriving in the 50s and early 60s, my participants were not aware of the ever-changing identity politics in America or the strong post-war assimilationist current. While outright discrimination may have been a problem of the past, Italian Americans’ whiteness was still considered tenuous. Throughout the country the war was having a lasting impact on the way ethnicity would be viewed and expressed. As Kaestle explains, “Technology, capitalism, politics, and education had combined to homogenize the world of print as never before. The society was not really homogenous, but print culture was, to an unprecedented degree” (286). The immigrant press had especially changed its tone-- though it was still printed in diverse languages, no longer emphasized ethnic pride, but assimilation (272).

Unknowingly, as soon as my participants landed on the shores of America, they were already transgressing the oft unspoken but deeply ingrained value of Americanization. They

arrived with a different language and a disparate set of values that marked them as foreign. Once they began interacting with mainstream Americans, they quickly learned that their status in the U.S. was fragile at best. As Joe Russo recalls, “They call you DP—a displaced person. See DP is a displaced person, but when someone say ‘he’s a DP’ in a mean voice, it means dumb person. There was a lot of discrimination, but we were better off than a negro even though we just came because at that time, 1955, there still was racism in this country.” As a characteristic that highlighted their ethnicity, their language practices were particularly criticized. “A lot of people madea fun of me, the way I speak,” Romanelli explains. “They still do. You know the way I pronounce things, things I can’t say. It used to bother me. I used to cry, but then you know what, I figure why let them laugh. So when they say something and I couldn’t pronounce right and laughed, I laughed with them.” Feeling unaccepted within the larger social world, my participants began to distance themselves from the rest of American society. They, however, saw this isolation as being forced upon them rather than being their own choice. As Pasqualina Casale explains, “I would go back to Italy tonight if I could. You can’t trust people here. I’m very scared. I won’t stay in the house by myself. Over there the people are more friendly. People open up and talk to you. Here everybody closes up inside. You don’t know anybody.” Isolation, however, was also a choice—a means of controlling their own identity without facing bigotry. Though this type of isolation is often viewed as silence and, therefore, a passive act, as I will discuss in the next chapter, it was a purposeful action.

Isolation became a means of maintaining their ethnicity within a community where they were accepted as being both Italian Americans and working class. While their ethnic markers were the source of derision, it was their class that was the cause of aversion. Since

the great migration, the majority of Italian immigrants fell naturally into the working class, so much so that their ethnicity and their class status merged to create an Italian-American identity. To be Italian American began to mean that one was not only ethnic, but of a lower class—an identity that was promoted by textual and visual media images. As Edvige Giunta, an academic from Italy explains, when she came to America to study, “I was also at that time invested in emphasizing that I was Italian and not Italian American, keenly aware, I realize in retrospect, that a class distinction existed between the two and I had nothing to gain from aligning myself with these people toward whom I felt a strong but uncomfortable sense of kinship” (xiii). While at this time there were Italian-American entertainers, politicians, bankers, entrepreneurs, and other socially mobile ethnics, there was an inescapable class label attached to their ethnicity, as is often attached to Hispanics today.

Not surprisingly, then, it was within the workplace that my participants recall the most prejudice. Both Ruggiero and Romanelli recall experiencing discriminatory hiring practices: “He [the boss at Modern Tool & Die] won’t give me a job. That’s one of those things. He hired all these poor Greeks, all these Yugoslavian guys, not too many Italians. He don’t like Italian people” (Ruggiero). During her second interview, Romanelli was turned away because the foreman claimed: “You don’t speak good English. You don’t have enough experience” (Romanelli). To which she replied, “I work in a factory for five years in New Jersey.” Still, his response was “‘No, no, no.’ So [she] went and scrubbed floors in Higbees” (Romanelli). Once they were hired, they were often subject to the scorn of fellow workers. As Ruggiero remembers with a shake of his head, “I argue with the people at Modern Tool. They call over there, ‘you all DP. You all DP.’ I tell them, ‘I’m not a DP.’ I pay my trip. I pay three hundred dollars to come over here. I am an American citizen.” According to my

participants, DP became a new ethnic slur, replacing dago or WOP. Like Ruggiero, Romanelli recalls defending her citizenship status: “I tell them all the time, ‘I’m not a DP. I pay my own way.’ ” Fellow workers also took advantage of the immigrant workers’ language practices. Romanelli, for instance, met a woman on the assembly line who seemed to be quite nice, investing time to teach Romanelli some English. Each morning, she would have Romanelli sit down and practice what she thought meant “good morning.” The kindly woman encouraged Romanelli to try out her new English skills on the boss, which she did. The next day, when she arrived at work, Romanelli walked up to her boss and said, “Good morning, jack ass son of a bitch”—a comment for which she was reprimanded without really understanding what she had done wrong. Luckily, another Italian-American woman helped Romanelli clarify what had happened:

They had an Italian woman and they brought her to talk to me and she asked me why did I say that and I told her that girl, they used to call, um, the floor lady, she told me to say it to John first thing in the morning. You know call him this name and she told me it means good morning. She made me repeat it over and over again and they fired her on the spot. (Romanelli)

These events were not isolated, nor could the Italian Americans isolate themselves from the rest of the workforce; they just learned to survive and to trust only those whose names ended in a vowel.

The participants who entered the workforce felt as though mainstream Americans assumed they were ignorant because of their limited English literacy skills. Certainly the lack of mainstream language skills predestined them for positions in the working class. It should not have been assumed, however, that they were uneducated. Joe Russo, for instance, had

gone to school for accounting and actually resisted coming to America as he knew he would be giving up his newly obtained credentials. Not wanting to be separated from his family though, he chose to come and work alongside them in the factory, where he recalls feeling like a “cog in the machine” who was treated with scorn. As Graff argues in *The Literacy Myth*, one reason working class ethnics face discrimination is because their illiteracy is taken as a sign of amorality—the case of Italian Americans clearly shows how this implicit claim takes shape. Because of the history of the *padrone*, the gangster film genre, and all of the fear of the immigrant that arose with WWII, Italian Americans were taken to be natural criminals. In Cleveland, this misrepresentation would continue to cast a dark shadow over the Italian neighborhood into the eighties. An Irish teacher at the Murray Hill School, Miss Graham tried to counter this persistent discourse. When she was assigned to the school, she recalls her friends exclaiming, “Oh! That district. That’s where the Mayfield gangs operate” (Graham qtd. in Ferroni 223). Though at first she believed what she had read in the newspaper, by 1968 her perception of the neighborhood had changed: “These kids weren’t really bad. They had no status in the city. I felt if we could just rid the neighborhood of its reputation, the children here would begin to feel like people again. They would feel that goodness was expected of them, rather than toughness” (qtd. in Ferroni 224). She was convinced that the undeserved reputation of the neighborhood was perpetuated by the media. So convinced that at the end of the year she “paid a visit to an editorial writer of *The Plain Dealer* who agreed to cooperate with her efforts in any way he could. Miss Graham pointed out to him that whenever something bad happened it was reported in the big headlines; at the same time the good deeds were reported in the corner of the obituary page” (224).

While the newspaper may have shaped Italian-American identity in Cleveland, the film industry has certainly had the largest impact upon the way that Italian-American culture is viewed throughout the country. Judging from the nearly one hundred films depicting Italian Americans as criminals, the gangster myth became an offer Americans couldn't refuse. From the first Italian-American gangster film in 1906, a caricature of Italian Americanness that was comparable to the portrayal of African Americans, was being created. Films depicting either community typically focus on the men in the same stereotypic fashion: rebellious, macho, violent, unfaithful, territorial, flashy, dishonest, and with an inclination for criminality. Though post-World War II audiences saw a greater diversity of Italian-American characters, "whatever their pursuits, they often resorted to violence, whether using their fists to become world champion boxers or wielding knives to terrorize New York subways (Cortès 116). This film version of Italian-American culture began to infiltrate other forms of media to the point that it created a false reality of this particular ethnicity. By 1959, for instance, J. Higham in *Strangers in the Land* offered the following description of Italian-American men: "The knife with which he cuts his bread he also uses to lop off another dago's finger or ear He is quite as familiar with the sight of human blood as with the sight of the food he eats" (66).

Statements such as this one were often driven by the belief that all Italians were in some way tied to organized crime. As the appended list shows, this has been the most consistent stereotype of Italian Americans throughout history. By the 1920s, this stereotype was so accepted as fact rather than as prejudice that movies about Italian Americans such as *Scarface* and *Little Caesar* violated, without punishment, Section 10 of the Production Code which stated that " 'no picture shall be produced that intends to cite bigotry or hatred among

peoples of differing races, religions, or national origins” (Clarens 277).¹⁶ The story has been repeated so many times that it is a part of the American consciousness: the mafia originated in Sicily when several families came into power. Some of its members came to America to earn money illegally, giving birth to a large criminal network of Italian Americans. As with most myths, this story has seeds of truth in it. Because of the constant takeover of their land, in Italy powerful families or, more often, individuals would retaliate against the foreign powers that be and also offer their protection to other families within the province. Certainly there was crime in Italy and Italian Americans committed crime in the U.S., but the idea that American organized crime originated in Italy or that Italians were predominantly criminals was a false one. This view, however, became a reality because of the way that organized crime was portrayed in various media outlets. In March of 1951, for example, when the U.S. Senate Committee held hearings on Italian-American organized crime in New York city, “all three major networks interrupted their regularly scheduled programming to carry the proceedings live” (Repetto viiii). By pumping this view of organized crime into the public through the news and film, mainstream Americans were able to continue seeing the Italian Americans as the “others” responsible for bringing a new type of crime to America.

In truth, similar to the *padrone* system, the mafia as it is understood in the U.S. was not a European phenomenon, but an entirely American one. In *American Mafia*, Thomas Repetto argues that “when discussing mafia activity in the U.S., a more accurate label is ‘American Mafia,’ which conveys the reality that Italian-dominated gangs arose primarily out of socioeconomic conditions in this country and often worked in partnership with mobsters from other ethnic backgrounds” (x). Similarly, Francis Ianni explains that

¹⁶ This code was abolished in 1967.

organized crime is “an American way of life, since it is found nowhere but in American cities” (Ianni 28). What Ianni is insinuating is that America is the one country where organized crime is predominated by minority groups whereas in other countries it is the majority group who make up criminal networks. Conversely, in the U.S. when the topic of organized crime is raised, we typically hear of Italian-American mafia activities or African-American gang wars. Yet, organized crime in the U.S. predated both of these groups:

Powerful, well-entrenched organized crime groups were in existence long before the waves of Italians arrived. Early in the nineteenth century Ike Ryders, an ex-Mississippi riverboat gambler, controlled both Tammany Hall and the gangs of New York. After the Civil War, boss gambler Mike McDonald was the czar of Chicago politics, and at the turn of the century, Jerry Bassity was the vice lord of San Francisco. (Repetto xi)

Though the reality of organized crime is detailed in several books on the subject, the construction of Italian Americans as mafia dons has become so entrenched in our culture that it is myth rather than fact that fuels the way that crime and ethnicity are understood. This view has been so embedded in our cultural psyche that it is not uncommon to hear accusations of mafia involvement hurled from even the most unbiased individuals. For example, “even a seasoned, well-meaning journalists like Sam Donaldson lent credence to thoughtless Mafia stereotyping when he stated on the Oprah Winfrey TV show that, of course, investigative journalists would look for Mafia connections in the past of any Italian-American candidate for high office” (Candeloro 185). Similar suspicions also resounded in 2005 during the Samuel Alito hearings when Alito was accused of not handing out fair punishment to the Lucchese crime family. Because of the extent of mafia stereotyping and

the fears roused by it, in 1992 investigative reporter Jack Newfield from the *New York Post* concluded that Italian Americans “are the last ethnic group America can comfortably mock... Prejudice against Italian Americans is the most tolerated intolerance” (qtd. in Gambino 274). Eventually, when a film was in need of a criminal side character, all filmmakers had to do was add an Italian American. In films from *The Gauntlet* (1977) to *The Goonies* (1988), just the name and the accent suffices to add a criminal element to the film (Cortès 119).

Even when film versions of Italian Americans move away from the mafia stereotype, the depictions, whether of prize fighters or racial bigots, still revolve around “characters of lower class origins without much education” (Bondanella 93). This is especially true of comedic portrayals of Italian Americans such as *My Cousin Vinny* where the low-brow culture and bad taste of Italian Americans is emphasized. Similarly, Hollywood boxers are also often portrayed as being Italian Americans. Though not the first, Rocky is obviously the most popular palooka icon that comes to mind. This representation still ties Italian Americanness to violence and a lack of education. The term applied to these fighters from the earliest days of Italian-American prize-fighting, a palooka even denotes someone of lesser intelligence. A palooka, though a commonly used descriptor for an Italian-American boxer, actually “refers to an unsuccessful boxer, especially one who is both large and stupid”; other definitions are more generalized, claiming a palooka to be “any large and stupid or clumsy person, an oaf or lout” (Michael Quinon qtd. in Bondanella 93). Italian Americans, unfortunately, took to the ring at the same time that sound was introduced to film. Within the world of boxing, “there is a direct correlation between waves of immigration and the predominance of different ethnic groups” (Bondanella 95). In terms of the most numerous ethnic boxers, by 1909, it was the Irish, followed by the German and British; in 1928 it was

the Jews with the Italians not far behind in 1936; and, finally, African Americans and Mexicans took center stage by 1948. As choices for the uneducated were limited, boxing became a way that individuals could earn a lot of money with a limited amount of literacy, hence the correlation between the arrival of the immigrants and the time they entered and left the ring. As the boxer was more celebrated—though not viewed as any more intelligent or less violent—the prize-fighter became a role model within the Italian-American community as an alternative to the other representation of the typical Italian American—the criminal.

While organizations such as the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) have battled against the presentation of Italian Americans as criminals and fighters, the most caustic representations—“representations of Italian Americans as reflexive conservatives who are hostile to political, racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities” (Cannistraro and Meyer 2) have often not been countered. While as an American citizen, I have laughed during *Moonstruck*, spent an entire evening becoming a Corleone, and am anticipating the next season of the *Sopranos*, two films from Spike Lee have struck a chord in me and made me feel unsure about my attachment to my ethnic heritage—*Do the Right Thing* and *Jungle Fever*. “Virtually all Italian immigrants arrived in the United States without a consciousness about its color line,” as my participant, Joe Russo, earlier explained. In Italy there was no understanding of slavery and the closest comparison was their own experience of working in a tenement farm type setting. Once in America, however, “they quickly learned that to be white meant having the ability to avoid many forms of violence and humiliation, and assured preferential access to citizenship, property, satisfying work, livable wages, decent housing, political power, social status and a good education” (Guglielmo and Salerno 3).

While Lee's *Do the Right Thing* portrays the displacement of ethnic minorities' own feelings of inferiority upon other ethnicity's and races,¹⁷ in some ways his films have the tendency to overshadow the complexity of race issues for European ethnics. Embarrassingly, the older generations within my family did not so much discriminate against African Americans as much as they taught me to fear them. But, then again, they taught me to fear almost anything foreign, which to them meant American. My husband still finds it amusing that even at the age of sixteen, I was forbidden by my grandmother to cross the street by myself and, when I did walk to the park at the end of her street, she followed me in her car. Italian Americans, whether because of the discrimination they faced or because of their predisposition for their own culture, were taught to fear anything "other." Yet, while they certainly have not been the first or last group to hold prejudiced views about African Americans, they have often been singled out as the most racist of ethnic groups. An entire conference sponsored by the American Italian Historical Association and, later, a book, *Shades of Black and White: Conflict and Collaboration between Two Communities*, have devoted energy to figure out why this destructive label has been plastered upon Italian Americans. While the conclusions were various, there were three common inferences. First,

¹⁷ The clearest example of this is the exchange of racial slurs that takes place between camera cuts to African-American Mookie, Italian-American Pino, Latin-American Stevie, Italian-American Officer Long, and the Korean store clerk. The exchange proceeds as follows: Mookie: "Dago, wop, garlic-breath, guinea, pizza-slinging, spaghetti-bending, Vic Damone, Perry Como, Luciano Pavarotti, Sole Mio, nonsinging motherfucker." Pino: "You gold-teeth, gold-chain-wearing, fried-chicken-and-biscuit-eatin', monkey, ape, baboon, big thigh, fast-running, three-hundred-sixty-degree-basketball-dunking spade Moulan Yan." Stevie: "You slant-eyed, me-no-speak- American, own every fruit and vegetable stand in New York, Reverend Moon, Summer Olympics '88, Korean kick-boxing bastard." Officer Long: "Goya bean-eating, fifteen in a car, thirty in an apartment, pointed shoes, red-wearing, Menudo, meda- meda Puerto Rican cocksucker." Korean Store Clerk: "It's cheap, I got a good price for you, Mayor Koch, 'How I'm doing,' chocolate-egg-cream-drinking, bagel and lox, B'nai B'rith asshole" (*Do the Right Thing*).

as I have discussed, old-stock immigrants and mainstream Americans lumped Hispanics, Italians, and African Americans into one group during the great migration, and the Italians fought to distinguish themselves from these groups whom they understood to be looked down upon by American culture. Second, in their attempt to reconstruct and honor their own ethnicity, Italian Americans co-opted the struggles of African Americans by making broad comparisons to highlight their own prejudicial treatment. Finally, they also contend that the media has promoted stereotypes of Italian Americans as racists in order to create a scapegoat to take responsibility for their own racist behavior.

The last conclusion explains the uneasy feeling I had while watching both of Spike Lee's films. Even with his concern for speaking out against racial discrimination, he has somehow managed to create "Italian American characters who are nothing if not trite stereotypes" (Giunta 18). His attempts to showcase the dark side of racism, the language and the violence that many would prefer remain unspoken, unfortunately "reflect a particular pattern of racism of his own, especially his consistent depiction of Italian Americans as bigots in a number of his films" (Bondanella 84). In *Do the Right Thing*, the Italian Americans remain basically flat characters—the proud ethnic pizzeria owner, the racist, and the bridge between the two communities. However, none of the three characters are treated with the same psychological depth that the African American characters are given. Throughout the film, the block is portrayed as "an idealized black community" with "a collection of colorful characters with close personal ties, the kinds of affective bonds commonly employed to demonstrate community in the Little Italies inhabited by Hollywood Italians" (83). There are no drugs or acts of same-race violence. In fact, the only two sore spots on the community are the Korean-run convenience store and the Italian-owned pizzeria,

both of which become targets of assault throughout the film. The pizzeria, however, becomes the locus of the film's action. Sal, the owner, decorates the pizzeria with pictures of successful Italian Americans. His customers, however, feel that since the shop is patronized by African Americans exclusively, he should hang their success stories on the wall as well. Sal refuses, leading to the climax of the film—Radio Raheem's refusal to turn down his stereo in the shop. Sal decides to turn it off himself by beating it with a baseball bat, inciting a fight between the neighborhood and the pizzeria, which results in the killing of Raheem by the police and the burning of the pizzeria. While, in the end, it appears as if no one has “done the right thing.” Lee appears to support the violence or, at least, to offer it as the only option. While he begins the film with two epigraphs—one from Martin Luther King and another from Malcolm X—it is Malcolm X who wins out in the end or, perhaps, he's winning from the beginning, as the film opens with the powerful lyrics of “Fight the Power.”

Whereas in earlier films Italian Americans are represented as the oppressed or the criminal, in Lee's film they become the oppressors. In almost all interviews, Lee has maintained that his purpose as a filmmaker is to give voice to the African-American experience so that it no longer remains voiceless. While this is an ambitious and worthy goal, his portrayals of Italian Americans (not to mention women and Jews) often result in the same reductive thinking he is working against. The problem is not so much that he depicts Italian Americans as racist—certainly Italian Americans similar to other ethnic groups and mainstream Americans have perpetuated racist thinking. It is, however, his singling out of Italian Americans as *the* racists that propagate the notion that Italian Americans above all other groups are hostile towards racial minorities. In addition to *Do the Right Thing*, *Summer of Sam* and *Jungle Fever* promote the same stereotypic view of Italian Americans. Even

actors who have worked with Lee have criticized this aspect of his work. The Italian/African-American actor Giancarlo Esposito, Buggin' Out in *Do the Right Thing*, for instance, “refused to act in *Jungle Fever* despite Lee’s now-magisterial bidding—in protest against the script’s reduction of the thickness of love to sexual racism” (Ferraro 171). While the publicity garnered by Lee’s films make him the easiest figure through which to discuss the portrayal of Italian Americans as the stereotypic racists, he is certainly not to blame for the creation or maintenance of this construction.

The stereotypic portrayals of Italian Americans as poorly educated, often criminal, and typically racist can be found in all facets of the media. In Cleveland, for instance, *The Plain Dealer* was criticized when a fight broke out in Little Italy between two African American men and an Italian-American man, and the paper referred to the skirmish as a “race riot” and went on to declare in its headline: “Two Negroes beaten by crowd in Murray Hill School Fight” (qtd. in Vernosi 158). Though the Italian Americans launched a massive boycott against the paper, the damage was already done; the majority of Clevelanders had already seen the headline and not the next week’s finely printed retraction. Circulation of these stereotypes through film and the press certainly impacted the way that this ethnic group was viewed and also the way Italian Americans reacted to the assimilation process, as I will discuss in the next chapter. Trying to determine whether it was the films or the newspapers or just general word of mouth that began the stereotypes is a chicken and egg argument. What is clear, however, is that the discourses disseminated by various media were mutually reinforcing, leading to a reality of Italian Americanism that Italians had to write against.

Writing the Norm to Change the Norm: Italian Americans Breaking the Silence

Tony Soprano: “When America opened its floodgates and let us Italians in, what do you think they were doin’ it for, because they were trying to save us from poverty? No, they did it because they needed us, they needed to build their cities and dig their subways and make ’em richer. The Carnegies and the Rockefellers, they needed worker bees, and there we were. But some of us didn’t swarm around their hive and lose who we were, we wanted to stay Italian and preserve the things that meant something to us—honor, and family, and loyalty.”
 --“From Where to Eternity” (II,9).

Many believe that Italian-American pop culture icons have done little to reverse the stereotypic images of Italian Americans as criminals, buffoons, or racists. They, after all, have been responsible for some of the most popular depictions of the mafioso stereotype. Further, in comparison to the films created about them, Italian Americans had a late entry into the popular cultural arena. Approximately forty films about Italian-American gangsters were made before the first Italian-American-directed film hit theaters as “it was not until the 1970s and 1980s, in the wake of the rise of the new ethnicity, the diversity mania of multicultural chic, that Italian Americans by the score claimed the center stage of American culture as their own, especially the movie screen, where they vied with each other and with the national iconography machine” (Ferraro 4). Though, in many ways, it seems as though Italian-American directors fueled rather than reversed the “national iconography machine,” it can be seen that they are using the master tools created by the American media (the stereotypes of the uneducated, criminal male and the silent and emotional female) but are also writing against the stereotype. As is argued in “Stereotyping Ethnicity: The Ideology of Filmic Representations of Italian Americans and African Americans,” “the filmic stereotype of the Italian American as ‘gangster’ is possibly the last vestige of anti-assimilation efforts on the part of the Italian-American filmmaker” (Vigliottie et al. 223). When looking at these films chronologically, there is a clear continuum that develops, moving further and further away from the traditional notions of Italian-American criminality.

Starting with the first and most widely acclaimed film, *The Godfather*, a reversal of the idea that Italian Americans have a proclivity for criminality because of their lack of education can be seen. Though criticized by a number of Italian-American organizations for its focus on crime, *The Godfather* series has received numerous accolades.¹⁸ Problematically, on the surface, the film supports the same stereotype that has been the focus of films depicting Italian Americans since *The Black Hand* in 1906. *The Godfather*, however, diverges from these previous films in a number of ways. Crime films from 1906 to the 1970s portrayed Italian-American immigrants as being natural, uneducated criminals. Rarely a redemptive plot, the film's climax was often the capture of the villainous Italian American by the American officials. The plots had little to do with family loyalty or America's capitalistic landscape as a breeding ground for crime. Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather*, with a focus on crime to attract audiences, was successful in overturning many of these stereotypes.

By creating a European-originating *padrone* system and organized crime network and by making the immigrant responsible for the lack of employment and low wages, the American media was able to curb growing dissatisfaction with a capitalistic economy that was being questioned, especially in the years directly preceding and following the Great Depression. Puzo and Coppola, however, challenged this scapegoating by exposing the commonalities between capitalism and organized crime. While Robert Warshaw argues that this classic gangster film expresses “the part of the American psyche which rejects the

¹⁸ The first film received ten Oscar nominations and won in three categories: Best Picture, Best Actor, and Best Screenplay Adaptation from Other Material. Part II received another ten nominations and won in six categories: Best Picture, Best Director, Best Screenplay Adaptation from Other Materials, Best Supporting Actor, Best Music, and Best Art Direction. Part III received an additional six nominations but did not win a single award (Bondanella 235).

qualities and demands of modern life, which reject Americanism itself” (qtd. in Bondanella 184), Puzo and Coppola actually show that the mafia is an organization that fits the American business model. As such, mafia films become a means of outing capitalistic America; “in all three [films], the link between criminal activity and business cannot be hidden, and the higher Michael rises, the more obvious it becomes that the entire world of business resembles a criminal organization like the Mafia” (Bondanella 247). The mafia, as Coppola portrays it, is a contractual organization, based on deals and promises between men. Though not legally codified, these contracts are binding and breaches are punished. There are “working class” mafiosos who do the most treacherous work to support the family CEO or, godfather.

Within the film, the only real difference between the two systems is that with crime, rather than capitalism, the achievement of the American Dream is a possibility. Vito Corleone does not arrive in America as a crime lord with ties in Sicily. Instead, he arrives as a youngster prepared to enter the working class. From the start though, he is stripped of his identity and forced to confront prejudice. The first encounter Vito has in America is with the Irish immigration official who asks Vito his name, but mistakenly records Vito’s name as Vito Corleone (the town he is from), instead of Vito Andolini—not a rare occurrence for immigrants.¹⁹ As we learn via the flashbacks in both the first and second *Godfather*, this was only one of many events that caused Corleone to turn his back on the “American Way” or to find a way of existing within the system that did not cost him his identity or specifically, his ethnicity. As Bondanella explains, “Although [Vito Corleone] attempted to live an honest and law-abiding life in America, he found that injustice . . . and economic prejudice (in the form of a lack of opportunities for Italian-American immigrants) were almost as daunting as

¹⁹ Interestingly, unlike the film, in Puzo’s novel, Vito chooses the last name *Corleone* when he arrives in America, as it translates to “lionheart,” becoming a name for him to live up to in America.

the conditions he left behind him. He thus returned to the ‘amoral familism’ . . . and dedicated his life to maximizing the power of family or clan” (Bondanella 261). It was a discriminatory system, not a lack of education or natural inclination for crime, that led him to begin a life of crime. This point is made most clearly through the portrayal of Vito’s son, Michael. Michael is offered to us as a symbol of the Americanized second generation. Instead of being involved in the “family business,” he is an American soldier, who has separated himself geographically as well as ethnically from the rest of his family. He is to be taken as a symbol of the supposed American Dream—he is a successful military man set to marry an Anglo woman. He is not working class or uneducated. Yet, his maintenance of this success is thwarted by another symbolic character, an American police chief who attempts to enable the assassination of Vito Corleone. The police chief, as a representation of American justice, teaches Michael that justice, as it is carried out in America, is, in itself, corrupt, causing Michael to turn away from the Americanization process and take over the family business.

From the beginning, Coppola forces viewers to see the American justice system as a flawed one. When the film opens, there is an immigrant sitting in the darkness, telling a story to the camera. He explains to the audience that he “believe[s] in America” and even “raised [his] daughter in the American fashion” (*The Godfather*). Following this statement, though, he begins to tell the story of what happened to his daughter; she found an American boyfriend who, along with another friend, forced her to drink whiskey and then “they tried to take advantage of her. She resisted. So they beat her like an animal.” Not only can this story be taken as symbolizing the Italian-Americans’ resistance to assimilation, but, as the story continues, we learn that the father “went to the police like a good American,” but, though the

boys were sentenced to three years, they never served a day of prison time because their sentences were suspended. Frustrated by this failure of justice, the father explains: “I stood in the courtroom like a fool and those two bastards, they smiled at me. Then I said to my wife, ‘For justice, we must go to Don Corleone.’” From the beginning of the film, we are shown that Vito Corleone is a just man, not because he picks up where the system fails, but because he resists the father’s urging to murder the two boys, explaining “that is not justice. Your daughter is still alive.”

Because Coppola and Puzo portray characters such as Vito and Michael reacting to forces that are working against their sense of justice, morality, and their efforts towards social mobility, both characters become heroes, defending their families from corrupt American systems of capitalism and justice. Whereas previous mafia films just gave us the criminalized Italian, taking what was not legally his, “not only did Puzo produce Sicilian family values as the secret to truly effective organized crime, but he revealed a monomaniacal capitalist conspiracy” where “Sicilians were, all of a sudden, not part of an embarrassing blue-collar morass, an industrial underbelly losing its significance, but instead the capitalist nation’s underground brain trust, and a potential mirror upon American corporate capitalism’s requisite brutality” (Ferraro 109). Throughout the film, we are shown that they “operate more efficiently, swiftly, and in accordance with their sense of justice than do all the legal and police authority” (Messenger 151). Rather than being portrayed as ignorant, the Corleones are often sought out by the most powerful of mainstream Americans—politicians, businessmen, etc.—for mental, physical, and financial aid. Instead of seeking out crime because of a failure on their part, the Corleones become criminals because, as Coppola and Puzo have been able to convince their audience, the American

systems of justice and capitalism have failed its citizens, leaving them with no place to turn. *The Godfather* offers to immigrants and individuals a way in which the American Dream is obtainable, and though it is through brute force and street wisdom, it is one way that “an immigrant can retain ethnic identity and yet succeed in America beyond belief in an open society without becoming ‘open’ him or herself” (174).

Obviously, this “crime does pay” mentality is problematic, and “understandably, this information also made Italian Americans nervous,” leading to some “very hyperbolic editorials in the Italian-American newspaper *Il progresso*” (Bondanella 259). If an Italian American portrayed Italian Americans as criminals, how would mainstream Americans stop viewing them as such? This fear was justifiable, especially as Coppola, knowingly or not, had created a role model for Italian-American children. According to Messenger, Michael Imperioli, who plays Christopher Molisanti in the hit series the *Sopranos* said in an interview, “When we where kids, *The Godfather* was hero worship to us and made us proud to be Italian. We had pride in these characters. We didn’t feel revulsion for them” (Imperioli qtd. in Messenger 255). Similarly, I vividly remember watching this film with my cousin in elementary school, both of us hoping that someday we would find out that our family had some tie into the mafia; it didn’t. Though we found this disappointing, the movie also made us think of our family in a different way. Having our grandparents and great-grandparents sharing one small bungalow with only two of the four speaking any English at all, made us feel proud instead of embarrassed. At least then people might think that we were all mobbed up, which, according to the film, did not seem like a bad label. Though certainly the stereotype was not all in all a positive one to promote, Coppola and Puzo were able to turn the entirely negative view of Italians as natural criminals into an understandable choice made

in order to maintain traditional Sicilian values while at the same time enmeshing them with American values.

Later filmmakers tried to deal with the issues that *The Godfather* brought to the forefront in the Italian-American media: the first being that it was still a depiction of Italian Americans as criminals and the second that crime was being glorified as the only way out of blue-collar gridlock. Dealing with the former, director Brian De Palma recreated the original *Scarface*, replacing the location (Little Italy) and the ethnic characterization of the gangsters (Italian American) with a story about crime in Miami and a ring led by Cuban Americans. As in *The Godfather*, Tony Montana's crimes are not portrayed as senseless acts of brutality. Though his crimes are not justified, the audience is at least able to understand Tony's choices. More than in *The Godfather*, however, we are also shown how consumerism and criminality go hand in hand. Much of Tony's drive to commit crime is fueled by his desire for possessions and, especially, his desire for an Anglo woman who desires possessions. By shifting the focus from the Italian-American criminal to the Cuban-American criminal, De Palma was able to show how this drive is not tied to a specific ethnicity, but is an almost natural reaction to consumerist society in which all participants are not given equal opportunity to gain the means of consumption.

Martin Scorsese, on the other hand, tried to deal with the latter issue—the glorification of crime. In both *Goodfellas* and *Casino*, Scorsese sets about to attack a number of myths about mobsters in general and Italian-American Wise Guys in particular. As Carlos Clarens summarizes, these myths include: the idea that “there is a code of honor among thieves, and that this perfectly self-contained (and self-sustaining) world rarely touches the man in the street” (qtd. in Bondanella 272). Turning away from these myths, in *Goodfellas*,

Coppola deglorifies mob life by showing that mobsters are “simply working-class guys unafraid to break any codes of conduct in order to make money, pure and simple” (279). Scorsese’s “goodfellas” don’t live in private villas, are not surrounded by bodyguards, and their wives are not entirely submissive (Henry’s wife even pulls a gun on him when she suspects him of having an affair). Instead, these wise guys’ achievements are small and summarized well by Henry at the start of the film: “They double parked in front of a hydrant and nobody gave them a ticket. In the summer, when they played cards all night, nobody ever called the cops” (*Goodfellas*). The gangster’s achievement, according to the film, is the respect of the neighborhood and a middle-class lifestyle. Additionally, similar to DePalma’s criminals, the gangsters gaining this respect are not all of Italian descent. Though the majority certainly bear Italian names, there are also Irish, German, Russian, and even Mormon criminals in Scorsese’s underworld.

In addition to diversity within organized crime, Italian-American organizations have called for more diverse representations of Italian Americans. While Robert DeNiro, in *A Bronx Tale*, sticks with stereotypical figures—the blue-collar American Dreamer and the gangster, he at least offers the blue-collar figure as worthy of just as much respect, if not more than the gangster. In between these two characters is Calogero, the son of a hard-working bus driver, Lorenzo, and neighbor to a mafioso figure, Sonny. In the film, DeNiro highlights the difficulties of growing up in an ethnic neighborhood in the 1960s as the plot of the film revolves around Lorenzo’s struggle to keep Calogoro from seeing Sonny as a role model. Again, the mafia is not glorified as it is in *The Godfather*. Sonny is respected in the Bronx, but his power is limited. He gets better tickets to watch the Yankees and prize fights. He gets free vegetables and other goods sold in the neighborhood, but he is not all-powerful

or excessively wealthy. While it seems as though the film will proceed with two stereotypes battling it out for one young boy, neither man completely lives up to the stereotype he has been assigned. At first, it seems that Lorenzo is the ideal father and role model: he “argues for the courage and dignity of the working man, telling his son that the real heroes of the neighborhood are the working stiffs who get up every morning to support their wives and children, and that people feel no love for Sonny—only fear” (54). At the same time, however, he is also a bigot who shudders when Calogero is getting ready for a date with an African-American woman. On the other hand, while Sonny is a criminal, he keeps Calogero from getting into fights and even keeps him from owning a gun. Unlike Lorenzo, Sonny supports Calogero’s choice to date an African-American girl, explaining that when you feel like it is love, you have to go for it. As Bondanella concludes: “In short, DeNiro is comfortable depicting Hollywood Italian characters in stereotypical fashion because the direction of the whole film cuts against such stereotypical ideas about Italian Americans and about stereotypes in general. Calogero rejects the Mafia and ultimately grows up, preferring his father’s values to those he admired as an immature youth” (57).

Obviously, as the relationship between Calogero and his African-American girlfriend, Jane, is one of the central issues of the film, DeNiro does not sidestep the racial issues in the Bronx during the 1960s. There are several scenes where African Americans enter the Italian neighborhood, and racial slurs and fistfights emerge. Yet, he also shows that this is not a one-sided issue. When Calogero attempts to walk Jane home, he receives the same treatment in her neighborhood. Racial tension mounts when Jane’s brother and several of his friends throw eggs at the Little Italy hangout and end up getting beat up. Though Calogero tries to help her brother, Jane’s brother tells her that he is the one responsible for beating him up.

While her brother eventually tells the truth, it's a bit too late. In retaliation for their earlier attack, several of Calogero's friends die trying to throw molotov cocktails into an African-American hangout while Calogero and Jane reconcile. The fire is never really put out, and the invisible, but powerful boundaries between the two neighborhoods become ever stronger. Unlike *Do the Right Thing* or *Jungle Fever*, however, the audience is not left with a pessimistic view of race relations, nor are we given a rosy one. While there is no scene where we see the two races coming together, what we do understand is that for Jane and Calogero the color line is a boundary they have been raised to see, but they don't understand it nor work towards maintaining it.

Though Italian-American directors have not diminished the stereotype of the Italian-American criminal, they have used the stereotype to raise several issues about the immigrant's status in America, especially the Italian-American immigrant's place in American culture. They have used this trope to question the tenets of the American Dream, challenge capitalism, discuss issues of race, and offer alternative role models for Italian Americans. Though probably the most highly criticized depiction of Italian Americans by Italian Americans, no film has worked to change the view of the stereotypic Italian-American mobster as has David Chase's television series, *The Sopranos*. In the series, Chase actually approaches Italian-American culture with a considerable depth. In *The Sopranos* Chase, in fact, creates his own world where Italian Americanism is the norm by which everything else is measured. Firstly, Italian Americans do not appear solely as mobsters; they actually occupy every profession that appears in the series: priest, contractor, psychiatrist, FBI agent, butcher, painter, tennis coach, police officer, detective, hospital workers, doctor, fast food worker, plumber, financial advisor, restaurant owner, car salesperson, interior decorator,

hardware store owner, principal, university fundraisers, nightclub owners, professor, art dealer, funeral home director, dentist, real estate agent, teacher, union leader, and any other career that works its way into an hour-long episode is typically filled by an Italian American.²⁰ While most of the action revolves around mafia-related activities, some of the plot lines have nothing at all to do with crime. As people tune in to learn if Carmella is going to divorce Tony, if Meadow is going to find her calling, and if Anthony Jr. is going to turn out to be a delinquent, it is clear that Chase has been able to fuse a mafia story with a more traditional soap opera/sit-com.

Because of the plot lines, Chase is also able to confront a stereotype often promoted in gangster films: the silent, emotional Italian-American woman. Italian-American gangster films are often not only patriarchal, but also verge on misogyny. Typically women play one of two roles: the passive wife locked out of the husband's business, who without question accepts his profession because of the money it yields and, in return, bears his children; or the *goomar*, the also passive mistress to a Mafia don, who is financially supported by the mobster in return for fulfilling his sexual desires. As evidenced by film and even scholarly representations of Italian Americans (Graff even makes this claim in *The Literacy Myth*), within the U.S., there is a tacit acceptance that Italian culture is patriarchal; there is, however, much evidence to the contrary. In Southern Italy, husband and wife toiled alongside one another, and though the wife/children often bore the responsibilities of the domestic sphere, women viewed these activities as imbuing them with certain powers. As Barizini explains, in Italy "men run the country but women run men. Italy is, in reality, a crypto-matriarchy" (202). Though most of the work women engage in is the behind-the-scenes work pertaining

²⁰ To see a complete listing of all of the characters, professions, and titles on *The Sopranos*, see Bondanello 300-02.

to home and family, “Italian women are aware of their importance. They know that without them the whole structure would collapse like a house of cards within a few hours” (203). Unlike the historical view of the domestic sphere in America, in Italy, as has already been pointed out, the home/family is viewed as the source of power and all decisions rest on its well-being. As such, the mother rises to become a symbol of not only virtue, but also of well-deserved respect.²¹

Though *The Sopranos* still includes stock female characters such as the strippers and the *goomar*, the series is also committed to showing that Italian-American women do not hesitate to evoke their own powers within and outside of the home. Just a cursory description of the main female characters and their actions provides evidence that Chase is working against this common stereotype.²² Tony’s mother, Livia, for instance, is portrayed as overbearing to both her husband and her sons, getting involved in the “family business” and causing the action of the series’ opening season by driving her son into therapy. Manipulative and always scheming, Livia even goes so far as plotting to have her son murdered when he commits her to a nursing home—a choice seen as betraying familial responsibilities and irrevocably disrespecting a mother in Italian culture. Tony often blames his failed relationship with his mother on another powerful female character, his sister Janice. Unlike most female, Italian-American characters, Janice did not remain within the home until the time of her marriage. Instead, she joined an ashram in L.A. and wandered around Europe

²¹ Barizini, for instance, studied gendered language in Italy and found that the mother is the central figure of the culture. When the men were in moments of crisis, for example, they cried out for “mama” in traditional phrases such as *Mama Mia!* (my mother). The same if not more churches in Italy are actually named for Mary as are for Jesus and Mary is represented much differently in their culture. Rather than being portrayed as the silent, virtuous woman, Mary is instead portrayed as being quite active. For instance, when asked why so many Italians have shrines to Mary in their yard, Maria Romanelli explained: “Because if you want something, you pray to Mary and she will tell her son, Jesus, what to do for you and he will listen.”

before returning to Jersey. Janice is neither a silent wife nor is she outside of the family business. Within the six seasons of the show, Janice marries three times. After divorcing her first husband, Janice marries a member of the mafia family, who she demeans for not claiming more earnings from Tony and eventually kills when he punches her during a domestic squabble. Though much less violent, Tony's wife Carmela is not entirely passive either. Though she is at times found praying for the salvation of her husband's soul because of his extramarital sexual liaisons and his violent crimes, she can also be found fantasizing about the priest, kissing an interior-decorator in the bathroom, and engaging in a romantic (though not physical) affair with one of Tony's associates. While she often veers close to becoming the stereotypic silent and supportive wife who is in it for financial security, she just as often questions Tony's choices, reminds him that he will suffer in the afterlife, threatens him with divorce, and struggles to find economic independence. Though these three women are dependent upon men for their economic survival, Chase also gives us representations of Italian-American women who are intelligent, self-sufficient, and powerful. Dr. Melfi, Tony's psychologist, and Meadow, his daughter, are but two of a number of examples. The series even includes a female Mafia boss, Annalisa. Though certainly the characterizations of women in the show are far from ideal, they are neither one-dimensional nor passive. As Regina Barreca explains,

courageous enough to braid together the domestic and the sexual, the educated and the nurturing, the machiavellian and the maternal, the vindictive and the compassionate, the good and the evil, Chase clears new ground for the

²² Even Tony recognizes that much of the power within the family resides within the women, as he explains to his mother: "everybody thought Dad was the ruthless one but I got to hand it to you, Ma. If you'd been born after these feminists, you would've been the real gangster" ("46 Long").

women. Neither madonnas nor whores (even the whores are not your ordinary whores—they too have complicated inner lives), the female characters in *The Sopranos* make life difficult for their men—and for their viewers, even those of us who identify with them. (36)

Though Chase's representations of Italian-American men and women in a myriad of roles are steps in the right direction, the show is not without deserved criticism. Certainly, groups such as NIAF's cause for complaint about the show is understandable. Not only, once again, is an Italian American playing the role of gangster, but also Tony and his friends are often characterized as having bad taste and a very low-brow sense of culture given their lower-class roots. It's common to see the women dressed from head to toe in hot pink or wearing too much make-up; it's also common that the male characters are overweight and wearing the same running suit, spouting lines from gangster movies. Similarly, many of the characters are portrayed as trying to exhibit an education they simply do not have. Though Tony often brags that he has one and a half semesters of college under his belt, he is often the butt of a joke, as we the audience are made to feel as though we are intellectually superior to him and several other characters. For example, Christopher describes "'dysentery among the ranks' rather than dissension" (qtd. in Bondanello 305). Anthony, Jr. mixes anarchists up with "antichrists" and, later, in speaking of his new-found belief that God does not exist, attributes the idea to Nitch, not Nietzsche (I,8), and Tony confuses "indigenous" with "indigent" people (IV, 4) (Bondanella 305). Chase makes similar jabs at the education of the main characters throughout all of the seasons of the *Sopranos*.

Because the characters committing these linguistic gaffs are all Italian American, there have been complaints that the show promotes the stereotype that Italian Americans are

uneducated and illiterate. Yet, these mistakes seem to highlight a difference in class rather than represent an ethnic marker. Since Tony, his family, and most of his friends have risen to the upper-middle class quickly and without the amount of education such mobility now requires, they often find themselves trying to fit into social situations where their limited education outs their class status. As this chapter has hopefully shown, class is indicated by more than the amount on one's paycheck or by more than what one does for a living. Class is tied into ethnicity, literacy, taste, geography, and the myriad of attitudes members of society hold about these disparate groups. Chase makes a concerted effort to show that his portrayal of Tony, his family, and the rest of the gangsters is emphasizing the connection between class and education. For instance, Tony's neighbors, the Cusamonos are an upper-middle class, Italian-American couple. The husband is a doctor and the wife is a homemaker. What separates them from Tony and Carmella is their attitude about Italian Americans of a lower class. As Bondanella argues, "The Cusamanos . . . basically think Tony is gauche, someone to be excluded from a refined and educated inner circle of friends" (303). Throughout the show, we see conflicts arise between the two neighbors. For instance, the Cusamanos do not invite the Sopranos to dinner parties, Mrs. Cusamano ignores Carmella's repeated request that she help get Meadow a letter of recommendation for college, and the Cusamanos often are seen mocking the Sopranos to other neighbors and friends. Yet, this behavior is not one-sided. For Tony, the issue of education *is* an ethnic one. He feels that by becoming educated and extending their circle of friends beyond the circle of Italian Americans, the Cusamanos have become "'Wonderbread Wops,' 'Mayonnaises,' or 'Meddigan' (the Italian American pronunciation of 'Americans')—so assimilated that they have lost the bedrock Italian values of honor, family, and loyalty" (303). Further, while we often think that the joke is on the

Sopranos, sometimes the characters surprise us. No one would expect Tony of being capable of offering a Freudian reading of his relationship with his mother, but he does. Nor would we expect a full episode to be dedicated to the goons from the corner fighting with Native American activists about the celebration of Columbus Day or to Carmella starting a classic film-of-the-week club, but these surprises abound throughout the six seasons, reminding us not to stereotype or underestimate the complexity of the characters Chase provides for us.

Though criticized for promoting stereotypic versions of Italian Americans, Chase spends much time during the show dealing specifically with this issue. For example, in one episode, Dr. Melfi, Tony's psychologist, is at a dinner party with fellow physicians. A woman at the party starts talking about china and then gets on the subject of Italian-American glass, laughingly discussing the gaudiness of Italian Americans and the way this shows through in their dishes. Of course, no one at the table suspects that Melfi, even with her last name, is Italian American, and we watch as she uncomfortably listens to the group mock her culture. Eventually, she reveals that she likes Italian glass because she is Italian American and excuses herself to the restroom while the dinner party guests look at one another in shock. Throughout the six seasons of the show, there are numerous episodes where stereotypes about Italian Americans are dealt with at length and are often debunked. Hence, while Chase does use mob violence to sell the show, he also uses this trope to explore the complexities of class and ethnicity.

As singers, actors, and directors, Italian Americans have successfully entered the cultural mainstream and have begun unraveling some of the stereotypes about their ethnicity. Italian-American writers, on the other hand, still face difficulty publishing their works, which are often labeled "Ethnic literature," though their works often deal with the universal theme

of identity construction. As Helen Barolini explains, “Minority or ethnic or exotic writers explore a fundamental theme: how to create oneself anew in an alien world. It is a restatement of the dialectics of identity. And that is a quest that speaks to everyone” (39). While this may be a universal theme, it appears that Italian-American writers have not been able to express the universality of their writing to publishers. When Gay Telese “surveyed the American intellectual landscape [he] found very few writers of this particular heritage, and he wondered why this was the case. Was it merely that most Italians who came to America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had been laborers who could not read and write?” (Ciongoli and Parini xiii). Though Talese partly sarcastically, offers the immigrants’ illiteracy as a reason for this silence, there are, in fact, two other factors acting as boundaries for Italian-American writers. First, as is argued throughout *The Dream Book*, it seems that Italian Americans suffer from a nomenclature contingency, meaning that the vowel at the end of their name either keeps them from being published or adds an expectation that their writing will focus on their ethnicity (34). As Dorothy Bryant explains:

Calvetti is my maiden name, and the childhood of Miss Giardino is my mother’s childhood: I had another Italian name (Ungaretti in a first marriage) after that one. Under neither of those names was I accepted as an artist. . . . I wonder if one of the reasons so many Latin women’s “identity” is veiled by a WASP name is the necessity of escaping from everything else that may be imposed upon a woman along with an Italian name. (qtd. in Barolini 34)

While their names denote their ethnicity and result in their placement in a separate genre of literature, their ethnicity, not as visible or historically marked by oppression as other ethnicities/races, often disqualifies them for inclusion in multicultural readers, which tend to

focus on the writings of Hispanic-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Native-American men and women. Within academia, the whiteness of European ethnics is an established norm. Sensing the gravity of these issues, academics such as Helen Barolini and Mary Jo Bona have set out to collect works by Italian-American women in order to create a forum where we can begin to understand what universal and individual characteristics their writing demonstrates.

Becoming White or Choosing Dark?

As the writings of more and more Italian Americans begin to enter academic conversations, we are beginning to unravel what Ferraro calls “the intellectual community’s best kept secrets”—Italian-American cultural production (10). After reviewing how stereotypes of Italian Americans were created and rebutted, I return to my original question: how did Italian Americans become white? Did they in fact ever shake their “otherness”? The answer lies somewhere between “yes” and “no.” While scholars such as Mary Waters have argued, as she does in her book *Ethnic Options*, that “feeling Italian is now a chosen identity” (Ferraro 203), I find myself both agreeing and disagreeing. Certainly in a country where fewer and fewer European immigrants are arriving every year, individuals are moving further and further away from the language and the values of their first-generation ancestors. Yet, there are others for whom ethnic identity is not a choice. As Lopreato argues, “Half a century after the door was slammed shut and the massive waves of European immigration ended, American society still exhibits a great diversity of peoples and traditions that seems to defy those Americanizing forces once expected to produce the great American ‘melting pot’” (9). Growing up as I did in a house where Italian was as common as English, “real” Roman Catholic masses were in Italian, pasta was a staple at every meal, families still lived all under

one roof, canning peppers and sauce was a sign of a change in seasons, work was inherently tied to the factory, and gardens filled every small patch of land, “feeling Italian” was not a choice. “Feeling Italian” was not even part of my consciousness until I left my family for several years; it was just part of my identity. I never felt as though I needed to claim my ethnicity. In an urban setting like Cleveland, people can still tell who is Italian, who is Polish, who is Irish though the neighborhoods have spread out and ethnics have trickled into the suburbs. For instance, you can imagine my surprise when my new father-in-law and I met, and he looked at me and said: “I didn’t know your people came up past Murray Hill.” Outside of urban industrial strongholds, people still recognize Italian Americans’ “otherness.” Because of my dark hair and eyes and olive skin, I have never once met someone without them inquiring what I am. So while, for some, ethnicity may just be symbolic—a t-shirt that says “kiss me I’m Irish” or great-grandma’s sauce recipe—for others in this country, it is a reality.

Certainly discriminatory attitudes about Italian Americans have faded, though reviewing the website of NIAF shows that these attitudes do persist. There are laws and regulations in place to make this less and less the case. For instance, “few people know that since the 1970s, Italian Americans had been an Affirmative Action category in the City University of New York because the then Chancellor Robert Kibbee, had been convinced that the under-representation of Italian Americans on the faculty requires redress” (Krause 110). Discrimination cases against Italian Americans have grown rare as aversion to their ethnicity has been replaced, unfortunately, by aversion to a new group of immigrants. Cyclically, each group of immigrants who have come to America and entered the working class has been the victim of some kind of ethnic slur and, often, discrimination. The Irish,

then the Jewish, then the Italians, and, now, Hispanics have traversed a similar path, though the epitaphs and the forms of discrimination they faced and/or face have changed. When discussing the literacy practices of these groups or the need of these groups for a certain type of literacy, therefore, it is important to understand where they have come from and what has shaped the way that they view English literacy. While it has taken several years of study for the definition of literacy to evolve from the mere act of reading to an act that is culturally informed and politically charged, immigrants, often unconsciously, have always understood this about literacy.

In the case of Italian Americans, as I will show in the next chapter, what keeps them from being easily identified as white is not oppressive actions on the part of mainstream Americans, though this certainly played a role during the early years of immigration. What keeps Italian Americans from being considered white in the same way as an Anglo-Saxon-Protestant is their maintenance of their own value system and language and their resistance to Americanization. Within the U.S., as Ferraro argues, Italian Americans have participated in a dialectic of identity. Being Italian American does not mean the same thing as being Italian because popular culture representations and Italian-American representations of themselves eventually “moved closer together, to the point where the feelings Italian Americans have for themselves, the feelings non-Italians have for Italian Americans, and the feelings they both have for the role of Italianness in America intertwine and interpenetrate: almost—but not quite!—into one” (Ferraro 5). As I have shown, while many markers of Italianness that began with negative stereotypes of Italian immigrants in the 1900s have been reinforced by Italian Americans, they have also been reinvented so that Italian Americanness cannot be reduced to a stereotype. Because of the conversations occurring on the screen, in the newspapers, and

between neighborhoods, “eventually what emerged was a sub-culture neither purely American nor purely Italian” (Parenti 32).

While this evolution is easy to see as it plays out on the silver screen, what cannot be lost is the ways that this evolution took place in neighborhoods because of the choices the immigrants made, especially when it comes to literacy. Italian Americans, as a group and individually, chose to live in the borderlands—linguistically, mentally, and physically.²³ In their balancing act between the struggle and the tools, as Cushman puts it, similar to the African Americans she studied, they used the literacy skills they needed to in order to gain some of the rewards of whiteness. At the same time, they did not completely assimilate, but held onto their own value systems and their own language because, as one participant explains, “I did not like the culture or the mentality of the American way” (Ruggiero). Therefore, before we can talk about the literacy skills working-class members lack, need, are not offered or desired, we must first understand the literacy choices that they make and how those choices can help compositionists as we try to teach literacy skills without trying to enforce the politics or colonization that accompanies those skills.

²³ “Borderlands” is a term borrowed from Gloria Anzaldúa’s work, *Borderlands/La Frontera*. The idea is summarized best in her poem “Borderlands”: “To live in the Borderlands means to/ put *chile* in the borscht/ eat whole wheat *tortillas*/speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;/be stopped by *la migra* at the border check points” (lns. 19-23). To live in the Borderlands means/ the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off/your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart/pound you pinch you roll you out/ smelling like white bread but dead;/To survive in the Borderlands/you must live *sin fronteras*/ be a crossroads” (lns. 36-43).

Films Depicting Italian Americans as Criminals²⁴

<i>The Black Hand</i> (1906)	<i>The Godfather</i> (1972)
<i>The Black Hand</i> (1913)	<i>Mean Streets</i> (1973)
<i>The Last of the Mafia</i> (1915)	<i>The Don is Dead</i> (1973)
<i>Poor Little Peppina</i> (1916)	<i>The Godfather II</i> (1974)
<i>Fair Lady</i> (1922)	<i>Crazy Joe</i> (1974)
<i>Underworld</i> (1927)	<i>Mr. Majestyk</i> (1974)
<i>The Racket</i> (1928)	<i>Capone</i> (1975)
<i>Chicago After Midnight</i> (1928)	<i>Silver Bears</i> (1978)
<i>The Heart of Broadway</i> (1928)	<i>Gloria</i> (1980)
<i>Dressed to Kill</i> (1928)	<i>Absence of Malice</i> (1981)
<i>Little Caesar</i> (1930)	<i>The Cotton Club</i> (1984)
<i>Born Reckless</i> (1930)	<i>The Pope of Greenwich Village</i> (1984)
<i>Doorway to Hell</i> (1930)	<i>Code of Honor</i> (1985)
<i>The Public Enemy</i> (1931)	<i>Prizzi's Honor</i> (1985)
<i>Night Ride</i> (1931)	<i>Wise Guys</i> (1986)
<i>Scarface</i> (1932)	<i>Heat</i> (1987)
<i>Marked Woman</i> (1937)	<i>The Untouchables</i> (1987)
<i>A Slight Case of Murder</i> (1938)	<i>Married to the Mob</i> (1988),
<i>Manhattan Merry-Go-Round</i> (1938)	<i>The Godfather III</i> (1990)
<i>The Blue Orchid</i> (1940)	<i>The Freshman</i> (1990)
<i>Lady of the Lake</i> (1946)	<i>Goodfellas</i> (1990)
<i>Kiss of Death</i> (1947)	<i>My Blue Heaven</i> (1990)
<i>T-Men</i> (1947)	<i>A Bronx Tale</i> (1993)
<i>Cry of the City</i> (1948)	<i>Casino</i> (1995)
<i>Force of Evil</i> (1948)	<i>Donnie Brasco</i> (1997)
<i>Key Largo</i> (1948)	<i>Mafia!</i> (1998)
<i>Knock on Any Door</i> (1949)	<i>Mickey Blue Eyes</i> (1999)
<i>Black Hand</i> (1950)	<i>Analyze This</i> (1999)
<i>Detective Story</i> (1951)	<i>Corky Romano</i> (2001)
<i>The Big Heat</i> (1953)	<i>Analyze That</i> (2002)
<i>The Long Wait</i> (1954)	<i>10th and Wolf</i> (2006)
<i>The Brothers Rico</i> (1957)	
<i>Inside the Mafia</i> (1959)	
<i>Some Like It Hot</i> (1959)	
<i>Pay or Die</i> (1960)	
<i>The Young Savages</i> (1961)	
<i>The Brotherhood</i> (1968)	

²⁴ This list is not meant to be comprehensive. These are films that I am familiar with. I have chosen not to include films in which Italian-American criminal activity is a sub-plot.

Chapter 4: The Struggle and the Immigrant's Tools

The Little Italian Immigrant A Cinquain

A bird
In covered cage,
With soul a-throb with art—
Remove the language handicap,
He sings.

Nanno C. Ring
Murray Hill School, Cleveland, Ohio¹

“O.k., o.k., nonna, say ‘automobile.’”

“Auto-mo-be-lay.”

“No, no, no. Like this—‘AUTO-MO-BEAL.’”

It was a ritual game we played in the car. I would look around and find a word and try to make my grandmother repeat it while my grandfather drove along in silence, chuckling once in awhile. This trip we were headed to Jersey so I could meet the rest of *la mia famiglia*. As usual, the game ended abruptly.

“*Marona*,” her favorite Italian grumble rolled off her tongue with ease. “Say dis, say dat,” she sang, mimicking my high-pitched voice. “You makea me *pazzo*.”

This was my cue to shut up and read, which I did, exhaling loudly.

Now I realize I must have been her worst nightmare—a nine-year-old who thought she was smarter and in many ways better than her elder simply because she could pronounce English words with precision. I hadn’t gone through a war, ridden in steerage, struggled to make ends meet, but the words made me feel wise, and her inability to pronounce them made me uncomfortable. While I could simply blame my error in judgment on naiveté, it was

¹ This poem was printed in *The English Journal* 16.10 (DEC 1927), 813.

actually a response, an embarrassment I learned from the culture around me. I believed in the stigma of illiteracy, and I also believed that literacy was the cure-all; I was not alone.

While in the last chapter I explored the representations of the illiterate Italian immigrant, in this chapter I focus on solutions to the real and imagined crises—those imposed by mainstream Americans and the tools developed by my participants. In order to highlight the connections and disconnections between formal literacy training and the experiential literacy learning my participants engaged in, I have intertwined these two narratives. First, in this introduction, I explore the general implications underlying literacy campaigns for immigrants/members of the working class and explain the argumentative framework for the chapter. I then demonstrate the ways literacy campaigns based on the literacy myth conflict with my participants' value systems and, specifically, the quality of life standards they hold. In the third section, I provide concrete examples of the ways that formal literacy programs in Cleveland were not just aiming to teach English, but also to impart American values to the newly arrived, causing my participants to reject these outlets. In order to understand the limited success of these educational programs, in the fourth section I explore the development of Little Italy and the types of literacies required and developed within the neighborhood. By doing so, I show that while they are stigmatized as being illiterate, my participants are actually sophisticated language users, accepting new literacies as they deem necessary and, in many ways, creating their own English-language literacy. I discuss the literate strategies they developed on their own in order to meet certain goals that we typically assume require literacy: employment, driver's licenses, and citizenship. Finally, I show that it was those who received the most formal education who were most apt to continue to try to live the literacy myth and, ironically, who faced the greatest struggles in the

United States. Taken collectively, these sections illustrate that my participants' rejection of formal education and their "supposed" illiteracy are not signals that they are functioning under false consciousness or that they have retreated into a realm of passive silence. Instead, this chapter highlights the way that their literacy choices are intentional—a means of resisting cultural and structural assimilation.

Though literacy scholars have addressed the hegemonizing forces at work within American boarding schools, the value of assimilation has often been echoed by educators without much consideration of the psychological impact it has on the immigrant or the impact it has upon America, a country founded on the ideal of cultural pluralism. Instead, immigrants, as soon as they arrive on American shores, are pushed to adopt a new language and, with it, a new value system. As the 1911 *Guide for the Immigrant Italian in the United States of America* explained to the newly arrived, "An Italian, like any other foreigner, is appreciated when he lives the American social life. Until then he counts for nothing. Join American clubs; read American papers. Try to adapt yourself to the manners, and customs, and habits of the American people" (Carr 71). Coinciding, then, with the great migration of the Italians were endless calls for the Americanization of the immigrant. According to these calls, literacy was the benchmark of assimilation. For instance, according to the guide:

Patience and perseverance will enable you to make rapid progress in this strange tongue that seems so difficult, and when you can do without an interpreter, and do not have to depend upon your children to explain your wants, you will be like a dumb man who has suddenly been given the gift of speech. You will then be on the level of equality with the native. (15)

This perpetuation of the literacy myth wasn't just a word of mouth phenomenon but was an idea advanced by the institutions and people aiming to help the immigrants such as founders of settlement houses and social workers. The literacy myth was so prevalent in these circles that in the 1904 issue of *Charities*, Robert Ward contends that:

no argument is necessary to convince any American that the hope of this country lies in the assimilation of our foreign-born population. We want these aliens to become Americans with us; to love and to preserve our institutions; to speak our language; to live, so far as possible, up to American standards of living; to contribute to the well-being of society. But this most necessary process of assimilation, which is of such vital importance to national unity, is becoming increasingly difficult every day because of the wide gulf which separates the majority of our latest immigrants from ourselves; and furthermore, and very largely, because so many of our immigrants are illiterate. (140-1)

The literacy myth here is complicated by nationalism. The Italian Americans were viewed with disdain because of their *supposed* illiteracy. While the majority of the immigrants could read and write, they could not do so in English which threatened the “national unity” Ward and others argue is essential to the preservation of American institutions. It wasn't that they were illiterate; it was that their literacy was not a welcomed addition to American culture. Continuing into the 1970s, the resistance of Italian Americans posed a challenge to nationalism as they “won notoriety (and the wrath of social workers) because they seldom permitted their children to obtain adequate schooling” (Nelli 98).

Schooling and literacy, it was believed, would raise the standard of living among the immigrants, keep them from becoming criminals, and meld them into more capable American citizens. As Graff argues in *Legacies of Literacy*, “Training in literacy and its social, cultural, and economic concomitants was assumed to be the most effective path to the reformation of the immigrants and their children. Assimilation was the goal, and education, in one form or another, was the most common and valued approach” (371). Literacy, as scholars have continued to discover, however, is not a neutral skill, and though it may be promoted as a cure-all for the challenges faced by immigrants or members of the working class, the consequences of literacy can be as damaging as beneficial.

As an educator and thereby a literacy advocate, I do not mean to debunk the value of literacy. Certainly, in accordance with Graff’s argument in *The Literacy Myth*, I agree that literacy can hasten social mobility to an extent,² especially in an information economy. Perhaps with a greater value placed on education, Italian Americans would not, as of 1970, still have made up “more than 50 percent of the labor force in the garment industry in New York City” (Lopreato 143), and more than 7% of Italian Americans over 25 years of age would have graduated from college by the 1970 census (Veronesi 310). Yet, as an educator and a literacy advocate, I also must work to remain aware of the sociocultural ramifications of literacy. Throughout his work, Kaestle reminds literacy scholars of these issues, asserting that “although literacy has indeed generally preceded along with other indicators of development used by modernization theorists, literacy also can be used for culturally intolerant or politically repressive purposes” (27). The validity of his assertion can be found

² Graff’s argument throughout *The Literacy Myth* is that literacy can be a means of social mobility, but that it is not capable of enabling people to overcome social barriers to their mobility such as race, ethnicity, and gender. While literacy may help these individuals advance within their communities, it alone will not enable them to surpass those who do not bear these cultural markers.

in the attempts to Americanize/educate the working-class immigrant. First, it was not their “illiteracy” that was truly an issue; it was the fear that a disparate language, a different set of cultural values, might change the American status quo. As Graff explains, “Americanization activities were a response to the threat that many among the dominant culture saw in the new immigrants. Both illiteracy and literacy in a foreign tongue were feared as fact and symbol of alien individuals and alien cultures that would disrupt North American society” (*Legacies* 371).

The attainment of new language skills so that the immigrant might become more informed and involved was never the sought-after end. There were no overall programs “developed to aid any particular immigrant group,” which would have been a necessary step to enable the shift from one language to another (Cordasco 155). Rather, “the schools were committed to Americanize (and to Anglicanize) their charges. Educational theoreticians of the period saw the new immigrants as ‘illiterate, docile, lacking in self-reliance and initiative, and not possessing the Anglo-teutonic conceptions of law, order, and government’ . . . and the school’s role was to ‘assimilate and amalgamate’” (155). The education-for-assimilation ethic was not limited to the schools nor was the aim always to assimilate the immigrant. The working class, the non-Christian, the African American, and a myriad of other individuals became the focus of such campaigns when there was a need to stabilize a particular group or to prepare them for changes within the American economic landscape. Arnove and Graff’s explorations of far-reaching literacy campaigns in multiple cultures all led to the same conclusion:

Historically, large-scale efforts to provide literacy have not been tied to the level of wealth, industrialization, urbanization, or democratization of a

society, nor to a particular type of political regime. Instead, they have been more closely related to efforts of centralizing authorities to establish a moral or political consensus, and over the past two hundred years, to nation-state building. (Arnove and Graff 2)

Hence, the label of literacy has much more to do with the values held by the individual, the behaviors s/he exhibits, and the ease with which the person or group fits into the established economic hierarchy than it does with the ability of the individual to read and write.

This system is effective for those who promote it as it not only allows the social hierarchy to be constantly reaffirmed, but it also provides a marker that can be used to further oppress the oppressed. As William D'Antonio argues, "What this ethic of assimilation-success does is to make us believe in the system as it is; those who don't make it for whatever reason, are taught to blame themselves rather than the system for their failure" (23). While agreeing with D'Antonio's conclusion, I argue it should also be extended: it is not *only* those who fail who see themselves as to blame. Teaching in an upper-middle class institution in Texas, I was constantly reminded of how the ethic of assimilation can lead to stasis. For instance, when my sophomore-level composition students first began service learning projects, many did so with reluctance, explaining to me that they believed poverty was the curse of the uneducated and that the uneducated were so because of their own laziness. Because of this assertion, a large number of students felt that it was not their responsibility to engage in any process that might benefit people they were taught not to respect.³ Ironically, as my students pointed out to me, in our culture, it is often those who are involved in back-breaking work because of their lack of wealth who are labeled "lazy," while the inheritance

³ This attitude shifted as my students engaged in the process, and in their final portfolios many reassessed the views of class they held at the start of the semester.

of privilege, so often the result of birth rather than effort, often garners one respect from all levels of society.

While this notion of oppression resulting from illiteracy is woven into our social fabric and is, as such, an easy notion to believe, it is not always accurate. As Holzman prompts readers to see, “a moment’s reflection will tell us . . . that there are people who cannot read who are not oppressed as a consequence of their illiteracy” (297). Illiteracy or, rather, selective literacy like silence can be an act of resistance. As I will explore in this chapter, Italian Americans were not deprived of literacy, nor was their life void of institutions established to provide them with literate skills. Most of these attempts, however, would fail. In the 1920s, for instance, the Cleveland Americanization Committee declared that

it would be absurd for Americans to deceive themselves as to the success of their efforts up to this time in teaching English to foreigners. It is a most astonishing fact how little the school has actually helped in teaching English. The census of 1910 indicated that of the foreign born who came here in the years from 1904-1910, hundreds of thousands learned some English. The same source of information tells us that of those that did learn English, less than one-half of one percent learned it in school. (Cleveland Americanization Committee 13)

Though there were settlement houses, night schools, public schools, and charitable organizations providing free classes to promote literacy and expedite Americanization, Italian Americans were not taking up the offer in droves. In fact, even into the 1970s, Patrick Gallo discovered that “the most important levels find the Italian structurally unassimilated, as evidenced by an occupational, income, and residential differentiation from the core society.

Most of the respondents held semi-skilled and unskilled positions” (195). Rather than resulting from laziness or a lack of access to educational outlets, however, their limited English literacy was the result of a choice.

Literacy scholars have only pondered why certain immigrant groups resist gaining English literacy. Graff, for instance, posits that “it is possible that such immigrants were aware of the contradictions of the ‘literacy myth’: the acquisition of literacy and education has by no means served to guarantee individual or collective advancement, and many have advanced without their benefit” (*Legacies* 368).⁴ Knowing my participants’ past, it is easy to see why they would have rejected the literacy myth; in Italy, literacy did not provide an avenue towards social mobility. The relationship these immigrants have with literacy, however, is much more complicated than their doubt that gaining literacy will immediately improve their economic position.

As shown in the previous chapter, throughout history, Italian-American culture has been under attack. From their invasion of the workplace to prohibition to WWII and even as they were gracing the silver screen, Italian-American whiteness was consistently called into question. The aversion to their ethnicity expressed by the dominant culture may have compelled the Italians to resist Americanization. As Lopreato argues, “The period of adjustment required for a minority group’s full acculturation and assimilation often lengthens in direct proportion to the degree of hostility displayed by the dominant group. The more violent the attacks against a group’s traditions, the stronger will be its attempts to defend and strengthen those traditions” (11). In short, the stakes for assimilating increase as a group’s

language practices and habits fall under greater scrutiny. Assenting to the dominant culture, in effect, becomes a white flag, and by waving it, the immigrant is admitting the inferiority of his or her own culture.

In her 1998 examination of African Americans in Quaylville,⁵ *The Struggle and the Tools*, Ellen Cushman similarly found that African Americans engage in linguistic mask wearing as a means of cultural resistance. As she explains, “mask wearing as an institutional language skill means retaining a sense of self and cultural beliefs even as one veils these beliefs with language that appeals to White society’s norms” (122). Essentially, she argues that her participants are not victims of false consciousness but recognize the implications of their actions and manipulate language tools in order to overcome economic struggles. By examining the literacy campaigns in Cleveland, their successes and failures, and the mechanisms my participants used to gain employment and mobility, I show that, similar to Cushman’s participants, Italian Americans are not functioning under some sort of false consciousness; rather, they understand that English literacy is a currency that can be used in certain situations but also maintain their own linguistic practices as a means of asserting their culture in a land intent on melting them into a more amorphous American.

False consciousness, a concept popularized by Hegel, Georg Lukàs, Gramsci, and Freire, has found renewed academic caché among critical theorists. False consciousness, as popularly used, indicates an individual’s unconscious acceptance of a system that

⁴ As previously cited, this argument has been put forward in a myriad of forms by several literacy theorists including Brian Street and Michael Holzman. Similarly, in the autoethnography “Literacy and Individual Consciousness,” for instance, Niyi Akinnaso argues that, based on his experiences in Nigeria, the villagers, those considered non-literate, were not ignorant, but were making choices about which types of academic literacies to accept, reject, and/or adopt.

⁵ This is the pseudonym Cushman gives to the mid-sized, northeastern, high-poverty neighborhood where she conducts her research.

disempowers them. In essence, those functioning under false consciousness are the oppressed who accept the ideologies promoted by the dominant group. Because of this acceptance, the oppressed are unable to obtain critical consciousness or the ability to challenge the status quo. While the theory of false consciousness is helpful, as it enables us to understand why the disempowered promote institutions and ideologies that do not benefit them, it is also problematic since it is always the empowered who are in a position to label and theorize about those they view as “oppressed.”

Labeling groups as “functioning under false consciousness” assumes that the social theorist understands the values of the group in question, the meaning behind their linguistic choices, and also puts the social theorist in the position to impose his or her ideological framework on a disparate culture or community.⁶ As Cushman explains, critical theorists have a tendency to “define individuals by what they do not have, do not do, do not measure up to. Then, as critical scholars and teachers, they claim to have the theories to liberate them; to have the skills individuals need to produce change and organize together against their oppressor” (xix). Further, the idea of false consciousness also often leads to claims that rescind the power individuals find in their everyday actions. “When social theorists subscribe to a notion of false consciousness,” Cushman explains, “they underestimate the day-to-day political insights and strategies that individuals deploy to construct and obviate unequal power structures” (xix). For instance, instead of recognizing Italian Americans’ reluctance to

⁶ Here, I would like to add a caveat. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire contends that the first and most essential step to enabling critical consciousness is to live among the oppressed, interact with them, observe their daily life, and grow to understand their choices. He claims that an ethnography is the first step towards the disruption of false consciousness. As a totem for critical pedagogues, Freire’s methodology appears to be in accordance with the call I am making. Yet, in practice, this essential first step is often disregarded or is not taken to the degree Freire suggests. It is rare in a classroom setting that a teacher lives among his or her students before making assumptions about oppression or that a researcher abandons his or her own life and lives in poverty before penning an article about false consciousness. There are critical theorists who do and, as such, it is not their work that is being called into question.

accept English as their dominant tongue as a resistive act, Dominic Candeloro represents the immigrants as victims of illiteracy: “The illiteracy of Italian immigrants and their sojourner mentality retarded their mastery of American English and blocked easy access to education as a stepping stone to social mobility” (178). This claim takes for granted that Italian-Americans’ value system mimics our own; it doesn’t. It also takes for granted that English-language literacy is the greatest good, to borrow an idea from utilitarianism, but as an examination of the educational efforts encountered by Cleveland Italians will show, accepting English-language literacy as the greatest good can also be repressive. Finally, claims such as this one fail to account for the everyday choices people make and, as described by Cushman, the ways that these choices show they have achieved critical consciousness.

Certainly, as academics, we are trained to concentrate on the power institutions have over individuals and to lament silence. Social theorists have long mourned the loss of information about Italian Americans, explaining that “because, unlike other migrations, these people were often illiterate, they left very few documents with which we can write their history” (DeSalvo 20). And they have concluded that “the Italians have been slighted in social science literature, perhaps because of cultural and linguistic barriers to research on their adjustment in this society” (Engel and Tomasi v). Silence can be a roadblock for academics, but it can be powerful for those who engage in it. As such this chapter will reverse common trends and examine the power individuals have over institutions. I will discuss immigrants not as “birds/in covered cage,” but as sophisticated language users able to enmesh a new language with their own. Immigrants, as Said notes, “exist in a median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old. Beset with

half-involvements and half-detachments, nostalgic and sentimental on one level, an adept mimic or a secret outcast on another” (49). My focus in this chapter is to examine the ways that the borderlands, “the half-involvements and half-detachments,” are empowering and to understand how we can reach the immigrants or members of the working class who resist traditional schooling.

Quality of Life: Assumptions vs. Expectations

“Essere poveru e una sfurtuna accettare elemosina e una vergogna”
To be poor is unfortunate. To accept charity is shameful.—Italian Proverb

Most literacy campaigns begin with the assumption that a group of individuals is in need of literate skills in order to improve their quality of life and become empowered. Whether teaching them to read the bible so they can save their souls or teaching them to write so they can overthrow an oppressor, educators often place themselves in the position of defining the needs and goals of the group in question. Attempts to Americanize the immigrants, for instance, are often grounded in the belief that immigrants come to America to benefit from American institutions and improve their quality of life. This assumption is not incorrect, as Ferroni agrees: “with all of its hardships, the American experience offered them [Italians] the opportunities that were lacking in their native land” (2). Certainly people do not make the voyage across land and sea, disrupt their lives, and struggle in a new land if their expectations are being met in their homeland; all of my participants chose to come to America because they or their families were seeking improved economic and social conditions. Yet, educators and social workers often err by believing the immigrants’ expectations or goals are synonymous with the myth of the American Dream; in this case, they were not. Immigrants enter the country with their own set of values, and often little attempt is made to understand those values before it is assumed that immigrants should prefer

the American way of life. Using their own or their institution's values as a basis for their pedagogical practices, educators often offer literacy to the extent that it helps reach the goals the educator has set for them. When the goals do not align with those the immigrants bring with them, these educational efforts often fail. Therefore, before we can understand why Italian-American immigrants rejected some educational opportunities, we must first understand the expectations and values they had when they arrived, so the conflict between their beliefs and the educators' assumptions becomes clear.

It is difficult to imagine anyone viewing manual labor and what we consider poverty as an acceptable or even desirable social position. In the U.S., knowledge is often sought because it holds an economic value and enables the social mobility of the learner. For instance, at the start of his introductory rhetoric course, Richard Enos highlights the connection between literacy and social mobility to his students as a means of motivation:

When I meet undergraduates for the first day of their first class in rhetoric, I begin by telling a story of my immigrant grandparents. I tell them that many people who came to the United States at the turn of the century could not speak, let alone write, English. When individuals do not have the power of orality and literacy in a country's primary language—I explain to my wide-eyed students—the land of opportunity becomes far less opportune. I ask these beginning students to consider what jobs do not require proficiency in language. The students soon begin to list jobs that have a craft skill—bricklayers, cooks, cobblers—along with other jobs that require backbreaking manual labor. (Enos 66)

While these jobs and the class position associated with them may not be desirable to our undergrads, for many who came to America, these positions were not viewed as oppressive or even lower-class. In essence, for them the land of opportunity was not viewed as “far less opportune.” Since we are entrenched in our own culture, it is difficult to accept value systems that conflict with our own, but *poverty*, *working class*, and, even, *literacy* are relative terms with definitions that vary by culture and generation. In other words, as Kenneth Burke reminds us, “a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing” (49). In order to understand the motivations Italian Americans did or did not have for gaining literacy, it is important for us to first recognize their values and their perception of their social position.

When I first asked my participants what they considered the best reward for coming to America, I already had a list of anticipated answers in my head: economic opportunity, gender equality, and, at the very top of my list, free education. When my first respondent replied “the bathroom,” I chuckled (Ida Casale). When a second participant answered “the shower,” I considered rephrasing the question (Falso). When a third participant responded “having a bathroom in the house,” I listened (Tony Parente). Though by the time my participants immigrated in the late 1950s, indoor plumbing was no longer viewed by many as a luxury in America, my participants were astounded with the magnificence of being able to turn a faucet and have water at whatever temperature one desired—no more collecting water from the river, no more late-night walks out to the restroom, no more emptying the commode. Maria Romanelli recalls entering her first public restroom and, while trying to appear normal, turning the water on and off, cold and hot, on and off. Knowing little of the country they were entering and leaving behind a pre-industrial, agrarian lifestyle, my participants’ expectations as to their quality of life, similar to those held by many Southern

Italians and other immigrant groups, were relatively low by American standards, materially-speaking. For them, at the top of the list of great American offerings was the restroom, followed by food and stability.

Whether coming because of crop failures, as they did in the late nineteenth century, or because of the destruction caused by the war, Southern Italian Americans made the journey to escape abject poverty and improve their economic conditions. Yet, their expectations for improvement were not on par with American values. For instance, Pomeroy explains that social workers should focus on Italian Americans because of the “low standards of living displayed by a considerable portion of the total number coming to our shores” (10). The low standard of living Pomeroy deplored in 1914, however, was seen as quite an improvement to even later immigrants. As described in chapter two, before the war my participants existed in a semi-feudal economy based on the exchange of goods and services rather than dollars. While their lifestyles then were self-admittedly meager, after WWII, even the smallest amount of goods they had accumulated would be destroyed, leaving them in absolute destitution. As such, it is not unreasonable to assume that by coming to America and having a toilet and food to serve, they saw themselves as escaping poverty. Pasqualina Parente, for instance, describes her best memory from coming to America as being “the food. That’s the best memories in my mind. That suffering we had. We did suffer a lot. We had no salt, no oil, just boil. No seasoning. There was a time we could not wash clothes. We had no soap. We were so poor. We were like homeless.” In coming to America, my participants were not seeking a new set of values, riches, English-language literacy, or charity. As the proverb at the start of this section explains, Italians are taught that needs should be met by the individual; as Ferraro contends Italian Americans “were ferocious realists who understood

where power lay and why it was wielded, but they would have hated—*hated*—to be considered anyone’s victim” (9). What they sought in America, then, was not aid or education, but the opportunity to meet their basic needs.

Certainly, as Enos relates to his students, these opportunities were limited by the immigrants’ lack of English-language skills. Yet, my participants did not see these opportunities as unattractive nor did they discern their work as being “backbreaking.” First, American labor was much less physically demanding than the work they were doing in Italy before and after the war. Lopreato aptly describes a typical Southern Italian agrarian lifestyle: “Working 365 days a year, from sunrise to sunset, in a good year and when in good health, the peasants managed to produce the bare necessities of life after the landlord had been paid” (29). When asked if working in the factory was difficult, Maria Falso replied: “No, it was easy because in Italy you work from sun up to sun down. Italy you start working at five o’clock in the morning and *finisce* eight o’clock at night—work, work, work, work. Here you work eight hours and you go home.” Because the workload was lighter, my participants found themselves actually gaining a freedom they did not have in Italy—the freedom to do something besides work. As Ida Casale explains, “Here, four o’clock you off work and then you can do anything you want to do.” While manual labor is often viewed as dehumanizing, being part of an industrial economy actually enabled my participants to have an identity outside of the workplace.

The systemization of the industrial workplace was what, in fact, drew my participants and many other Southern Italians to America. Accustomed to work that was literally as unstable as the weather, many Southern Italians value any sense of stability. As Barizini argues:

any kind of *sistemazione* is the dream of most Italians. It does not necessarily signify responsibility, good wages, and the possibility of getting ahead, but often nothing more than a mediocre but durable position, protected from unseen events, with a predictable career, some moral authority, and a pension at the end. (113)

These goals do not fit with the uniquely American philosophy of self-advancement nor do they place an emphasis on education as a means of mobility. Yet, to my participants, these goals marked a significant improvement from prior working conditions. Previously, not only were earnings dictated by the weather, but they also were never guaranteed. Since the government was not actively involved in enforcing labor laws in the Italian countryside, laborers were forced to work without a promise of being recompensed. As my participants described in chapter two, they often worked with only the hope of getting paid—a hope that often did not materialize.

Though, as exemplified in the previous chapter, they were often looked down upon in America for accepting low wages, my participants highly valued the fact that they would either receive a paycheck or could demand recourse. As they were used to bartering their crops for other goods and services, a paycheck which provided them with a multitude of spending options was seen as another freedom they gained by becoming part of the industrial economy. Ida Casale excitedly highlights the difference between a barter and a currency-based economy: “Another thing was different too because we went shopping! You know you get this check. We never seen a check before. You get whatever it was at the time, seventy dollar, seventy-five dollar. You buy whatever you want,” she said throwing her arms in the air. “You could buy food for the rest of the month! In Italy, it is not that way. You got

to work. You trade.” Regular paychecks, free time, decent wages—while these items may not be representative of the American Dream in action, for my participants they were hallmarks of success.

Though my participants adjusted to a new economy, for the most part, their values remained the same. Since they were not raised in a consumer culture, they did not see the value of American status symbols. As Parenti explains, to Italian Americans “expensive vacations, Cadillacs, sumptuous homes and fancy clothes are aberrations; recreation is a simple and inexpensive affair centering around the home. There is no college tuition to worry about because the children are not sent to college; they are all working, as they should” (50). Graff is correct in assuming that “owning their homes must have had a special meaning to these individuals” (*Literacy* 96). Yet the homes they valued bore little resemblance to a traditional American home. In describing her first home, Romanelli recalls:

We had no refrigerator, no furniture, no clothes. We got this little box, used to call it icebox in America—at least that’s what my uncle told me. Everyday I used to go buy a piece of ice and put ‘em in there and put some milk and some meat. One day my mom uncle gave us this mattress; it was a dirty mattress. He raised nine kids on it, but, hey, to me it was something beautiful. Put ‘em on the floor and we slept on that mattress for about six months, me and my mother.

Eventually, mattresses on the floor were replaced with beds, refrigerators were purchased, and my participants began to adjust to the comforts of an industrialized society. Yet, they still viewed their possessions as comforts rather than necessities and continued to value frugality over wealth. Put summarily, the ability to turn the water on and off was never taken for

granted. As such, rather than maintaining their appearance through the attainment of name brands and changes of address, they felt their “self-presentation” should “be genuinely thrifty as well” (Lassonde 102). For instance, though she could afford otherwise, my grandmother still lives in the first home that she paid for in cash, owns a console television, covers her original furniture in plastic and, within fifteen minutes, would reveal to any stranger that her freezer is full of meat she found on sale.

Hence, while Italian Americans like my grandmother accepted the systematization of American industrialization, they were reluctant to accept American values over their own. As Ferroni explains, “Italians still value family advancement rather than the American value of self-advancement. As a result, Italians have found it difficult to enter the larger society and chose instead to remain in their neighborhoods” (11). For my participants, maintaining their family meant much more than entering the larger society. Bernardina Corte, for instance, expounds upon the value of family:

It depends on the way you put in your mind. A lot of people they put having a big house, a mansion house, and they have to have two, three jobs and never spend any time for their family. I think for my own self a different way. I want to give education and love. And both my kids live in Cleveland and they are doing pretty good and I get to see them.

Examples such as this one are not meant to imply that Americans do not value family. First generation Italian Americans, however, have a disparate sense of identity; they do not view themselves as an isolated unit. Instead, they see themselves as being part of a whole—a family, a neighborhood, or a migrant group. They are, therefore, reluctant to leave behind

their communities. Instead of seeking a move to the suburbs as a sign of self-advancement, they would rather remain in the ethnically isolated neighborhoods they create.

When Corte describes wanting to give an education to her children, for instance, it is not the type of education parents typically desire for their children. While, like many parents, she worked and saved money to send her children to a specific school, the school was not a college. Instead, she worked to enable her children to attend a private, Roman Catholic high school where she was ensured they would learn traditional Italian values, including the Italian language, in addition to academic skills. For Italian Americans, American education was viewed as a threat, challenging the values they brought with them. As the following survey of the educational outlets provided for the immigrants in Cleveland will show, they were more apt to become active learners when Americanization was not the goal of the educator. While they understood that learning English gave them more social power, they did not desire to gain English at the expense of their own culture. Hence, while social workers before, during, and after their arrival presented education as a means of social mobility, my participants recognize the ways that education can conflict with their cultural values.

Education in Cleveland: Americanization vs. Education

La Cittadinanza

*Il tuo sogno si e 'arrivato non è piu una speranza
 Hai preso la cittadinanza
 Era sei Americano anche tu allora cosa vuoi di piu'
 E' giusto che sai cose 'ma non dimenticare mai quel di'
 Quando col cuore neste e senza pretese
 Lasciato il tuo paese
 In cerca di fortuna terra straniera
 Sotto un'altra legge e un' altra bandiera
 La fortuna che hai trovato ti fa sentire un privilegiato
 Lavita ti offre ancora tante coase belle
 Grazie e questa terra con la bandiera e strisce e stelle
 Ma non dimenticare mai dove sei nato*

*Sarebbe un grave peccato
 Continui ad onorare il Tricolore
 E il tuo Paese ricordalo con amore
 Della tua terra censervi le tradizioni
 Insegnate ai tuoi figli e alle nuove generazioni
 Che quando nel futuro l'Italiano non parlano più
 Potranno per sempre dire; Italy, I Love You*
 --Anonymous

Education can be empowering. That is a dictum I have always believed. In college, I had a poster in my dorm room with one quote by Epictetus—“Only the educated are free.” It was not, however, until much later in my academic life that I was able to fully grasp that quote. Growing up, I had always thought education was synonymous with schooling, that the level of your education could be measured in grades rather than years or experiences, a by-product of being raised in public schools and on televised American culture. Assuming that I was not a lone holder of this assertion, I think it is important to discuss the ways that schooling and education are often not synonymous, as these divergences show why the immigrants found certain educational outlets to be oppressive rather than empowering. Specifically, in this section, I examine the first Cleveland settlement house, Hiram House; the Italian-American public school in Cleveland, Murray Hill School; the settlement house in Little Italy, Alta House; and the adult literacy program, West Tech Night School.⁷ Not only will understanding the tenants of these programs demarcate the boundaries between literacy training and value indoctrination, but recognizing the successes and failures of these programs will also serve as a means of thinking about our own teaching practices in multicultural settings.

⁷ Since my participants did not come into contact with the public schools until their children attended them, I will not discuss them in this project. The Murray Hill School will be discussed here as it provided classes for adult immigrants as well as their children.

The anonymous poem, which opens this section and is owned by all of my participants, is the best representation of their views of education and assimilation. Roughly translated, the poem reads as follows:

When you are sleeping it is not a dream anymore

you are a citizen.

Now that you are an American what more do you want?

Now that you have what you like, don't ever forget what you left behind.

When you follow your heart without pretensions/ and you leave your home
city

in search of fortunes in a strange land

under other laws and a different flag

the fortune that you find makes you feel privileged.

Your life will offer you beautiful things.

You should thank that flag with stripes and stars,

but never forget where you were born.

It would be a serious sin.

Continue to honor the three colors

and remember your hometown with love

always keep your traditions

always teach your children and the new generation

so that when in the future Italian is not often spoken

they will always be able to say; Italy I Love You.

As this poem exemplifies, though they had physically left their homeland for economic reasons, my participants all expressed a strong interest in keeping their culture alive for their children and their grandchildren. Existing in the borderlands allowed them to pick and choose the aspects of each culture they wanted to adopt and pass on to their children. For this reason, literacy educators became feared interlopers as their pedagogical practices were often based on assumptions that did not fit with the goals of the immigrants.



Fig 4.1 Hiram House⁸
Cleveland, OH

From the earliest days of the great migration, southern Italians entered the country wary of any sponsored institution. As previously shown, “for *contadini*, how one lived was determined not by the government but by *la famiglia*.... Long and bitter experience with public officials—and the large landowners they shielded—had left the *contadini* with a cynical attitude toward all forms of authority other than the family” (Kraut 112). Hence, because of their backgrounds, their value system was already at odds with those promoted by settlement houses. In general, “the public school and the settlement house were . . . strongly American-oriented institutions” (Ferroni 209). While the stated goal was always to “educate”

⁸ Photograph courtesy of The Western Reserve Historical Society’s online project, “Serving the Community: A Timeline of Philanthropy, Charity, and Non-Profit Organizations in Cleveland, Ohio.” <http://www.wrhs.org/html/philanthropictimeline/1891to1899.htm>

the immigrant, the implicit goal was always related to another term ending in “ate”— assimilate. As Pisani explains:

For the immigrants themselves, classes were established both by the government and by private groups, to teach them both the English language and ‘patriotism.’ This latter term was too often thought to consist in adjuring the immigrant student to forget the old country and wrap himself in the mantle of the new one. (154)

The first settlement house in Cleveland, Hiram House, did not stray much from these generalizations.

Established in 1896 by students at Hiram College, Hiram House both provided housing for, as described on their current website, the “burgeoning immigrant and poverty stricken slum dwellers” and offered classes in English and American customs and history in an effort “to build character” (“History” para. 2). As this description indicates, there was not a focus on a specific population, aside from the class distinction, nor was the curriculum developed with an aim other than what the founder, George Bellamy, considered a necessary education to foster quality citizenship. Essentially, Hiram House was an attempt to assist the impoverished “with various social services, language classes, vocational training and recreational activities,” and the main goal for immigrants was attaining citizenship (Veronesi 188). Though ambitious, these goals are not innocuous in and of themselves. Hiram House and its curriculum were heavily laden with American values, counting as its major success the movement of Cleveland’s Jewish community from the ranks of the poor and into the surrounding suburbs. When it came to the Italians, however, the program, which was located

in close proximity to Big Italy, was a failure and eventually closed its doors in 1941 in the face of falling enrollment.⁹

A major reason the settlement was not as successful in assimilating the newcomers was that the proprietor's notions of culture, values, and education were based on an older stock of immigrants. Though a charitable social effort, the settlement movement was not prejudice-free. Bellamy, the founder, in fact is labeled an ultra-conservative, philanthropist, and racist, in disparate sources. His employees, too, express dissatisfaction with the changing ethnic landscape of Cleveland. Miss Mitchell, one of the supervisors at the settlement, for instance, once commented that "in place of the Jews with their splendid morals and intense home life, we have the fiery Italians, and the Slavish and Polish with their duller minds, their drunkenness and immorality" (qtd. in Veronesi 191). Comments such as this mark the main conflict between the settlement house and the immigrant—a misunderstanding of culture. As alcohol was thought to lead to profligate behaviors, it was prohibited by the settlement house even though wine was a staple of Italian culture. While this example may seem like a small discrepancy of values, it highlights the main reason for the settlement's failure: the immigrants' values, needs, and goals were often not taken into consideration and were, instead, supplanted by the values of the literacy sponsor. While aiming to be transformative—to replace one set of values with another—this type of education ultimately fails to transform because it is based on a banking concept of education. According to Freire, "in the banking concept of education, knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing. Projecting an absolute ignorance onto others, a characteristic of the ideology of oppression, negates

⁹ Hiram House would open again later as a camp rather than a settlement house, aiming to help impoverished youth gain social skills as well as academic knowledge.

education and knowledge as processes of inquiry” (58). Italian Americans and the other immigrants residing in Hiram House were not empty vessels waiting to be filled. Treating them as such caused many to turn away from the settlement program.

In order to engage immigrant learners, pedagogues need to be vested in the interests and values of the immigrants—a step not taken by Hiram House. As Veronesi argues, “If Hiram House marginally accepted the Italian immigrant at first, there was still a basic lack of commitment toward these immigrants. At a time when the settlement was predominantly Italian, no full time staff worker spoke Italian” (193). The program functioned under the assumption stated in the Cleveland Americanization Report: “While the Committee is convinced that the most useful workers in Americanization are to be found among foreign born people, the most valuable leaders in the work are native born Americans” (Cleveland 3). Events taking place within the settlement house, however, proved otherwise. Italian-American involvement was at its peak when two Italian Americans, Domonic Viloni and Frank Russo, were given permission to spearhead a program focused on music, leading to the formation of two Italian-American bands as well as the purchase of operatic recordings (Veronesi 191). The implication of this example is not, as may be supposed, that one need belong to the community before s/he can educate the community members; rather, the implication is that understanding the community in question fosters a mutual respect and a more reciprocal learning environment.¹⁰

As the pedagogical practices at Hiram House were for the most part monologic, Italian Americans quickly turned away from the settlement house. As Veronesi explains, “Being a tightly knit group and relatively mobile, the Italians chose to remain aloof from

¹⁰ For more on creating reciprocal learning environments, see chapter 5.

activities which no longer catered to their ethnic traditions” (195). They instead set out to create their own communities, which “drew Italian involvement away from the mutli-ethnic and multi-racial environment of the Hiram House settlement ” (195). A new Italian-American settlement, Little Italy (Murray Hill), began to develop, and two educational outlets vested in the interests of the immigrants also emerged: Murray Hill School and Alta House. Since they developed as a result of the Italian-American exodus to that part of the city, they were embedded in the culture and values of Italian Americans, separating their teachings from those at Hiram House. For instance, while as a public school, Murray Hill School still promoted the ideal of Americanization, it did so by also valuing the culture Italian Americans brought with them. Similarly, Alta House, though still a settlement house, was run mostly by Italian Americans who promoted the immigrants’ needs and values over those of the greater American public.

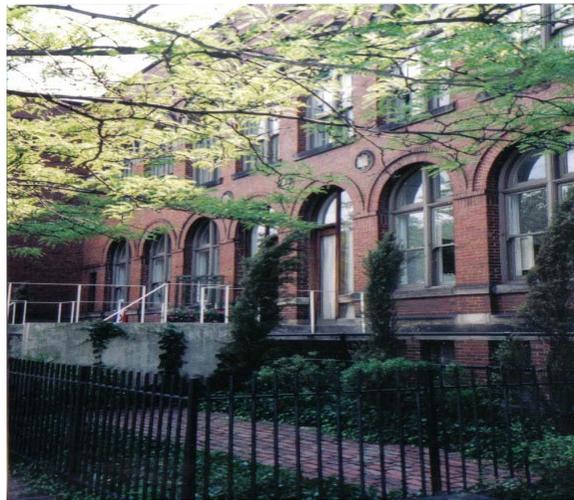


Fig. 4.2 Murray Hill School House¹¹

Located in the middle of Little Italy, Murray Hill School, originally Brandon School, witnessed a change in name, in structure, and in population when it became the elementary school for Italian Americans in 1909. From its opening in 1895 to 1916, Murray Hill School

¹¹ Photograph courtesy of the author.

grew to be one of the three largest schools in Cleveland, comprised of fifty classrooms where kindergarten to eighth grade were taught.¹² The location of the school was of no small consequence as it contributed to the success of the programs provided. The area selected for Little Italy “had the best opportunity to resist the forces of assimilation” because it is geographically isolated from the rest of the city (Ferroni 211). With a large forest on one side and the 285-acre Lake View Cemetery Park on the other, Murray Hill is an area set apart from the happenings of the downtown area. The location of the school resulted in a relatively homogenous learning environment. This was typically the case in northeastern schools. As Stephen Lassonde argues based upon his findings from his study of New Haven from 1870-1940, “in most cities of the industrial Northeast and Midwest during the early twentieth century, children were sent to schools in their own neighborhoods, which were often relatively homogenous ethnically, racially, and socioeconomically” (5). Given the neighborhood’s homogeneity, institutions such as the public schools could not ignore the dominant population’s culture and, as such, the immigrants saw these schools as less of a threat to their values. As Lassonde points out, “As long as schooling at the elementary level occurred in the neighborhoods where children played and parents, siblings and kin toiled, all was relatively familiar. The school, then, while foreign and for some even objectionable, was not necessarily the irritant of ineluctable change” (5).

Though sponsored by the Cleveland Board of Education and considered a public school, because it developed in the cradle of a populous Italian-American settlement, the school was designed to meet a myriad of needs in the community. In addition to educating

¹² When the school officially closed in 1977 because the enrollment numbers were not high enough to support such a large structure, the building was turned into an artist colony. Home to over ten art galleries, a yoga school, book binder, violin maker, fashion designer, and host to a myriad of community activities, the structure remains an intrinsic part of the neighborhood.

the children, the school offered night classes to adults, a free health station to battle the impetigo and pediculosis caused by the crowded living conditions in the neighborhood, a dental dispensary, a model home, as well as an indoor community swimming pool. In many ways, the Cleveland Board of Education went beyond the call of duty to try to reach out to the Italian Americans and help them trust the public schools—an institution they were not familiar with in Italy. As well as attempting to serve the needs of the community, the school leaders also appreciated the values Italian Americans brought with them. Though none of the teachers were themselves Italian Americans, they did share the same religious beliefs. As Ferroni explains, “All of them Miss Murney, Miss Mulrooney, Miss Hanrahan, Miss Graham and Miss Keane were of Irish descent and Roman Catholic” (Ferroni 218). Only blocks away from the school, Holy Rosary, the second Roman Catholic parish for Italians, offers masses in both Italian and English. At the time, the church had two priests, one of which was Irish and attracted a small Irish population to the church. One of these Irish churchgoers, Miss Florence Graham, became involved with the children of Murray Hill by working with them in the church and eventually served as principal of the Murray Hill School from 1937 to 1957. Though the school was public, Graham understood that by establishing this connection with the church, she was able to build rapport with the Italian-American immigrants, and, as such, she began walking the children to mass or lectures at the church after school (Ferroni 218-20).

In addition to appealing to Italian Americans’ religious beliefs, Graham also worked to make their cultural values part of their children’s education. In an interview, Graham states: “If the people sensed that you liked them, and respected them, they respected you in return” (qtd. in Ferroni 231-2). In order to show respect, Graham believed the immigrants’

heritage had to be part of the curriculum. In his celebration of Murray Hill School and Miss Florence Graham in particular, Ferroni argues that “there seems to have been no deliberate attempt to destroy the culture of the native land and substitute for it that of the adopted land” (217). To support his argument he offers two pieces of evidence. First he states that: “evidence that the Italian community was not subject to a forced Americanization program is seen in the teaching of Italian during the principalship of Miss Florence Graham from 1937 until 1957” (217). He further contends that the singing of Italian songs in the classroom proves that Miss Graham “respected the Italian past and in that way was able to work effectively in guiding young Italians toward an American future” (230). Graham, herself, seems to enjoy teaching in the borderlands and not pushing for complete assimilation. In a 1968 interview she describes her experience in Murray Hill:

From my office I could hear from the one side the citizenship class, that was working with the older people singing ‘My Country Tis of Thee’ while from the other side I could hear our music teacher and the young children singing Italian songs coming from the other, both meeting in the public school. I just loved that. (qtd. in Ferroni 218)

Graham also understood that becoming part of the community, as Freire argues, was an important step for educators to be successful in the neighborhood. She consistently explained to her fellow educators that “no teacher could come into Murray Hill School with a special plan of being accepted. That was something that had to come in time” (Ferroni 231).

While certainly Graham was successful in bridging the divide between the public school and the Italian-American community (during her tenure as principal almost 1,000 Italian-American children were enrolled for elementary school), Ferroni’s presentation of the

school as being without forced Americanization programs is a bit overzealous. Even within his book there are instances where conflicts of interest are portrayed, though he quickly dismisses them. For instance, the Cleveland Board and Miss Graham decided to open a model home inside of the Murray Hill School on the third floor. As Ferroni describes:

The hallway opened into a huge living room with a fireplace, closets and windows that overlooked the schoolyard. Beyond the living room, the model home included two bedrooms, a kitchen and a bath, all of which were well-equipped. Here the young Italian girls were taught cooking and housekeeping as it was done in the American way. (215)

Though the most popular ethnic food today, Italian cuisine was deemed disgusting by early social workers who thought mixing a bunch of ingredients in a pot and then passing it around was unhygienic. Therefore, in settlement houses, they tried to teach Italians to abandon old-world cuisine and adopt American cooking habits. Eating is such an important part of Italian culture, rivaling even Roman Catholicism, that these assimilation efforts were taken as a vicious attack on Italian culture. Hence it is not a surprise that the Murray Hill model home “was not always appreciated, especially by some of the older people in the area” (216). Even Ferroni admits that the immigrants “felt the model home was rather foolish since they already knew how to cook and make beds” (216). While Italian Americans were not adamantly opposed to the educational efforts in the area and were even open to some of the assimilationist curricula, they did not welcome the curriculum into their own homes. For instance, when one teacher wrote a note home to a girl’s parents, requesting that “the child be cleaned,” the mother responded with a brief, but poignant letter: ‘Maria is not a rose, do not smell her, teach her’ (qtd. in Pecorini 31).

Whether or not Cleveland's Italian Americans rejected assimilation, these Americanization efforts grew more intense as WWII and particularly Italy's involvement in the war became front-page news. Though it's hard to determine if Miss Graham, in the face of disparaging remarks about Little Italy, was trying to give the neighborhood the appearance of Americanization to change its reputation or if she was really aiming to force-feed patriotism to her students, it is clear that the curriculum changed from embracing Italian American customs to a focus on nationalism. Throughout the war years, as exemplified in the previous chapter, Miss Graham became very involved in the representation of Little Italy, and her teachings and values often extended beyond the classroom. For instance, in 1941 she developed a plan to exhibit Italian Americans' patriotism to the rest of Cleveland and decided that the first step was to establish a voluntary curfew. Though efforts to create a compulsory curfew had failed in the past, Graham thought

she could surely sell the young people on the idea that they would be contributing to national defense by going to bed early, getting plenty of sleep and thereby growing strong. The curfew would contribute in no small way to the nation's defense effort by enabling the youth of "Little Italy" to mold themselves into brighter and more alert sons and daughters of Uncle Sam. In so doing they would prepare themselves for any future job that their country might require of them. (Ferroni 234-5)

While there is no evidence to suggest whether or not the plan was a success, what is certain is that students were being taught much more than simply how to read, write, and solve basic mathematic equations. These lessons were as much public as they were private. In accordance with her plan, "the older students at Murray Hill formed a sleep committee which

listened to students testify as to how the extra sleep was helping them prove their love for their country” (235). These testimonies were then published in Little Italy and also forwarded to the press. Similarly, Graham began a letter-writing campaign in which students were told to write “a good citizenship pledge to a relative, friend, or to any G.I. Joe in the armed services” (238). Again, this use of classroom time was publicized.

Whether or not Graham’s openly assimilationist efforts resulted from her drive to change the immigrants or to change the perception of the immigrants, whether her strategies were welcomed or abhorred is subject to debate. Students did get involved in the letter-writing campaign and also in the drive to collect goods for soldiers serving in the war. Their impetus for doing so and their parents’ involvement, however, are not noted nor is there an existing archive of the materials from the Murray Hill School. Since the Italian presence in the war cast a dark shadow over Italian Americans, attempting to express any sort of nationalism, aside from American nationalism, was a risky endeavor. There is evidence, however, that at times Italian Americans were willing to take such risks. In one of her attempts to “publicize the patriotism of the Italians,” Graham planned a special Flag Day ceremony to take place in Murray Hill (236). When she arrived at the school, though, “Miss Graham discovered that someone had cut the rope used to hoist the flag” (236). In order to continue the ceremony, Graham called in the Fire Department to repair the cord and the police to make sure nothing got out of hand. Given that while Graham announced to the media the intense patriotism expressed in Little Italy, she also found it necessary to have police protection surrounding her, I suspect that the success of the Murray Hill School lies somewhere between the celebration found in Ferroni’s work and the retaliatory actions taken by some Italian Americans. Without doubt though, the school was much more capable of

working with the Italians than Hiram House because of its location, the Board's interest in the community's needs, and Miss Graham's valuing of the students' backgrounds. Rather than the immigrants becoming invested in the school, the school became invested in the community.

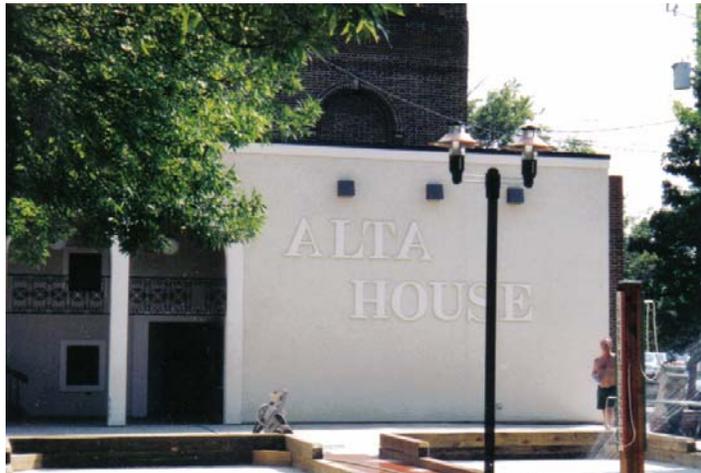


Fig. 4.3 Alta House¹³

In addition to working with the church and the media, Miss Graham and the other educators at the Murray Hill School also worked with the largest (and only) Italian-American settlement house in Cleveland, The Alta House.¹⁴ Driving to his Cleveland office during the late nineteenth century, John D. Rockefeller often passed through Little Italy. The neighborhood apparently made an impression on him as in 1895 he funded the building of a day nursery to aid working Italian-American women and named it after his daughter, Alta Rockefeller. Under the direction of two neighborhood leaders, Marius Robinson and Joseph

¹³ Photograph courtesy of the author. This is actually a picture of the new Alta House. Strangely, in 1980, the Alta House was set on fire. This fire, which began on the third floor, not only damaged this section of the 80 year old meeting house, but also the cultural arts section of the building, which contained a majority of the Italian memorabilia housed in the building. Firemen at the time declared faulty electrical wiring caused this fire. Nine days later, the building went up in flames again. This time it was the second floor that was targeted, causing the loss of the operations offices and meeting rooms. Still, the fireman were reluctant to call this arson, referring to the cause as undetermined. Within four months, Alta House would be set on fire twice more before the building was condemned and closed. It wasn't until the fourth fire that the cause was called, "arson." Eighty years of Italian history in Cleveland disappeared in less than six months. The arsonist still has not been found.

¹⁴ Miss Graham eventually became the first female head of the Alta House Board.

Carabelli, the nursery expanded to include clubs, classes, a community center, playground, library, swimming pool, a boxing ring, and gymnasium. Though named for his daughter and funded by his checkbook until 1921, John D. Rockefeller did not play a role in the day-to-day activities of Alta House.¹⁵ Although he would be considered a literacy sponsor because of his financial contributions, the members themselves made the actual decisions about how Alta House should be run and what it should offer. According to the Alta House Records, “throughout its history, the settlement maintained a close relationship with area residents. Its Board of Trustees (est. 1900) always included neighborhood leaders, and its programs often reflected their cultural background” (“Introduction”). Eventually the board adopted the following as the Alta House Philosophy: “Consideration as to the cultural, religious, and social backgrounds of the clientele must be kept in focus so that through intake as well as observation of ages within the community, the program attempts to reflect some of the needs of the clientele” (“Philosophy”). By continuing to select leaders from the community, Alta House and its philosophy persist today.

During the thirties and into the sixties, Alta House functioned more like an ethnic club than a settlement house. Within the building, Italian dances were held, Italian art was showcased, and groups from the same neighborhoods in Italy divided themselves into bocce teams. Because of their shared ethnic values, even though they were not, perhaps, the most successful Americans, many of the speakers invited to Alta House were also Italian Americans. For instance, an ad for the Alta House Career Program read: “Included in the program will be a movie ‘Auto Servicing’ and a discussion on Auto Mechanics led by Rocco

¹⁵ In an afternoon spent scouring his correspondence about Alta House at the Western Reserve Historical Society, I learned little more than Rockefeller did not feel the playground equipment should be as expensive as the surveyor recommended.

DiLillo and Nick Gambatese. Everyone should come to this first meeting even though they may not want to be a mechanic” (Graser). In many ways, Alta House can be understood as Italians sponsoring Italians. For instance, when needy families came into the neighborhood, the Alta House would hold a food drive and provide the newcomers with food from their neighbors’ tables. Since the majority of Italian Americans in Little Italy immigrated from the same province in Italy, these actions were not viewed as charity, but, rather, as helping out one’s *paesani*.

While English was taught to the adults, Standard Italian was taught to the children and, eventually, the Alta House joined forces with the Cleveland Public Library, enabling Alta House to operate a free lending library within the building. Because of their shared ethnic values, Italian Americans entrusted the board with their children. For the fiftieth anniversary of Alta House, for instance, a number of members wrote reflections about the comfort they found within the settlement, as one middle-schooler explained: “Alta House is a place where the teachers trust you and depend upon you” (Excerpts). Yet, while educational opportunities were now being provided for the immigrants by fellow immigrants who supported Italian-American values, many Italian Americans were not touched by these efforts. My participants, for example, never visited Alta House although they were aware of its existence. The majority of my participants lived in an area outside of the confines of Little Italy. They did, however, often visit to attend church, participate in ethnic celebrations and parades, shop, and also to earn money. Both Maria Romanelli and Maria Romano sold glass in Little Italy, but neither ever set foot in Alta House. When asked why they chose not to become involved, their answers reflected the lack of nationalism they felt towards Italy as a whole. All of my participants explained that they did not become involved in any of the

education programs in Little Italy because they were more for the Sicilians who dominated the area. Further, only six of my participants sought any formal schooling in America, and, for a myriad of reasons, the six chose to seek out educational opportunities that were close to home and less time-consuming but no less charged with identity politics.



Fig. 4.4 West Technical High School¹⁶

The night school offered at West Tech High School fit with my participants' time and distance requirements. Since all of my participants lived on the West Side of Cleveland, West Tech was a reasonable choice as it was accessible by bus. Plus, the classes were held after working hours and were only one to two hour-long sessions focused solely on language. While certainly the most popular literacy sponsor for not only my participants, but also for the majority of immigrants in Cleveland, the actual value and extent of the literate skills offered in the night school is arguably not on par with the value attached to these schools in the media. Basing their assumptions about the value of educational opportunities on the lack of English-language skills Italian Americans display, scholars often make claims grounded in faulty syllogistic reasoning. Mangione and Morreale, for example, contend that “unless the

¹⁶ Photograph courtesy of author.

immigrants attended night school (which rarely happened) or learned English from their children, their grasp of the language seldom developed beyond an amalgam of fractured English and native dialect” (160). My participants’ language practices, however, show that schooling played only a minor role, if any, in terms of helping them gain English-language literacy. Literacy is a relative term used to denote the ability to read, write, and speak the dominant language. After approximately fifty years in the country, four of my participants could perform none of the aforementioned tasks; two can speak English but not read or write in English; one can speak and read, but not write in English; one can read and write English, but cannot speak it; and only three are able to read, write, and speak English. If Mangione and Morreale’s assertion were true, it would mean that the latter three received an education that extended beyond their eight fellow immigrants; this is, however, not the case. One participant who cannot speak, read or write in English, Maria Romano, for instance, had just as much schooling as the three men who are capable of performing all three tasks. Rather than being based upon the amount of schooling they did or did not have, their English-language literacy was dependent upon the ways that they used these skills in their day-to-day lives. Just as the settlement houses often failed to reach the immigrants because they did not take into account the values the immigrants brought with them, the night schools often failed to reach students because educators did not make the literacy teachings relevant to the lives and goals of the immigrants.

Despite high enrollment numbers, the success of the night school was not glorified in Cleveland, as stated by the Cleveland Americanization Committee: “The opinion of the best school men in America indicates that the public evening school has not succeeded as an agency for the teaching of English to adult foreigners” (10). Yet, the Committee had a very

simplistic view as to why the programs were not returning the expected results: “The most elaborate plan for the teaching of English in the evening is rendered inoperative by the simple, physiological fact that at the end of the day a working man is tired” (10).

Undoubtedly the mental and physical exhaustion of the new members of the working class contributed to the inefficacy of the night schools. Some of the participants offered their exhaustion as the reason they chose not to go to school; “I go to work, come home, wash clothes, cook the dinner, clean the house, make the bread, make the pizza, can the tomato, can the pepper. There was no time” (Falso). The physical sacrifices necessary to obtain adequate schooling were also offered as a reason why some quit school before the class was finished. As Ruggiero explains:

I work ten hours a day. I took two buses to go home. I took another two bus to go to school at West Tech. . . . It was a sacrifice because you work ten hours. You go home six o'clock. Seven o'clock I have to be in school until nine o'clock. Go home. Go to bed. You beat after you work ten hour a day. It was a sacrifice to go to school, so I give up on school.

Ruggiero touches on another reason why the schools were either not attended at all or only attended for a limited amount of time: transportation. Without cars and, for awhile, without driver's licenses, my participants were forced to rely upon public transportation or their own two feet to get from home to work and also to school. If they lived or worked far from a bus stop in the volatile Cleveland climate, attending school became an even greater challenge. “I tried to go to school,” Pasqualina Casale explains, “but we didn't have no car and it was far. I only went to school for about three months: September, October, November. December, December was so cold and we had to walk. So, I quit school. Then, I learned by myself.”

Women faced even another challenge to attending school as they were often the “keepers of the home” and, without childcare, had no time to attend night school.¹⁷ While these physical factors, therefore, did play a role in determining the amount of education some of the participants would receive, these conditions were not the only factors that caused them to turn away from the schools or to receive only rudimentary literacy skills when the programs were completed.

Similar to the settlement houses, the night schools often treated students as if they were empty vessels without any knowledge to build upon. Often, “too many instructors failed to realize that difficulty with a new language and inarticulateness did not mean their pupils had a low level of intelligence. They often taught as if teaching small children rather than adults” (Pisani 154). As such, “many of the immigrants quit school in disgust before they had time to reap the full benefits that the schools had to offer them” (154). According to my participants, the majority of the class was devoted to “tr[ying] to speak and learn the alphabet” (Ianiello). Yet, they questioned how much they were learning as without correction: “you got to speak in English. Even if it’s wrong, you got to speak in English”(Ianiello). The only writing process they were asked to engage in consisted of the teacher saying words in English and the students trying to copy the words down as they heard them. As can be seen from fig. 4.5 (next page) taken from Maria Romano’s class notes, the students were learning words without context. Though Romano has, for the most part, correctly transcribed the words, it is unclear how this task will help bring her to a greater understanding of the English language as the words do not really relate to one another, nor do

¹⁷ By referring to them as “keepers of the home,” I do not mean to perpetuate the assumption that Italian-American culture is patriarchal. The women did take on the responsibilities associated with raising children and caring for the home, though the men and women often gardened and canned together. With two

they prepare a student to put together whole thoughts. Even when they were learning to string words together, as can be seen in fig. 4.6, they weren't being asked to be creative thinkers or language users, but were being asked to perform tasks based on rote memorization.

Fig. 4.5:

A handwritten list of words arranged in three columns. The words are:
 Column 1: pencil, ~~teacher~~, teacher, girl, little, letter, look, clock.
 Column 2: paper, bunch, women, Boys, Big, Box, good, you.
 Column 3: people, lunch, man, baby, long time, like book, all man, her, she, they there.

Fig. 4.6:

A handwritten version of the Pledge of Allegiance written on a spiral notebook. The text reads:
 I pledge allegiance to the flag
 of the United States of America
 and to the Republic for which
 it stands
 one nation indivisible under God
 with liberty and justice for all

This pedagogical simplicity, however, seems to be more rooted in the classroom dynamics than in the assumptions of the teachers. It was true that, for the most part, “they just teach you basic expressions, not much” (Pasqualina Casale). Yet, they could not be

exceptions, however, all of my participants worked outside of the home and the men and women were often equal wage-earners.

expected to teach much more when the “the teacher was American” (Pasqualina Casale), and “in the class you used to have maybe ten different countries and nobody understood each other. They couldn’t even understand the teacher” (Russo). Further, the teachers were not necessarily pedagogically savvy. As with Driver’s Ed classes, the qualifications to teach night school were not very stringent. Since higher education was often only the province of the rich in Italy, even my participants were surprised to learn that their teachers were not academically trained. Tony Ianiello recalls his own astonishment: “I remember, I found out that my teacher in the daytime, he is a milkman. He is a teacher and, in the daytime, he delivers milk in the daytime! I’m thinking, ‘My teacher is a milkman?’ While multicultural settings can be beneficial in certain contexts, when trying to teach individuals a new language, it is unrealistic to assume that they will be able to make the mental leap from their home language to a new one without guidance in their mother tongue. (Just imagine if professors without proficiency in English taught foreign language courses in America.)

Further, not knowing the students’ home language led to some interesting predicaments in the classroom. Maria Romanelli, for instance, recalls the teacher asking her to write the word *face*, a request she refused, though the teacher did not understand why. *Face* in dialect Italian is a cuss word referring to one’s rear end. Several of the women noted this translation issue as being one of the most difficult challenges to their English-literacy learning. As Ida Casale explains, “The most difficult was when you said the words. A lot of words in America you say frequently-- is a like a *change* for us look like it was bad words. When I heard my cousin say ‘Give me some change, mom. I want to give it to Ida,’ I was embarrassed because that’s a bad word in dialect. Yeah-- ‘Give me pussy.’” For numerous reasons, the lack of a bridge

from one language to another caused many students to quit; as Joe Russo concludes, “It was difficult when you don’t even understand the teacher, so a lot of people, they just give up.”

Those who chose to remain in the class were dissatisfied with the amount of literacy they gained. While the overall goal of the course was to teach the immigrants English, the actual outcomes of the course were ambiguous as were the results. English is a complex language and, because of the way they were taught, my participants were much more capable of intake rather than linguistic output. Ruggiero explains: “I learn to put a few thing together. Not could I write, I could read everything. We have a rougher time than American people to spell. I could write a few lines, but when you talk about reading, I learned to read everything: newspaper, letters.” Having the words on paper, my participants were able to spend as much time as necessary trying to determine the meaning of the words—an act that knowing even the few words they learned in school made possible. Even after completing the course, however, an understanding of how to put English words together on their own was not established. As Ida Casale explains, “I’m not going to say that whatever's write it, I cannot read it. I can read it, but it's hard to comprehend the words to put them together because, you know, you read it one way, you write it another way, you spell another way. That's the worst part in this country.” Interestingly, even though my participants all stated to me that reading was the easiest literacy task for them to complete, the teachers focused on speaking and did not use reading as a tool to help my participants grasp the complexity of English—a choice that did not make much sense to my participants: “The most important thing they wanted to teach you to speak because with the writing, I understand it better, but they want you to learn the words” (Ianiello).

By stating that they were dissatisfied with the language classes, I do not mean to imply that the students were dissatisfied with their own literacy skills. The majority of my participants who attended night school did so because they were told it was necessary to learn English in order to find a job. They quickly learned, however, that this simply was not the case and, as such, had less interest in learning how to read, write, and speak a new language. When I asked Tony Ianiello, for example, if he used what he learned in school, he explained: “No, after I got the job at Ford, I don’t go to school no more. I got the job that’s it. I don’t need to know. I don’t need the milkman no more.” All of my participants who attended school, with one exception, offered the same response. Joe Russo, the one participant who was able to get a higher education in Italy was invested in becoming literate in English, so that he could use his prior education. As he explains, “My diploma over here didn’t mean nothing because over here, everything’s different. Over here, we had to start all over. So then, when I came in this country in 1955, I went to night school to pick up some English.” While he was committed to becoming literate, the night school could not fit his needs. “Over there, two months they put me in higher grade, higher grade,” he explains. “Then, six months, they threw me out because I had some English, but I didn’t know the language. I knew how to write a little bit, the grammar, but to speak-- it was no good.” (Russo). When Russo expressed a strong interest in continuing his English-language education to West Tech’s principal, he was told: ““Your best bet is just volunteer for the service. Get away from all these Italians. You got to volunteer for the service just two years. When you come back, you will be a new man.’ And I listened because I want to speak the language” (Russo).

Even the principal was aware that the way to gain proficiency in the English language was not going to be found in the educational outlets of Cleveland—a realization most of the participants came to early in their night classes. They also recognized that gaining English-language literacy required them to give up part of their home culture—a choice that, unlike Joe Russo, many were not willing to make. Russo's desire to become an English-speaker, writer, and reader, was, in fact, uncommon among his peers. Only six participants out of eleven chose to attend any language classes; only two completed the entire course. The majority of my participants and their friends and family that immigrated before them realized that the educational opportunities provided for them were not going to be enough to move them into a higher social class, nor did they think these teachings were capable of fitting in their own value systems. As such, they were reluctant to encourage one another to gain a greater understanding of English. Russo's family was "very upset" with his choice to move away from the family and join the army, and when Bernardina Corte told her family and friends that she wanted to go to school, she explains, "everybody made fun of me." Needing an education in order to find work was one thing, but desiring a foreign education was seen as a betrayal of the home culture. This notion increased in fervor because of the way Italian Americans were portrayed in American culture. As Pisani argues, "As their ways were ridiculed, as foreign customs often were, they became dearer to the Italians who held them" (152). Their desire to maintain their culture and values, hence, turned them away from literacy sponsors.

According to the literacy myth, the immigrants would then retreat into the silence of illiteracy and be unable to become socially mobile. There certainly appears to be evidence

that such a retreat occurred. DeSalvo, for instance, describes the impenetrable silence keeping her from her family's past:

Lamentation is essential for an oral history to exist, and because they did not recount their grievances, but instead buried them, I have almost no stories to share about these grandparents; nothing that has come down to me about how my grandparents and their parents lived in Italy or when they came to the United States; nothing about how they were treated or about the difficulties they encountered. (20)

Obviously, by highlighting the experiences of my participants, I agree with DeSalvo that silences must be broken in order for cultural and historic understanding to develop. I am hesitant to detract from the rhetorical power of silence. Though DeSalvo notes the void that silence leaves behind, Giunta offers us another representation of her mother's silence: "her silence is more eloquent than a press conference It is the silence of words that remain unspoken but hang in the air, thick and substantial, drenched with meaning" (Giunta 71). This substantial silence, as I will show, was a way for my participants to fight against the "psychic effects of giving way to the established system" (Rolle 110). As Rolle explains, these effects are "great. A man who has to give up his language, his culture and, in some cases, even to change his name, is placed under extreme pressures, both unconsciously, and at the conscious level" (110). Instead of giving in, the Italian Americans chose to isolate themselves, creating a world where their language was the dominant tongue and their values were synonymous with those of their neighbors, friends, and many of their co-workers because "they wished not to hide what they were in order to be successful, although sometimes it was necessary to go against one's wishes" (113). Therefore, while many of their

stories, as DeSalvo points out, are shrouded in silence, there are ways that living under this cloak can be empowering.

Interestingly, while believing the literacy myth would lead us to conclude that this silence came at the expense of social mobility, it did not. While many contend that

whatever the heart-warming tales concerning human ability to supercede linguistic differences by the primitive means of smiles, grunts, charades, gesticulations and twinkling eyes, the fact remains that as long as the immigrant remained ignorant of the English tongue, his capacity for gaining access to the skills and means of assimilation and mobility were severely limited. (Parenti 28)

Such statements are really just a by-product of the literacy myth that takes for granted that assimilation is a goal of the immigrants and that mobility can only come with school-based knowledge. A study of the Italian-Americans' ability to move from working to middle class shows, however, that English-language literacy did not really have an impact on their subsistence. As Humbert Nelli states, "Despite dire predictions that Italians, caught 'in a cycle of poverty,' would remain destitute and a burden to society, by 1900 they had begun progressing from unskilled labor into commercial, trade, and professional classes, including printing, bricklaying, carpentering, import and export, banking, law and medicine" (99).

While obviously the latter three require high levels of specific literacies, my participants were able to make similar economic gains without trading their language for the dominant discourse. Graff is correct in arguing that "handicapped by illiteracy and heavily burdened by ascriptive characteristics, these men and women often proved themselves resourceful in their abilities to settle, survive, form families, and make their way in environments new and alien

to them” (*Myth* 92). It is their resourcefulness or, rather, the adaptational maneuvers that they developed outside of the schools and within their communities that made their mobility and cultural resistance possible.

Breaking Ground and Baking Bread: Community Development in Cleveland



Fig. 4.6 Maria Romano (Center Right) and Maria Romanelli (Center Left) with their husbands, children, and Maria Romanelli’s Mother¹⁸

Despite the media’s and, often, the academy’s constant affirmation of the night school and the settlement house as vehicles of social mobility, the type of literacy my participants relied upon most in America was not comprised of the functional language skills they learned in school. Instead they were able to find work, get driver’s licenses, gain citizenship, and complete a myriad of tasks that typically require English-language literacy by relying upon the teachings of their peers. Since the time of the great migration, Italian Americans began creating and, to an extent, recreating their Italian communities in various American cities. In part, this settlement pattern harkens back to the Italian tradition of *campanilismo*. “Deriving from the word *compagna* (bell) and *campanile* (church tower), *campanilismo* refers to a view of the world that includes reluctance to extend social, cultural, and economic contracts

¹⁸ Photograph courtesy of Maria Romanelli.

beyond the points from which the parish or village bell could still be heard” (Lopreato 104). Essentially, this meant that Italians viewed those living beyond their village as foreigners—a perception that Italian Americans also adopted. As Lopreato explains, “The Italian colonies in all places tended to be internally divided into ‘Little Sicilies,’ ‘Little Calabrias,’ and the like” (41). Yet, this separatist attitude was not the only impetus for the creation of the ethnic enclave.

While the government and the media decried the establishment of foreign colonies, because, as the State of New York Report of the Joint Legislative Committee states, they “too often had the effect of perpetuating the foreign language and interests and delaying adjustment to and participation in American life” (qtd. in Mangione and Morreale 160), the government actually developed immigration policies that promoted the establishment of ethnically isolated environments. When my participants arrived in the U.S. in the late fifties and early sixties, immigration policy required that non-citizens be sponsored by a current citizen, meaning that a family member or friend would have to contractually agree to financially support the newcomer as well as provide him or her with shelter.¹⁹ As one participant, Ida Casale, explains, you came to a city “because your family was here. At that time, it was whoever sponsored you, that’s where you go. During the year, my uncle was responsible for whatever happened to us. After that year, you could move, but that first year you had to stay with who sponsored you.” As typically it was a family member who served as the sponsor, whoever immigrated to the U.S. first would be responsible for bringing over

¹⁹ Sponsorship was a change in U.S. immigration policy which had earlier been based upon a national quota system. It was hoped that this new approach would actually cause the ethnic neighborhood to deteriorate. As Joseph Velikonja explains, however, “the legislative restrictions which originally aimed to prevent the establishment of national clusters through national quota restrictions, instead reinforce these same concentrations” (31).

the rest of *la famiglia*, which led to the development of “chains and networks of migration from Italian clans, towns, and regions to specific states, towns and urban neighborhoods in the United States” (Candeloro 174). Ida Casale, for example, begins to describe the chain of migration she was a part of: “we came over here. We stay for a couple of weeks. Then *zia* [aunt] Pasqualina came, Aldo, Alio. We got oh, you know, the Falsos, the Russos, there was a lot a lot of people that we [pause] it was like a group of little Italy.” Because one person often served as a sponsor for many, the houses often became overcrowded. Maria Falso, for instance, shared one home with fourteen people because her sponsor had brought over her mother, her two sisters, Maria and her family as well as her brother’s family (Falso). The majority of my participants would live with their sponsor, typically their aunts and uncles or parents or in-laws, for a year until they were able to get on their feet and the term of sponsorship was completed. Yet, once they were able to move off on their own, they often chose to remain near their sponsor. As Bernardina Corte explains:

I live with my husband and my father-in-law right there on Courtland in a small little house. Then after a year, we buy this house. We live in this house for forty years. I no like to move. This is my place. I love this spot. Everybody know me. They say hi, you say hi, you know. I live on this street almost forty years. (Corte)

Of my eleven participants, ten chose to stay in the first home that they purchased thirty to forty years ago.



Fig. 4.8 Maria Romanelli stands at the fence of Maria Falso's House (Left) and Pasqualina Parente's House (Right)²⁰

One reason they chose to stay in their neighborhoods was because sponsorship and the resulting community formation was “a source of psychological satisfaction and security” (Gallo 191). There was a sense that those residing in the neighborhood understood each other and were committed to one another’s well being. As Romanelli describes: “It was all Italian. The people I live upstairs from was Italian. As a matter of fact, one of the woman was right from my hometown, and they treat me really good. They know my husband used to leave me and the kids and that woman downstairs used to always come up, bring me food and stuff.” While, “in reality, of course, the colony represented an important step away from old world patterns” because Italians from all different Italian provinces were interacting with one another, the shared language, religious beliefs, and cultural traditions provided the immigrants with a sense of stability in the new world (Nelli 88). “Immigration was not too bad,” Russo explains, “because when we came, we were in groups. All of the Italians used to live on W. 67th Street or by St. Rocco Church on Clarke Avenue. All of the German used to live in a different place. All the Slovenians, they had their own place.” Russo adds that

within the neighborhood, “They have Italian stores, Italian churches, Italian clubs. They all speak Italian. So we were outside. Just when you go to work you had to be around other people.” While my participants are characterized as being among those who did not gain English-language literacy because of laziness, in reality, speaking their own language filled a psychological need. It wasn’t that they couldn’t speak English or learn English but that speaking their home language served a distinct purpose:

when we get together with Italian people, we always, always, always speak in Italian. It feels like more home—that you in Italy. It seems so better.

Especially when you want to say the words, *da ma aqua*, you know it sounds so romantic. I like it. Every time we get together, we always speak Italian.

And, really, the words come so much better. (Casale)

Speaking their home language provided my participants with a feeling of familiarity, consubstantiality,²¹ and was a way of showing respect for their heritage. By communally maintaining their language, my participants and their peers were leading to the formation of a new community where Italian was the norm.

Within the neighborhood, then, there was no impetus to learn the English language. The completion of day-to-day tasks was made possible because of the community network. *La Voce*, the Italian-American press of Cleveland, for instance, put out “a ‘commercial Guide’ to assist the Italian reader in spending his wages” (Veronesi 228). The pages were

²⁰ Photograph courtesy of author.

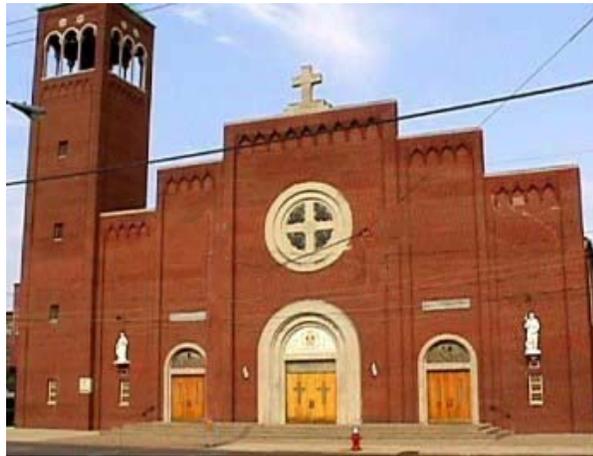
²¹ Kenneth Burke refers to consubstantiality, as a sense of identification through the sharing of a like symbol or experience. A metaphor, for instance, can make two people consubstantial, as it enables us to understand an experience or an idea through the recognition of a shared symbol. For a more complete understanding of Burke’s ideas about identification, see *A Rhetoric of Motives*. Berkeley: U of California, P, 1969. 19-22. Also see Burke’s *Philosophy of Literary Form*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1973, where he discusses these ideas throughout.

filled with businesses run by other Italians. Ida Casale and Maria Romanelli recall ads for grocery stores such as Gallucci's Foods, Rini's, and Zanoni's and also for stands at the West Side Market. The guide also included businesses that were Italian-friendly. For instance, "The May Company and Cleveland Trust set up 'Italian Departments' in their stores to accommodate the Italian-American shopper" (229). Within Cleveland, as Rolle argues, "immigrant businessmen, especially those who formed partnerships with native Americans, acted as 'links between two worlds.' Whereas city stores operated by immigrants listed their products in both English and Italian, most tradesmen used only English in their advertising" (117); hence the immigrant proprietors attracted Italian customers. The population density of Italian Americans in the neighborhood also provided some with entrepreneurial opportunities that did not require linguistic training. Russo, for instance, opened both a pizzeria and a tire shop and relied solely on the business of other Italian Americans. As he explains, "Selling pizza was good because there were a lot of people from Italy. And the people they used to come everyday. They don't patronize an American restaurant because they don't understand, so they patronize the Italians."²²

When the neighborhood lacked institutions run by Italian-speaking individuals, the immigrants built them. Two of the Italian nationality parishes, Our Lady of Mount Carmel

²² Though Joe Russo's businesses relied upon Italian-American customers, after he was in business for awhile, he did want to get more Americans to come into his store because, relating back to Italian-American's thriftiness, he argues: "The Italians are the cheapest people that God created." As such, he often found it easier to charge Americans higher prices, as they were not as likely to haggle with him. In order to attract American business, Russo began running advertisements for his store in English language periodicals.

and St. Rocco's,²³ were built to serve the Italian Americans' spiritual and linguistic needs. Tony Ruggiero touches on the connection between these two needs when he describes his experience at mass: "I go to 10 o'clock mass. It's in Italian language at Our Lady Mount Carmel on Detroit. Everyone comes out on the sidewalk and speaks in Italian. It feels like home." As the Cleveland Americanization Committee concluded, "The corner store with its foreign proprietor; the parish church with its foreign clergy; the neighborhood bank with its foreign owner—all of these color the life of the immigrant with old world languages and traditions. They seem to make it unnecessary to acquire the language of the adopted country" (10).



**Fig. 4.9 Parish of St. Rocco
Cleveland, Ohio**

For this reason, many argue that "it was not uncommon for immigrants to spend their entire lives in the United States without any knowledge of English" (Mangione & Morreale

²³ St. Rocco's church was literally built by the immigrants. As Veronesi explains, "In 1950 it was decided that a new church was needed and one of the most unique stories in Cleveland's Italian past began. The men of the parish had been collecting bricks, stones and slabs of marble from construction sites and had stored them on the church grounds until it began to resemble a junkyard. Using ropes and muscle, the men began to build a church, hoisting the stones forty feet above the ground and fitting them into place. During the evening eight men would work and on Saturdays this figure doubled. After two and one-half years of work the junkyard materials had been assembled into a beautiful stone church seating 750 members" (207).

160). Yet, this conclusion is a bit misleading and is often interwoven with claims of the immigrants' illiteracy. Though they often resisted English-language education and chose dialect Italian as their dominant tongue, my participants were far from illiterate in either language. Claims of their English-language illiteracy were based more on mainstream American attitudes about foreigners, accents, and social class than on the lived literacy experiences of Italian Americans. Tony Ruggiero discusses his own literacy practices and the way his literacy is perceived by outsiders: "We had a rough time. You could tell that we are foreign. You can tell we speak broken English. You never learn the accent from another country. As soon as you open your mouth, they know you're not American. But I did read a lot." Prayer books, newspapers, magazines, romances, books, the Bible—my participants devoured as many texts, if not more, than mainstream Americans because they appreciated the free time they now had to enjoy literate activities.

Though claims of illiteracy were often placed upon the immigrants, judging from my participants' reading behaviors, they actually were quite adept at gaining new literacy skills. Not only were they reading and writing in dialect, but they were also learning standard Italian and English almost simultaneously. As with many Italian-American immigrants, my participants chose to learn the standard tongue in order to retain a connection with their homeland; "the Italian language press filled a psychological need for its readers in assuring them there was reason for pride in their homeland" (Pisani 134). In order to make "the news" accessible to more Italians, the presses often opted to print stories in standard Italian rather than selecting one of the many dialects. As I explored in chapter two, standard Italian was taught to my participants when they were in grade schools but was not used in the village and, as such, this linguistic knowledge was often lost once my participants left the schools.

Because of the press and their need for solidarity in the new land, however, my participants and many others became committed to relearning the language, often putting this goal before the learning of English. Being able to read a common paper gave them a sense of nationalism towards their homeland that they did not experience until they arrived in America. Parenti, for example, argues that within the press

regional differences were often submerged by the common problems of acculturation Italians shared. Contact with the strange surroundings emphasized to the immigrant his kinship with those fellow-Italians in the new land who, regardless of their provincial origin, were in many ways like him. Most of all, the discrimination displayed by the dominant community and the low status to which Italians were relegated were experiences that most shared. . . .It can be said that one major catalyst for group solidarity was majority group bigotry. (34)

In many ways, the experience of adjusting to American habits and culture brought Italian Americans together in a way that they did not and probably would not have experienced in Italy. This unification is evidenced in my participants' language practices. Maria Romanelli, for instance, explains that "if I met people from my hometown I used my dialect. If I met people that come from Rome or the north or Milan then I speak Italian." Romanelli's development of the standard Italian tongue once in America is not unique among my participants or Italian Americans at large. In fact, "for immigrants revisiting Italy after a twenty year absence it is a surprising experience to discover how many 'Italian' words they now use are unknown to denizens of the old village" (Parenti 32).

Also, though it has been concluded otherwise, my participants reading of materials in Italian did not stem out of a need. As earlier stated, the act of reading in a foreign language was considered by many of my participants to be the easiest literacy skill to adopt. As such, many of my participants also subscribed to and read English-language newspapers such as the Cleveland *Plain Dealer*. Tony Ianiello, for instance, explains that in addition to reading material printed in Italian, he also enjoyed reading in English:

I read the *Plain Dealer* a lot. I use to buy those book, but I don't remember the name of it--Reader's Digest? I used to buy that. I get a good kick out of that. The kids come around. You give them a couple bucks. I used to buy the Press at night. I used to buy and take it with me to work and read it.

Rather than being forced to read Italian texts because they could not decipher English texts, my participants chose to read newspapers from Italy or newspapers printed in Italian because they help “readers retain their sense of the old background and values” (Pisani 135). Similar to a number of my participants, Tony Ruggiero not only subscribes to the Italian newspaper in Cleveland written in Standard Italian, but also to the newspaper from his hometown written in dialect Italian. As he explains, “I read the Italian newspaper. We have one local in Cleveland that's located on the Eastside, and I also have a paper that comes from our hometown. I pay \$35 a year and you get every three months and it tells you all the details in the town.” Similarly, Joe Russo subscribes to magazines from Italy, not because he could not read magazines printed in English, but because, as he explains, “I don't want to leave my language from my country behind because now, even so I'm a U.S. citizen, but I still, I want

to keep the heritage alive. That's why I started the Italian school for the club."²⁴ Though all of my participants are now American citizens, they maintain a connection to Italian culture rather than just Italian-American culture. For instance, at two o'clock our interviews would stop because that is when the Italian news is on channel 43—an Italian cable channel all of my participants except one subscribe to. According to my participants, staying informed about Italian politics and culture is a way of maintaining their heritage and passing it on to their children.

It is also a way of staying connected with the friends and family still in Italy who often also serve as literacy sponsors for Italian Americans. My participants' families back home, for instance, keep my participants engaged in an exchange of words through books and letters. Until they could afford phone service, the only communication they had with family members back home was through these literate exchanges of ideas. On average, my participants wrote three letters a week during their first few years in the United States. Though most of these exchanges were simply focused on relating everyday experiences, they sometimes grew into academic exchanges as their friends and family in the "old country" would often send them Italian texts that they could not otherwise acquire. As Maria Romanelli explains, "If someone writes me a letter, I answer back or my cousin sent me a book of Italian stories and I read that and write back." Similar to Romanelli, Joe Russo, Tony Parente, Tony Ianiello, Maria Romano, Tony Ruggiero, and Bernardina Corte all own and read books ranging from poetry to history that were written by friends and family back in

²⁴ Joe Russo and several other participants are involved with the maintenance of Cleveland's Home Family Club—a club created for individuals who immigrated from the Latina region of Italy. The club celebrates Italian traditions like cooking, bocce ball, and religious festivals. Joe Russo is responsible for the Italian language classes that are offered to both children and adults. To learn more about The Home Family Club, visit: <http://homefamilyclub.com/index.html>

Italy and sent to them. While the letter-writing practices began to break down once communication was expedited by the telephone, books, newspapers, and magazines continue to be exchanged via mail.²⁵

While Italians contribute to the development of their peers' Italian literacy, Italian Americans serve as sponsors for one another's English-language literacy. Even when living within an ethnically homogenous neighborhood, immigrants at times are forced to step outside of that world and have a need for certain types of English-language literacy. My participants foregrounded three of these interactions above all others: currency exchanges, doctor's visits, and job seeking. When we think of literacy, we typically think in terms of words rather than denominations, but deciphering the values of coins and bills does require an ability to understand a symbol system. For my participants, change posed a significant problem (aside from the fact that *change* translates to a pejorative word relating to female anatomy). The actual value attached to a coin does not relate to the coin's size, material, or color. To understand bills, one only needs to know numbers, but even that requires a certain amount of literacy, especially for a group of people who had rarely been involved in currency-exchanges before. At first, whenever they shopped outside of Little or Big Italy, they often had to rely on the kindness of strangers. As Pasqualina Casale explains, "What I used to do was when I buy stuff. I would go to the teller and give them all the stuff. When they said the money, you didn't know how much it was, so you gave them a bill, a big one." In order to get by, friends and family who had immigrated earlier would often organize shopping trips to take several of the newly arrived to the store and help them learn how to

²⁵ Only one participant, Joe Russo, owns and uses a computer. Russo bought a computer in order to make promotional materials for the Home Family Club, such as posters and brochures. He does not, however, use email.

complete these business transactions. Eventually, the newly arrived took over this responsibility when more recent immigrants arrived.

After a few years in the U.S., Maria Romanelli, for instance, began to take on the responsibility of taking her peers to the doctor's office. On their own, my participants struggled when they tried to explain their symptoms to doctors or had to fill out all of the paperwork one encounters at any doctor's visit.²⁶ As such, they would accompany one another on these visits—one of them being adept at the particular literate needs required at such visits. When she first arrived, Romanelli's aunt would take her to the doctor and show her how to fill out the forms by creating a sheet that had her name, social security number, insurance information, etc. all labeled so that the information could be copied on the appropriate forms. After several visits, Romanelli began to learn the words related to bodily functions that she needed to know in order to explain her symptoms to her doctor on her own—*stomach, pain, headache, sprain*, etc. After that point, she began taking others to the doctor. Maria Falso, for example, explains that “Maria (Romanelli) took me to the doctor many times.” For those such as Falso, who chose not to ever learn to speak, read, or write in English this network of fellow immigrants who understood the ropes remains a necessary reliance.

For those who wanted independence—a state that requires a certain amount of literacy in the dominant tongue—they, like Romanelli, often relied upon the same network for language acquisition. While certainly my participants picked up words, phrases, and some English-language knowledge from a myriad of places—Pasqualina Parente read her daughter's kindergarten textbooks at night; Bernardina Corte watched programs on Channel

²⁶ Interestingly, on a recent doctor's visit I explained my research to my physician, and he informed me that even still it is often Italian-American patients who rarely speak English.

25, the local learning channel; and several attended night school for at least a short period of time—the majority of my participants point to one another as their greatest literacy sponsors and to experience as their best teacher. Even without a formal understanding of the language, because they understood each other’s needs, goals, and home language, they were the most capable of providing useful literacy training for one another. The result was a certain type of literacy that D’Angelo refers to as *Italglish*. As Giunta explains, becoming an Italian American is “a process of splitting and joining, blending but not melting, absorbing, but not assimilating; a negotiation with cultural identities and languages ... at odds with each other” (x). The Italian Americans’ participation in this process is evidenced in their language practices. Most of my participants had some degree of literacy in English, Italian, and dialect and, in certain places, these disparate dialects/languages began to overlap and enmesh, as is evinced by the vowels added to words or the disparate types of sentence structures found in quotes throughout this project.

Though engaging in this blending requires sophisticated language techniques, this linguistic behavior was often taken as a sign of illiteracy. Rolle, for instance, argues that “the uneducated transformed words into their own equivalent: *Bum* has an Italian plural *bummi*. *Rag*, *bar*, and *car* became *raggo*, *barro*, and *carro*. *Job*, *basket*, *shop* and *mortar* were changed to *jobba*, *basketta*, *shoppa* and *mata*” (110). Such blending of languages, however, should not be characterized as stemming from a lack of education. Instead, as D’Angelo explains when he describes his own father’s language practices:

my father was intuitively using Italglish as a *lingua franca*, sometimes making use of Italian syntax, incorporating English words, transforming their sounds to make them correspond to the sounds of Italian (e.g., *stritto carro*, for street

car), other times using English syntax, incorporating Italian or Sicilian words, blending Italian and English lexicons. (55)

This blending reflects a complex understanding of language and a resistance to accept the English-language and its political concomitants. Without completely assimilating, my participants developed these language practices to engage in all sorts of activities that typically require Standard English literacy.

The Literacy Myth at Work: “Just Ask Another Italian”

If we believe the literacy myth and the forms it continues to take today, we would be apt to agree with the relationship the 1910 Immigrant Guide describes between literacy and the workplace:

English is absolutely indispensable to the workman. He needs it in order to find work. He needs it to take directions and have his work explained. He needs it unless he is willing to work for the smallest wages with no hope of increase. He needs it when he is in difficulties to avoid interested helpers. He needs it to protect himself without requiring the help of the law. He needs it to understand words of warning and keep out of danger, for every year hundreds of Italians are hurt or killed in America, because they do not understand the shouts of warning, or do not know how to read danger signals,

when a few English words might have saved their lives. (Carr 14)²⁷

At first, as their enrollment in the night school suggests, my participants believed in the mythology of literacy emphasized here. For my participants, gaining employment was not only vital for their own sustenance, but also for the well being of their sponsors and the rest of their families. Ida Casale's reflection clarifies the fear sponsors experienced when taking in relatives:

My uncle was afraid that my daddy would not work. My daddy says, 'Look Frank, Francesco, I got to find a job.' He says, 'You know I got four kids over here. I got to find a job.' So my uncle got more relief because he knew my daddy was not a freeloader.

Though, because of this fear, they often enrolled in night classes; however, their ability to gain employment really had little to do with the amount of English-language literacy they had even when English literacy was listed as a requirement on applications. Though media outlets contended that "unless you speak English it is impossible, in the skilled trades, to find work," my participants proved otherwise (Carr 10). Once again, it was because of their community networks that my participants gained the connections and the literacy tools they

²⁷ While this argument was also made by my participants' employers, as I will later show, there is no evidence to suggest that having literacy has limited workplace accidents. Many of my participants were injured on the job, but being able to read would not have prevented these injuries. For instance, Maria Romano had one of her fingers ripped off while she was employed at Joseph Feiss Sewing. The accident did not result from her lack of language skills, but from her boss' failure to listen to her. As she explains: "He make me put bundle of coat on the top of the metal shelf, but I tell the boss, 'it's too high over there. I can't go there.' He say, 'you got to do it because we have to put the stuff there.' Romano grabbed a stool to complete the task and an event that changed her life forever occurred: "I have a little stool, you know? I stand there because it's high. I jump and I feel my body, woop. One piece of steel very small and strong. When I put the hand like this, the piece of steel go inside the ring. When I jump down, I feel it—phomp. I think something electrocute me. I feel a shock on my body, but I don't know what it is. Then, I come back. I put the hand down and I see the finger --all of the tissue of the finger was hanging here. The ring cut my finger off. All this tissue." Though Romano could have sued the company, she chose not to, but this choice had more to do with her views of charity than with her lack of English-language literacy. As she explains, "I didn't do nothing. I no want to sue the company. My son work there. I don't sue nothing. I go to work after seven months. They give me everything. They pay me the days.

needed to find, apply for, and get jobs. As was pointed out in chapter two, “Italians brought with them a lively rural-paesani culture that, though imbued with class distinctions lent itself to cooperative survival strategies in their new world” (Candeloro 175). These survival strategies translated into the economic market of the New World, and just as they had helped one another on the farm, they began to help one another in the industrial workplace.²⁸

Cleveland is a city founded on industry. Petroleum, steel, cars, clothing, shipping, and a myriad of commercial enterprises supported by Cleveland’s location on the banks of Lake Erie drew in immigrants from many disparate parts of the world. While today the closing of these businesses has landed Cleveland on the list of “poorest cities in the country” more than once, during its hey-day and continuing into the years my participants arrived and sought employment, work was available to almost anyone with either a strong back or a keen sense of detail. As such, the majority of my participants sought their livelihood on the assembly lines or in the sewing rooms that they had heard about back in New York or New Jersey. Though these companies eagerly sought employees, there were still measures that made a reliance on the community network necessary. From applications to literacy tests to citizenship requirements, my participants faced a variety of gate-keeping tactics, but all of them were able to surpass these barriers and receive the jobs that had enticed them from across the ocean. Obviously, seeking out employment forced my participants to step outside of their communities, but, in a way, they also brought their community with them. Just as they depended upon one another to negotiate shopping trips and doctor’s visits, they also

They pay me, I think \$3,000. When I come back, the doctor tell me “Joanne, if you don’t want to work. Come back here and I give you more time.” But I no go. See I don’t want to sue nobody. I make my own way.”

²⁸ Given my participants and most Southern Italians rural background, it was surprising to many that they did not choose to get involved in agricultural work in the U.S. They had several reasons, however, for choosing industrial labor instead. As Nelli summarizes, “They did not become farmers for several reasons. Farm life in the U.S. was far more isolated than it was in rural Italy and did not allow for the close communication

used this network to obtain employment. As Maria Romanelli explains, to “find work, you use Italian people. At that time, it was no problem find work. If they work somewhere they would try to bring you there. You always had to have someone tell you what to do, but you learn, you learn fast. My cousin was here four or five years and she could get along fine. She helped me a lot.” Similar to how they handled paperwork at the doctor’s office, one would help another fill out applications, understanding that later they would be responsible for helping someone else. This process was often understood, though unspoken, as Romanelli explains, “You can’t fill [applications]—somebody helps you. Some Italian who has been here longer, they go with you, find the job, fill out the application and then you do for the next person.” Since they were helping one another find jobs, they often ended up working together.

All six of the women I interviewed, for example, worked for the same company, Joseph Feiss Sewing. The forewoman at this particular location was Italian and a sister-in-law to one of the residents in the neighborhood. For this reason, the application process was often expedited. As Maria Falso illustrates, “I work at Joseph Feiss because my neighbor work there and she drive me back and forth. She tell the forewoman I work on the farm, and they hire me right away because they know Italian farmer works.” Despite the claims of literacy proponents such as *The State of New York Immigrant Guide* which claimed: “English is absolutely indispensable to the workman” (Carr 14), for many of my participants, work and English literacy did not presuppose one another. At Joseph Feiss, the boss and most of the workers actually spoke Italian rather than English. As Maria Falso explains, “The boss parla italiana: ‘Hey Rose, a faci soldi.’” Bernardina Corte adds, “When I went to work, there

networks in the city. Second, many came to the U.S. to escape the hardships of rural life and, finally, when they arrived in the city they often met with ready employment and higher wages than they received on the farm (85).

was all Italian people over there. So really, you talk Italian. You speak whatever you want. You want thread, you want a needle.” In moments of uncertainty, rather than feeling as if language failed them, they, as Maria Romanelli reveals, “just ask another Italian.”

Though this ethnically isolated work environment rang true for several of my other participants who found work at Petiti’s Garden Center or Italian barbershops, the predominance of Italian Americans at this particular factory was an anomaly when compared to larger companies in Cleveland. For the most part, there were three hurdles to employment at companies such as Ford Motor Company or Modern Tool & Die: attainment of citizenship, obtaining a driver’s license, and passing some sort of literacy test. The first in this list served as an almost national literacy requirement as the citizenship test required some amount of English-language literacy or, at least, it was supposed to.²⁹ First, individuals needed to be able to understand verbal questions about American government, history, and culture in English and answer them in English—a task my participants completed by memorizing specific words such as *stars* and remembering the answer would either be *50* or *states*. While this description simplifies the task, the immigrants would often spend months preparing for this section of the test as there were 500 possible questions and answers. For the second component of the test, immigrants were asked to write a simple sentence. For example, Tony Parente was asked to write, “the boss is coming.” The ability to write a sentence chosen at random from a book was meant to gauge the individual’s literacy. Though this sounds simple when compared to the oral test, it was actually this one sentence answer that proved to be most challenging for my participants.

²⁹ Gaining citizenship is, in fact, still supposed to guarantee that the immigrant can “read, write, and speak English.” This information is according to the U.S. Immigration Support Website: http://www.usimmigrationsupport.org/citizenship_application.html

Yet it seems other Americans questioned the validity of this literacy requirement. For instance, when Maria Romanelli took the citizenship test, “they left the book open. When I went, they said, ‘write *I went to work today.*’ He left the book open, and I looked and wrote it.” Similarly, when Pasqualina Casale took the same test, they asked her to write “*the door is open,*” but when he saw her struggling, the examiner spelled the word *door* for her. Even then, she began questioning the meaning of literacy within American culture: “you know it’s funny when you go for American citizenship. They make you write *the door is open.* You want to be an American citizen, what the hell you write *the door is open* for?” (Casale). Casale has a point: what, specifically, is this literacy test meant to measure? Does the ability to write five or six words prove that one is literate? Does the inability to write five or six random words prove that one is illiterate? While the test was designed to separate the literates from the illiterates (at least in terms of English speaking, reading, and writing skills), at the time my participants took the test, none of them could perform any of these functions in English, yet they all passed the test, although, for at least one participant, doing so required taking the test seven times.

Similar problems arose with the test to acquire a driver’s license. English-language literacy is a requirement for this test based on the rationale that people need to be able to read stop signs, warnings, street signs, etc.³⁰ While understanding these basic symbols did not pose a problem for my participants, translating the test and choosing the correct answer did. Even for my participants who could read, certain questions simply did not make sense; Tony Parente, for instance, struggled with a particular question:

³⁰ In an interview with a staff member at the local DMV, this was the rationale I was given. Yet, the type of literacy required to take the test is actually unclear. Though reading is supposedly essential to driving, the DMV does offer an oral version of the test. For my participants this meant they could listen to a record and write their answers.

I pass the first time driving part and then written test I didn't pass. One question I missed twice. If you go 75 mph, do you let another car pass? I said no because you are going 75 mph: first time, second time. Then, the third time, I went over there and that guy was nice. I said, if you going 75 mph and a man--do you let them pass. He said, "Sure." So I put it down.

This issue of comprehension became more significant for my participants who did not have the same level of English reading skills as Parente. His wife, for instance, explains:

The driving for me was o.k., but the question was hard because some you understand, but some was kind of hard for me to understand. I didn't pass the first time, but the second time, son of a gun, I studied the question and they change the sheet. It was different question. So, I said, "Oh my God, now what?" (Pasqualina Parente).

As having a driver's license was a necessity to gain employment away from the bus line, and some jobs even required a driver's license to obtain employment, all of my participants desperately sought this freedom of mobility.

While some participants were able to retake and pass the test without assistance, others needed a crutch. Like Cushman, I discovered that in the face of such challenges, "individuals learned to work with institutions by listening to the stories of other area residents who had returned from their interactions with wider society's public servants" (Cushman xiii). In terms of the driving test, in the neighborhood, as Pasqualina Casale describes, the answers to the disparate written driving tests were passed around: "I write it in my hands and I just write it down. It worked and I passed." Though the test would change from time to time, if the test was retaken two or three times, chances were great that one

would eventually pass, as Parente did. Although Cushman's study focuses on the ways inner-city African Americans develop literate tools to aid with institutional interactions rather than strategies they develop to complete specific literacy tests, examples such as this one show how, like her participants, my participants found that "stoops and kitchens were schools for . . . institutional language: the reading, writing, and speaking skills needed in the daily struggles to obtain and maintain resources" (Cushman 53). Through this type of learning, my participants were able to gain the resources they needed while still maintaining their own cultural and linguistic identity.

For the most part, by making citizenship a requirement, large companies did not find it necessary to mandate formal literacy tests. Yet, even without the tests, my participants had to play language games in order to prove their "literacy" to the employer. As Soltow and Steven explain, literacy became an employment prerequisite because it gave "employers some efficient means to select personnel and . . . literacy [is] a convenient and easily applied measurement of achievement" (146). As English-language literacy is purported to be a mark of morality and docility as the teaching of the language often coincides with the teaching of values, even when formal literacy tests are absent, an individual's literacy skills may be called into question. Tony Ianiello, for example, was turned away from Ford Motor Company three times because he couldn't speak English. Repeatedly, Ianiello recalls, they said, "You go to school and then you come back." Finally they explained to him, "We put the sign *Danger* you shouldn't go through, but you can't read." Ianiello turned to his Italian friend and said, "Tell him I remember the sign *Danger*." That was not convincing enough. After the third rejection, he decided to enroll in a night class. Yet, he went to only one class session before applying again and was given the same job he had been turned down for only two

weeks before because of his lack of English literacy. This story highlights the problem with using literacy as a standard for employability: when he arrived for his interview, the same foreman he had seen weeks earlier stated: “I have to ask you a question if you want to get the job.” The question was: “Why don’t you have your coat on?” Ianiello was overjoyed, as he explains: “I understand that. I say, “My coat is in the car,” which caused his new boss to reply, “Oh, o.k. go to the doctor. I think you learned something.” He received his job March 9, 1959 and kept it until 1993—all with minimal English literacy. Even Ianiello recognizes the limitations of such informal literacy testing: “See, he think I learn everything... . He think I’m really English. I don’t know what kind of question he would have asked me if I had a coat, and I don’t know if I could answer.”

Even when their literacy wasn’t called into question, at times, my participants engaged in language games as a means of making themselves appear more American. As the previous chapter shows, my participants were aware of the stigmas surrounding Italian Americanness in America and, as such, when they were interacting with Americans, they would often engage in the type of linguistic mask-wearing Cushman describes, the deliberate masking of identity “to appeal to white society’s norms” (122). Antonio Ruggiero, for instance, purposefully engaged in such mask wearing when he applied for a job at Modern Tool and Die. When the employer asked his name, he replied, “Anthony Ruggiero.” As he explains his choice, “I put Anthony instead of Antonio. I wanted to make it an American name.” Similarly, when women laughed at her phrases at work, Maria Romanelli began to laugh with them as a means of identification. Yet, she also explained that she would remember the phrases that caused such laughter and refrain from using them in the future because she knew the laughter was a signal that she had not pronounced the terms properly.

For all of the literacy tests and language games, my participants actually used very little English on the job, and any literacy skills they did need were learned contextually, making the lessons sustainable. Similar to Street's evaluation that "literacy tests which firms develop for prospective employees may have nothing to do with the literacy skills required on the job," my conclusion based upon my participants' experiences is that the school-based training my participants were told to seek and the types of skills assessed by literacy tests such as the citizenship exam proved to be of little use (18). As little school-based literacy was required for the participants who worked at large companies like Ford as was required for the women working at Joseph Feiss sewing. When Joe Russo describes his grandfather, for example, it is clear that gaining traditional English literacy would have served little use for him on the job: "My grandfather was here since 1921 and he couldn't speak English. He was working in the factory. When you work in the factory, you punch in, you go to work, you punch out and you go home. That's it. You didn't have to learn that much." Though his grandfather's job certainly required specific skills, they were not the skills being taught at the night school, the settlement house, or the public school.

Instead, each job, apparently, had its own literacy that was easier to learn in the context of the workplace than in a classroom. In fact, once they were in factory positions, many of my participants expressed an eagerness to learn the terms that would help them complete their work. As Tony Ruggiero explains:

I learned more by trying to talk at work. You learn in school, if you don't use it tomorrow you don't know it anymore. When I was at work I asked question. There was a guy at Cleveland Welding, Tony Falso. I ask him many question.

He tell me, “what you think, I’m a teacher here?” I had to learn. I had to learn everything, everything. I tried to learn everything.

While too exhausted to attend night school, Ruggiero communicates a genuine interest in gaining English terminology on the job, especially since he was learning from a peer who had immigrated from his hometown in Italy. Though in this scenario, and many others, peers served as the teacher, often bosses also helped the employees gain useful literacy skills.

In his study of lived literacy experiences in international contexts, Street similarly found that “many tasks require minimal literacy or a different kind of literacy skill than is taught at school, and employers can sometimes teach these on the job fairly easily: lack of literacy skills is not so frequently a real barrier to employment as the public accounts suggest” (18). At Joseph Feiss, while the forewoman was Italian, there was also a Ukranian boss foreman who, though not formally, sponsored the learning of his workers. As Ida Casale’s experience exemplifies, “he took a lot of time with me to make me understand: ‘this is the thread. This is the needle. You gotta sew it this way, not this way.’ You know, little by little, that’s how I learned.” Though the boss didn’t specifically spend time working with Maria Romano, she also claims to have learned much from him but by using her own literacy attainment methods. As she explains, “You learn because the boss talk to you. I tell you what I do, I write—Italian words, English words. I write the way I think what they say, not the right way. The way I pronounce. The first words I learn: ‘how are you?’ ‘Fine, thank you.’

‘How are you?’ ‘Thank you.’ By looking at the notes she kept from this self-language training (Fig. 4.10 & 4.11), it is clear that her learning was more contextual than the literacy training she was receiving in the schools. (See Fig. 4.5 & 4.6)

passato
 I was, *frangere*
 I went to the cafeteria
 Fig. 4.10
 mese
 month
 I went to the cafeteria

this is a hat
 this is a belt
 this is a belt
 this is a cuff
 this is a sock
 this is a sock

Fig. 4.11

As can be seen from these examples, Romano is not only learning words, but she is learning words that will be useful on a day-to-day basis and is also experimenting with putting those words into greater context by beginning to write simple sentences. While she continued to use her Italian literacies at home, in the neighborhood, at church, to read, to write, and to maintain a connection with her community in Cleveland as well as her community back in Italy, Maria Romano like the majority of my participants, learned the literate skills she needed to in order to function in institutions outside of her linguistic comfort zone.

These examples show that by working together, my participants were able to achieve things that we typically believe require literacy: work, homes, even citizenship, and a driver's license. Through their experiences in gaining work, gaining citizenship, and gaining the hyphen that follows the descriptor "Italian," my participants were repeatedly shown the contradictions involved with the literacy myth. If English literacy had an inherent value, what was it if it could not help them subsist? How did knowing how to write "the door is open" make one more or less desirable as an American citizen? What they learned, as Graff argues, was that English literacy was not necessary to provide them with the lifestyle they desired; what was necessary was a literacy in the Italian language. Italian had an economic caché as this was the language that enabled them to find work and complete day-to-day tasks. It was also a language of resistance, enabling them to maintain their ethnicity within a country that not only had a foreign language, but also a foreign set of values.

Outside of the Network: From Industry to Information

While this portrayal celebrates the strategies they employed to maintain their culture, it by no means is meant to overshadow the struggles they faced. As was seen in the last chapter, their choice to resist assimilation certainly had a negative impact on the way they were viewed by outsiders, and, as such, they were often treated with more than a hint of disdain. They were not, however, victims of false consciousness; They participated in unions; They went on strike when their needs were not being met; They understood that English language literacy imbued its holder with certain powers and opportunities. Yet, they also understood that because of their ages when they arrived and the amount of literacy and currency they brought with them, the amount of English-language literacy they could receive in their lifetimes would never enable them to rise above the middle class. As Maria Romanelli puts it: “In America, you supposed to work and be, be anything you want. I know I cannot be anything I want—I only have third grade education when I come and I am already 17, but I can build foundation. I can have better home, better job, better life than in Italy.” While there were limitations to not knowing the language, interestingly, those who brought with them a more abundant Italian education and sought to enter the economy of information rather than industry seem to have struggled the most though they often also gained the most English-language literacy.

First of all, getting a strong grasp of the English language, as Russo’s principal claimed, often meant that the immigrants had to leave behind the comfort of the community network and immerse themselves in American culture. While immersion is one of the most

effective ways to learn a new language, it is also the most unsettling and chaotic. Tony Parente, for example, was educated to be a barber in Italy. In order to put his skills to use in the U.S., he had to venture outside of his comfort zone. The experience was disquieting:

I stop over in Cleveland. There was a barber shop over there. There was a guy there from Austria. I explained to them I want a job with my hands. He said, “o.k.” He put me in the car and took me to Berea. I was scared. I was thinking, “is this guy crazy?” He had a son over there with a barber shop. I started to work over there. Then it comes six thirty, closing time. I didn’t even know what bus I got to take. I don’t have no car. I thought what I’m going to do?

Following the advice of his principal, Russo, too, felt the discomfort of being cut off from the community when he enlisted in the army and was sent to Alaska. Though he did gain literacy skills, he also sacrificed the independence that being part of the community network enabled, as he explains: “It was Fort Knox. It was very hard. You don’t understand nobody. You go to the parade, you go to the meeting, you don’t know nothing. You’re just like a sheep; you gotta follow what all the other people are doing. So you become a sheep. Wherever they go, you go.” While certainly relying on the members of the neighborhood community meant that they could not be completely independent, it did provide my participants with the means of expressing their desires in a language they knew to people who understood and often could provide them with a means of completing the task at hand; immersion provided no such luxuries.

Though immersion brought with it struggles, proponents of the literacy myth often encouraged this type of emigration as they believed it would hasten assimilation and language acquisition and thereby increase chances for social mobility. In all instances, for my

participants however, this was not the case. Though Tony Parente did continue to work outside of the community, he never actually left the community behind, but instead sought refuge from his English-speaking clientele by returning to the neighborhood at night, joining Italian clubs, and remaining immersed in the Little Italy my participants built whenever he was not required by work to leave it behind. In fact, the more education they had received in both Italy and the U.S., the more s/he seemed to struggle, as their expectations of their quality of living were much higher. Russo, trained as an accountant in Italy, for instance, choose to learn English because he wanted to work in the information, rather than industrial, economy. As he explains:

Working for somebody, I never did believe that for me. When I came over, when I work the steel, I don't like to be by the machine and become a statue. You cannot move. I worked at Ford, Ford Motor Company. I start over there five times. I had a friend of mine that works over there and he gave me five different jobs. And I didn't like none of this because they put you on this machine. All day long boom boom, boom boom, boom boom. You become a statue just looking at the machine. I didn't want to do that. I want to bullshit with you. I want to smile at him. I want to do that kind of work--I got that idea when I was a little boy.

Because of his aversion to “working for the man,” however, Russo ended up doing just that by enlisting in the military and becoming, as he refers to it, “a sheep.” After his service term was complete, he bounced from job to job, and though he did become involved with a restaurant that his family created, the business was shut down when the city decided to build a highway straight through Russo’s Pizza—an establishment that still catered to the residents

in Cleveland's Little Italies. With the closing of the pizzeria, Russo continued to pine for a career that would enable him to use his education and enmesh him with the larger American community, but as an immigrant from a working-class background, college was not an option. Rather than joining the ranks of his peers, he instead turned to the only professions that would allow him to be his own boss—illegal ones.

In order to fulfill the dream of becoming an entrepreneur that began in Italy with his education as an accountant, Russo ran a gambling house out of a basement in Cleveland on and off for seven years. He profited by “taking so much from every pot” and also by creating connections with established Italians and Americans alike who had the money to gamble on the weekends (Russo). Though the business was certainly illegal, Russo only tacitly accepted it as such, as indicated by one of the conversations we shared:

Cassandra: Wasn't it illegal to run a gambling house?

Joe: No, it was against the law. I didn't get in trouble. I was paying somebody. You pay somebody and you don't get in trouble because that somebody will let you know when the police coming.

By running the gambling house, Russo put his accounting skills to work and used his success as a justification for breaking the law. It was not until his wife threatened to leave him and move back to Italy that he rejoined the world of legitimate business. Eventually, as previously noted, Russo opened a tire shop that catered to an Italian clientele, putting him back into the community he sought to leave behind by joining the army, becoming educated, and using his education. Russo did not move into a fancy house in the suburbs, but became an adamant Italian, spearheading programs to teach Italian heritage in the Home Family Club.

Similar stories of educated Italians trying to leave the community were recounted to me second-hand. Though certainly there have been Italians who have done so successfully, all of my participants' narratives ended with retreats into alcoholism, divorces because of domestic abuse, perpetual bouts of unemployment, suicide attempts, and, often, eventual returns to the nest. It seems that the higher the status they had in Italy, the more they subscribed to the literacy myth in America. With schooling, with English-language literacy, the individuals who left the community and faced tragic downfalls became morality tales for many of my participants. Instead of being focused on the successes individuals had because of gaining English-language literacy, these stories focused on the corruption and the failures of those who tried to leave the community and their heritage behind—they essentially became examples of the literacy myth at work.

Conclusion

Though some ventured into the education system and into American culture, for the majority of my participants, though they chose to cross the ocean in the aftermath of WWII, Italy remained home—cultural and linguistic. All of my participants still watch channel 43—the Italian channel, subscribe to several Italian newsmagazines, and attend Italian mass at St. Rocco's or Holy Rosary. More than thirty years after their immigration, their literacy is a way of bridging the distance between one country and another and maintaining the traditions and the ties that they brought with them. Italian literacy, as it was at our dinner table, is a way of always teaching and reminding later generations that our history and our heritage inform who we are today.



Fig. 4.12 Bernardina Corte's husband, Antonio, picking figs in their backyard³¹

Understanding the immigrants' history helps us to see the ways that literacy becomes a part of ethnic survival—a means of maintaining the old while embracing what is needed to survive in the new. Taken as a symbol, the fig tree, a sort of urban anomaly many of my participants grow, best signifies the ways in which Italian Americans strove to maintain their culture in a foreign land. Fig trees, in Italy, are as common as oaks and maples in America. Yet in most urban American climates, a fig tree will not grow. Instead of leaving this bit of culture behind, many young immigrants carried fig trees onto ships and airplanes and planted in stamp-sized urban backyards. As Mangione and Morreale explain:

However unwilling the immigrants might feel about farming in the New World, some could not contain their love for cultivating the soil on a modest scale. Wherever there were backyards, the immigrants gardened, producing for their own use the same vegetables they had grown in Italy. The tiny

³¹ Photo courtesy of the author.

backyards often included fig trees, which, nurtured by warm summers, flourished. To protect his fig tree from winter's harshness, the immigrant wrapped it in rags, or linoleum, as cold weather set in. (175)

Quite delicate, fig trees require nurturing to stay alive. During the winter months, the tree is wrapped in blankets and plastic, to be unwrapped in summertime—this wrapping and unwrapping is a symbol of Italian culture and the adjustments to that culture that are necessary to survive in America. Similar to Italian culture, its roots are weak and vulnerable in American soil and require constant tending to survive.

It is these histories of survival those of us interested in working-class literacy should be after in order to understand how best to respond to the proclamations of illiteracy crises we hear. While the study of this small number of participants is not meant to be representative of the entire working class, it is meant to make us question the often unqualified cultural value of our own literacy skills. People are not always oppressed as a consequence of what is popularly deemed “illiteracy”; rather this supposed “illiteracy” can be viewed as an act of resistance. Lee Soltow and Edward Stevens, for instance, point out that “cultural pluralism was a fact to be reckoned with because it was perceived to threaten the essential homogeneity of the American population” (95). While they put this idea into the past tense, I believe it is still a present issue, especially within an information economy that places such as high value on standard English literacy. As we aggressively try to maintain our position within this global economy, the literacy skills required for work will continue to accumulate as Deborah Brandt suggests, and unless we remain aware of these issues, cultural resistance will become more a part of an old American Dream than a contemporary reality. In order to maintain a view of America as a pluralistic nation, as literacy advocates and

educators, we must take steps to ensure that we proceed ethically. Concluding this project, then, I offer several strategies to aid us in creating classrooms that are both effective and ethical inside and beyond the university.

Chapter 5: When the Factories Stop Breathing: Developing Ethical Pedagogical Strategies

Driving through the city I am surrounded by skeletons. The giant metal arms of LTV Steel still reach into the sky. Rather than being home to a diverse workforce, it is now home to a strip mall. Façades of Joseph Feiss Sewing, The Federal Knitting Mills, and the Bingham Hardware Company still exist, but their interiors have been transformed into luxury loft apartments for Cleveland's elite. The reality that my participants' experiences with literacy and the workforce are not synonymous with the expectations placed upon workers today is concretely evident to me. That we are part of a new economy is not just a theoretical assertion, but is manifested in the building of a museum dedicated to preserving Cleveland's industrial past and further evidenced by the rising poverty and unemployment rates in the city. Yet while these disparities in the job markets and the resulting calls for literacy exist, exploring the experiences of previous immigrants within the workforce is productive, as it changes the direction of our research efforts by forcing us to ask new questions about the literacy crises we face and the communities entrenched in them.

If we are to respond to the current crisis of transitioning a new working class from an industrial to an information economy, beginning to ask new questions about the working class is of the utmost importance. There is no doubt that Rose, Heath, Cushman, Brandt, Hull, and others began conversations about the working class that are extremely valuable within our field and this project is certainly indebted to them. As scholars engaging in these conversations (or even just overhearing them), our responsibility is to continue to think of ways to move beyond these conclusions as our economic landscape, the literacy skills required by it, and the communities populating it continue to shift. Scholars within the field

of literacy studies have laid the groundwork for such explorations, but works dealing with working class issues often leave us only with ways to think about, rather than respond to, these issues. Throughout *The Violence of Literacy*, Elspeth Stuckey similarly promotes activism, condemning scholars for engaging in research that brings to the fore the inequality of literacy education only to turn and argue for more of the same. As Stuckey contends in our research and or teaching, “we remain content to simply allow equations between illiteracy and incivility, and to nod our heads at unfair but apparently unfathomable relationships between lack of English ‘skills’ and lack of opportunity” (107). Yet when searching Stuckey’s text for ways to move beyond the acknowledging nod, we are invited only to respond in dichotomous ways: either we continue to promote inequity by remaining in our college classrooms and engaging in further research that leads us to, as Stuckey puts it, “more nonanswers,” or we leave the university entirely and also leave behind literacy advocacy. Though Stuckey argues for greater awareness of the relationship between literacy and social stratification, as she explains: “What we have to see . . . is how literacy is a weapon, the knife that severs the society and slices the opportunity and rights of its poorest people” (118). Gaining such an awareness, according to Stuckey, scholars are left with only two choices: “we promote greater literacy, or we promote greater humanity” (124).¹ By forcing scholars, teachers, and literacy advocates in general into an either/or way of thinking and acting, Stuckey fails to acknowledge the limitations of her own work.

Literacy, as shown through the experiences of my participants, is never an either/or. Though it certainly can be a means of oppressing communities, at the same time, it can also

¹ Stuckey argues that by remaining in the classroom and continuing to engage in research we can only perpetuate the current class structure. In general, Stuckey claims that “far from engineering freedom, our current approaches to literacy corroborate other social practices that prevent freedom and limit opportunity” (vii). She particularly takes issue with ethnographic research, which she dismisses as being ideological.

be a means of resistance and unification. My participants were certainly portrayed as illiterate and therefore ignorant, lazy, and oppressed, and, at times, their lack of English-language literacy acted as a barrier. Yet, when studied ethnographically, it is clear that they were not “ignorant,” but both linguistically capable in a myriad of languages and dialects as well as consciously aware of the cultural assimilation often required in the English-language classroom. Their perceived “laziness” is in actuality overt cultural and linguistic resistance and their financial and educational “oppression” is not felt as severely as I—nor I suspect many—imagined. Understanding literacy—its plurality, functions, and intersections—from my participants’ perspectives, we are able to see the shortcomings of works such as Stuckey’s. Instead of focusing on the activities within the communities she portrays as illiterate and impoverished, Stuckey uses the majority of her text to summarize the work of prominent literacy/education scholars such as Giroux, Aronowitz, Heath, and Scribner and Cole, charging each scholar with supporting the status quo. Because of this methodological shortcoming, Stuckey fails to account for the empowering functions of literacy and the literacy goals of the disenfranchised.

Though I see a value in ethnographic work that reveals the “consequences of literacy” for members of the working class, as well as the lack of homogeneity within this category, I agree with Stuckey that ethnographic research on its own is not enough. Even works that engage in ethnographic research of the working class often call for either changes in thinking rather than activism or educational reforms that will not be felt by those already struggling to succeed in our shifting economic landscape. For instance, the conclusion in Mike Rose’s *The Mind at Work: Valuing the Intelligence of the American Worker* emerges “from the lived moments of work [he] experienced” (xiii) by entering various workplaces and studying the

cognition required to complete jobs typically considered unskilled. Yet, because his focus is on the *contexts of* rather than the *communities laboring in* American workplaces, Rose's conclusions only lead us back to traditional classrooms and top down approaches to education. Essentially, in *The Mind at Work*, Rose sets out to challenge "the hand-brain binary," the sense that the work of the hand is separated from the cognitive processes we associate with the work of the mind (141). Through his exploration of the skills needed to be a plumber, electrician, waitress, and hairstylist, Rose pushes us to see that the binary between hand and brain, though inaccurate, "is in our cultural bones, and it affects, and distorts, the specific economic responses we develop, from education and job training and the way work is organized" (xxi). His work draws attention to the fact that the way we talk about workers and education matters, as it influences the treatment of workers, their own sense of worth, as well as the creation of educational policies and programs. In his conclusion, however, rather than calling for reforms, research, or advocacy that would aid the working class, Rose only leads us back to the high school and college classroom. While his call for vocational educational classrooms that blend the "intellectual development of common work" with traditional academic subjects is a way of combating the divide between experiential and academic knowledge, Rose still appears to be advocating a top down approach to education. Though the classrooms are meant to recognize the knowledge of workers, the curriculum is based upon the *scholar/educator's sense* of their literate aptitudes, as they are displayed in the workplace, but not beyond it. As such, the academic component of the classroom is still decided by the educators/administrators' values and goals and not, necessarily, those of the workers. Further, while valuing workers' knowledge within the high school and college

curricula serves the young, it does not serve those who are already members of the working class.

Within our field, it is not surprising that much of the work focusing on working class issues returns us to the classroom. Because the field of composition studies is rooted in the creation of the freshman writing course, there is an often unspoken assumption that the work we do as scholars should have pedagogical implications that shape composition “inside classroom walls” (Gere 78). Over ten years ago, however, Anne Ruggles Gere argued that “in concentrating upon establishing our position within the academy, we have neglected to recount the history of composition in other contexts; we have neglected composition’s extracurriculum” (79). Though rhetoric and composition occur outside of the academy, the investigation of these nonacademic sites of learning have often been considered the province of literacy studies. In this chapter, however, I contend that to respond ethically to the crisis at hand, we must draw upon the strengths of our unique, interdisciplinary field. In order to move away from the “non-answers” decried by Stuckey, I argue for involving members of the composition and rhetoric community in multiple ways: as rhetorically sensitive and active citizens, community-focused researchers, and informed pedagogues.

I hesitate to call this chapter a conclusion, as it is really only a start to the work at hand. Drawing from the experiences of my participants and the characterizations of them circulated in the media, I argue for three elements of what I hope will be a continuing process towards developing ethical pedagogical strategies. The first of these elements is in-depth rhetorical analyses of calls for greater literacy education and representations of working class people as deficient. With a shift in the economy there is a tendency to characterize individuals as being in need of further literacy training. Though my participants entered an

industrial rather than an information economy, the value of language education was no less promoted than it is today. Yet, by examining the representations of my participants as illiterates and often criminals, it is clear that more than a call for new skills, the literacy crisis was a call to ameliorate other cultural anxieties such as increased economic competition and the influence of foreign values on American culture. As such by analyzing contemporary literacy crisis rhetoric and responding to it in both public and academic venues, we can challenge not only the literacy myth, but also the representations of those that comprise the working class.

Secondly, in order to challenge these representations, I call for further ethnographic research of the communities falling under the umbrella term “the working class.” We should, instead, speak of working *classes*, because they are as varied as the issues maintaining their position in the social hierarchy. While there are certainly core economically determined factors contributing to their financial oppression, women, African Americans, and the myriad of immigrants comprising the working classes are not categorized as such for the same reasons, nor do they see themselves as a homogenous community. As shown in chapter three, instead, in an attempt to leapfrog one another economically and socially they often perpetuate negative, media-promoted stereotypes about other members within their economic class. In order to open up more positive avenues to empowerment, we need to better understand the ways that language is or is not working for these communities. We need to understand their motivations for seeking out or resisting literacy training. We essentially need to build consubstantiality with these communities. Consubstantiality literally means “of the same substance.” Yet Kenneth Burke, as seen in the previous chapter, uses this term to describe an act of identification whereby individuals can overcome differences symbolically. While

Burke's focus is on how identification acts as a means of persuasion, I argue that it can also be a means of education where we learn from and with communities. In effect, I contend that by analyzing the literacy crises and the motivations behind them as well as understanding the communities and their motivations, we can work towards building consubstantiality.

Gaining an awareness of these often-competing motivations enables us to move to the third element: developing ethical pedagogical strategies. As compositionists we continue to work towards untangling the act of writing from the gate-keeping functions our courses are often established by the university to serve. By this I mean we have developed pedagogical strategies that encourage critical consciousness instead of passive acceptance of what is often passed off as "a neutral skill." Process pedagogy, expressivist pedagogy, student-centered classrooms, contact zones, collaborative pedagogy, service learning, and a myriad of other pedagogical theories have arisen to counter the discrimination, homogenization, and silencing of our students. I argue that is our responsibility to move this knowledge beyond our college classrooms and academic journals and into the world of work, where workplace literacy programs still function from current-traditionalist understandings of language and a valuing of "neutral" skills over student voices.

We know that language is political. We know that people are struggling outside of the academy's walls because of the politics of language. We know that the literacies individuals do and do not have can shape not only their lives, but also the way their lives are represented. We know that literacy can be violent; it can suppress and perpetuate injustice. Yet, we also know that literacy can enable liberation and foster communication. By presenting this knowledge in contexts beyond the academy, we represent ourselves not just as scholars of the humanities, but as humane scholars. As much as in a commitment to the teaching of literacy,

our field is grounded in a commitment to relieving social, political, and economic oppression. For instance, when Jacqueline Jones Royster was asked about the aims of her teaching, she explained: “Ultimately, I suppose that ground rock beliefs for me are not about the teaching of writing at all; they’re more about peace, about justice, about social responsibility, about a commitment to humaneness” (*Take 20*). Similarly, as a field, by challenging the neutral appearance of academic discourse, affirming the student’s right to their own language, valuing process over product, disrupting traditional notions of classroom authority, questioning cognitive reductionism, and by negotiating the ways differences in race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity impact writing and rhetoric with our peers and students, we have confirmed our commitment to social justice. My argument in this chapter, then, is not to alter what we already do, but to discuss new contexts where we can apply what we do.

From the 2007 CCCCs chair’s address in which Akua Duku Anokye, based on her interviews of 23 conference participants, called for scholars to work harder to affect public policy to the echoing calls for social activism by teachers/scholars in the recent documentary *Take 20: Teaching Writing*, it is clear that the field is preparing to move in new and more public directions. For instance, when asked: “what’s next for the teaching of writing?” in the film *Take 20*, several prominent members of our field responded as follows:

I think in the past because composition and ESL, for example, have been developing as separate disciplines, many people seem to think that its o.k. for writing teachers not to know about language issues or students who come from different language backgrounds. Because the student population is

becoming more and more complex that is becoming less and less the case.

-- Paul Kei Matsuda

In the next few years, writing teachers will need to become much more aware of language diversity of a multiple range of Englishes, and a multiple range of dialects.

-- Cheryl Glenn

Writing teachers will need to begin to think very carefully about the ways our work extends beyond the classroom into contexts, into realms of public policy, into education policy, into the ways that writing and writers are represented. We need to work with that inside and outside of the classroom.

-- Linda Adler-Kassner

I see writing teachers needing to sort of pay more attention to global issues.

-- Malea Powell

In this conclusion, I am both responding and adding to these exigencies. In what follows, I briefly sketch out three ways of responding to our current crisis—analyzing the rhetoric of crisis, building consubstantiality by understanding the communities, and developing ethical pedagogical strategies—inviting members of the fields of rhetoric, literacy, and composition studies to help make knowledge work for the working classes. Based on the implications drawn from my limited range of participants, these three sections are only the beginning of three conversations that I hope will continue to engage us as a field.

Analyzing and Challenging The Rhetoric of Crisis



2

A first step in affecting public policy is to understand the assumptions already guiding public and political views of literacy. Whether we believe the current literacy crisis we face is imagined or real, analyzing the crisis at hand is of the utmost importance, as we, along with testing companies, tutoring programs and other literacy sponsors often benefit from such crises.³ In the past five years, for instance, we have seen an increased number of courses and resources dedicated to increasing technological literacy. As Trimbur reminds us, “in the flurry of activity it has taken to launch new courses and programs, however, we have

² This cartoon is freely distributed by minutemanmedia.org and is housed on their website at <<http://www.minutemanmedia.org/ARCHIVE%20FILES.htm>>.

³ There are also, however, ways that we suffer as a field when crisis rhetoric emerges, as a perceived lack of skills in the greater public is often blamed upon educators. As we can see from the policies of the No Child Left Behind Program, literacy crises often result in calls for literacy practices and the ways they are taught to be assessed and measured. Rarely are composition scholars or other educators in charge of developing ethical assessment practices. Instead, policy-makers often judge what we should or should not be doing and how students should perform on tests that have been developed by testing companies.

not stopped often enough to ask what we are subscribing to when we say the magic words ‘literacy crisis’” (278). Taking this step back is extremely important as it enables us to consider the values underlying our pedagogical practices and the communities that we serve. Often, as we saw in the case study of my participants, proceeding without critical reflection leaves educators to blindly respond to calls for literacy education that come from those in positions of power rather than those with the assumed lack thereof. Despite the supposed literacy crisis spurred by the arrival of large waves of immigrants on American shores during the first half of the twentieth century, for instance, the experiences of my participants show that the dismal predictions of the media never came to fruition: they were not kept out of the workplace, they did not live in squalor, and their class position did not remain static as a result of their language practices. Historical glimpses such as this one allow us to recognize that what was rhetorically labeled “a crisis” by liberal and conservative educators, policy-makers, and media outlets was more an American identity than a literacy crisis.

Because of similar historical studies, such as Arnove and Graff’s *National Literacy Campaigns*, within the field of literacy studies, literacy crises are commonly accepted by scholars as being manufactured events that often either disguise the interests of literacy sponsors or replace discussions of real social and economic issues. Although commonly understood as cultural mythology, the rhetoric surrounding crises should not be dismissed because, as Trimbur contends, these fictions “inscribe motives in educational policy and practice” and “renegotiate the terms of cultural hegemony, the relations between classes and groups, and the meaning and use of literacy” (281). Since literacy crises always focus on a lack of skills, particular communities become associated with this lack, and, as shown in chapter three, these communities become representatives of a host of other social problems.

Before and during my participants' immigration, the popular media linked lacking literacy with criminality, a lowering of wages, a lack of hygiene, and numerous other social stigmas. While calls for gearing literacy training to our current economic needs are certainly more skill-focused than they were during the industrial period, since they are aiming to prepare workers for a more technological, information-exchanging workplace, the ideological underpinnings of literacy education are still firmly in place.

As I show in chapter four, the literacy programs designed for the working class immigrants during America's industrial zenith were aiming to teach the immigrants behaviors under the guise of literacy training: manageability, patriotism, punctuality, and morality—specifically, Judeo-Christian morality. While the skills needed for an information economy may have changed, these conservative implications of literacy training have not. As such, a necessary first step in developing ethical responses to our current crisis is to deconstruct the rhetoric driving educational practices and promoting ethnocentric, racist, and gender stereotypes among the general public. Immigrants, in many ways, have continued to be the central focus of these crises. Though emigrating from disparate regions, within our contemporary crisis, immigrant workers have simultaneously become the focus of literacy campaigns and a scapegoat, as the cartoon at the start of this section emphasizes. As responsible social rhetors, we have the opportunity, then, not only to challenge the educational basis of literacy campaigns or the lack thereof, but also the cultural backlash against the communities represented as illiterate.

As noted in chapters three and four, since the late nineteenth century the perceived illiteracy of Italian Americans and other working-class immigrants inspired rampant fear. Though often phrased otherwise, this fear was more tied to a belief that foreign language

practices might disrupt the status quo than the belief that the immigrants might not be equipped with the skills to keep industry productive. As John Trimbur argues, “the rhetorical power of the phrase ‘literacy crisis’ resides in its ability to condense a broad range of cultural, social, political, and economic tensions into one image” (277). As more minority-majority States are revealed with each census,⁴ the cultural ramifications of non-mainstream literacies and their ties to literacy crises become more evident. Less than a year ago, for instance, protests of a Spanish version of “The Star Spangled Banner” made headline news. Though the lyrics specifically describe America as “the land of the free and the home of the brave,” many felt that these freedoms should be limited, at least linguistically. According to *The Washington Post*, critics argue that “rendering the song in Spanish is a rejection of assimilation into the United States” (Montgomery A01). President George W. Bush apparently agrees with this rallying cry: “I think the national anthem ought to be sung in English, and I think people who want to be a citizen of this country ought to learn English and they ought to learn to sing the national anthem in English” (qtd. in Baker A06).⁵ Although, according to the U.S. Census Report, “Language Use and English-Speaking Ability: 2000,” one out of five Americans speak a language other than or in addition to English, and the U.S. does not have an official national language, linguistic homogenization is still being called for (Shin and Bruno). Similar to the literacy campaigns experienced by

⁴ According to the 2005 Census, California, Hawaii, Texas, and New Mexico already have a minority-majority status. According to their projections, Maryland, Mississippi, Georgia, New York, and Arizona are expected to gain this status in the near future. For more information, see the Census report at <<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/releases/archives/population/005514.html>>.

⁵ Interestingly, this *Washington Post* article also notes that there are four Spanish versions of the anthem posted on the State Department’s website and that there is evidence that the President used a Spanish version of the anthem on the campaign trail.

my participants, these English-only campaigns are not only trying to foster an understanding of the language, but to squelch resistance to cultural assimilation.

Unfortunately, because they are grounded in fear, present-day literacy crises are much easier to believe than to question. Literacy crises are often presented in doomsday fashion. For instance, *To Secure the Blessings of Liberty*, the 1986 Report of the National Commission on the Role and Future of State Colleges and Universities, ominously foreshadows the crisis we face today: “The storm warnings are unmistakable; our society is troubled, our economy is endangered; our democratic values jeopardized; our international leadership threatened; our educational system embattled” (qtd. in Stuckey 105). Current projections are in accordance with these fears, as Amanda Paulson of *The Christian Science Monitor* reports:

U.S. workers may be significantly less literate in 2030 than they are today.

The reason: Most baby boomers will be retiring and a large wave of less-educated immigrants will be moving into the workforce. This downward shift in reading and math skills suggests a huge challenge for educators and policymakers in the future, according to a new report from the Educational Testing Service (ETS). (para. 1-2)

We must, however, also keep in mind the literacy sponsors’ stakes in promoting projections such as the one quoted above. The Educational Testing Service, from which Paulson draws her information, benefits greatly from literacy crises which typically result in calls for the measurement of literacy skills. Certainly, “in an information economy, reading and writing serve as input, output, and conduit for producing profit and winning economic advantage,”

making the value of English-language literacy appear to increase and, perhaps, become a necessity for economic survival (Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* 25). Yet before we begin to accept the literacy myth as a reality and equip ourselves to face the challenge of educating our future workforce, it is important to analyze the crisis thoroughly before we respond. As Graff reminds us, “Literacy, to be comprehended fully must be taken as fact and symbol, as well as myth” (“The Legacies of Literacy,” 265). It is a fact that the amount of entry-level manufacturing employment is eroding. It is a fact that the economic division between service-based jobs and information-based careers is great. Yet, it is also a fact that literacy crises are “attempts to resolve in imaginary ways actual tensions, anxieties and contradictions”⁶ (Trimbur 281). As such, these motivated aspects of crises—the symbolic, mythological and rhetorical—must be unraveled in order to respond ethically to contemporary calls for literacy education.

As the economic tide turns from industry to information, reports of an illiteracy crisis grow in fervor. The Department of Labor, for instance, concluded in December 2006 that there is a shortage of skilled workers in America (Isiodore). This assertion has led to proclamations such as, “the biggest problem with job growth right now isn't too few new jobs. It's too few skilled workers” (Isiodore para. 1). Implicitly labeling workers as unskilled and, as such, to blame for their own unemployment, however, eschews the realities of the economy and the skills it requires. In 1988, the Consortium for Worker Education began to develop literacy programs to respond to changes in the international division of labor. The

top two issues they were responding to were “the erosion of entry-level jobs in the manufacturing sector for unskilled workers with little or no formal education” and the shift to “a service economy highly dependent on computers and advanced technology, for which the current workforce has not been educated or trained” (Collins, Balmuth, and Jean 455). Notably, neither of these issues is under the control of the “unskilled workers” blamed for our current crisis. Instead, what is central to each of these issues is a change in societal expectations of what literacy entails. As Beth Daniell explains, “What counts as literacy in a given time and place is determined by social, economic, and political factors rather than some prior definition” (399). It’s not that the American workforce is unskilled. Rather, the blue-collar worker’s skills are not imbued with a high economic value in an information economy. As Brandt explains in “Accumulating Literacies,” literacies tend to pile up and expand out as technology creates “new and hybrid forms of literacies where once there may have been fewer and more circumscribed forms” (650). The ability to read and write, at one time, was able to move someone into a higher economic bracket once other ascriptive characteristics (race, gender, age) were taken into consideration. “Yet the very broadening of these abilities among greater numbers of people has enabled economic and technological changes that now destabilize and devalue once serviceable levels of literate skills” (Brandt, *Literacy in American Lives* 2). Hence, as a historical understanding of literacies’ values

⁶ For evidence of the connection between literacy crises and other cultural anxieties, see Graff and Arno’s *National Literacy Campaigns: Historical and Comparative Perspectives*. New York: Plenum, 1987. Also see Lawrence Cremin’s *American Education: The Metropolitan Experience, 1876-1980*. New York: HarperCollins, 1988. See also Cynthia Selfe’s *Technology and Literacy in the Twenty-First Century: The Importance of Paying Attention*. Carbondale: SIUP, 1999. See also Lee Soltow and Edwards Stevens’ *The Rise of Literacy and the Common School in the USA: Socioeconomic Analysis to 1870*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981. Also see Maureen Hourigan’s *Literacy as Social Exchange: Intersections of Class, Gender and Race*. New York: State U of New York P, 1994.

reveals, this crisis does not stem from the deficiencies of working-class Americans, but from sweeping and rapid changes in the economic landscape.⁷

Yet, it is the workers who are often left to face the repercussions of the shift and the stereotypes that emerge when the expectations of the new market are not being met. The largest of these repercussions is increased competition for low-wage work, which often results in the same type of ethnic aversion my participants experienced. In the United States, close to three million manufacturing jobs were lost from 2000 to 2003, according to two senior fellows at the Institute for International Economics (Bailey and Lawrence para. 1). As companies continued to downsize and send jobs overseas, Wal-Mart, with an average hourly wages between \$8 and \$11 an hour,⁸ became the nation's largest employer of working-class individuals. As this shift in employment opportunities for the working class shows, "recent technological change has served to boost the wages of skilled workers while depressing the employment opportunities and earnings for the less-skilled" (Wheeler 376). Though wages

⁷ Recognizing the shift in the economy and the new skills needed to support this economy is a challenge that many feel they are already meeting, but often the responses neglect a large portion of the population impacted by the demands of an information economy. President George W. Bush, for instance, in his January 2007 State of the Economy Report, explained that "the same dynamism that is driving economic growth is also -- can be unsettling for people. For many Americans, change means having to find a new job, or to deal with a new boss after a merger, or to go back to school to learn new skills for a new career." His and others' representations of the issues, however, do not touch on those impacted most by this shift: the working class. Bush's solution is two-tiered. For children, he recommends the "No Child Left Behind" program, but this has no impact on the millions already in the working class. His second solution, going back to school, is also problematic, as many of those in the working class do not have the time, the resources, or the prior educational background to simply sign up and attend college classes. What gets lost then in this call for greater skills are the repercussions for low-wage workers who cannot quickly adjust to new market demands.

⁸ There are many disparities in the actual average pay of Wal-Mart employees. According to the "Fast Facts" on their website, Wal-Mart's average hourly wage is at \$10.56 an hour. According to the United Food and Commercial Worker website, however, the average hourly wage for a sales associate at Wal-Mart is \$8.23 and the average wage for a cashier is \$7.92.

for the technologically unskilled continue to decrease, the immigration of workers without economically-viable skills continues to increase. According to Steven Camarota of the Center for Immigration Studies, since the 1990s immigration has increased the number of workers without a high school education by 25% “while increasing the number of all other workers by 6%” (“Immigrants” 1). This increase in foreign-born low wage earners impacts the labor market by driving wages down. As Camarota in an earlier article explains, the increase in the supply of unskilled labor drives down wages “not so much because immigrants work for less and undercut natives (though that does happen), but rather because lower wages are an unavoidable byproduct of significantly increasing the supply of unskilled labor. It's basic economics: Increase the supply of something, and the price will fall” (“Tired” 21).

Economic competitiveness and literacy crises go hand in hand. As Street argues, “Governments have a tendency to blame the victims at a time of high unemployment and ‘illiteracy’ is one convenient way of shifting debate away from the lack of jobs and onto people’s own supposed lack of fitness for work” (18). In reality, it is not just the working class who has lost jobs; it is all of America. The popular logic behind moving jobs overseas is that there are people willing to do the same work for less pay resulting in more profits for the company. These jobs are not remotely unskilled either. Customer service and information technology jobs have also been shipped to countries such as India and Japan. Unfortunately, because of the rhetoric surrounding the crisis, too often the enemies of the working class become those willing to work for less instead of the companies who employ them. As native and foreign-born individuals vie for the same jobs, negative representations of those within minority populations tend to rise.

As seen in chapter three, the perceived threat Italian-American immigrants posed to the labor market contributed substantially to the negative representation of their social and linguistic behaviors. As English-language skills and the rights of citizenship are often the two advantages low-wage American employees have over non-native employees, public backlashes against diversity are bound to appear and have already begun. As Debby D'Amico and Emily Schnee contend, educating the workforce is a challenge "given the high unemployment in the United States in general and in New York City in particular during the late 1980s and continuing to the present, along with the increasingly anti-immigrant and anti-minority sentiment and efforts at exclusive legislation" (D'Amico and Schnee 138). Focusing attention on the relationship between foreigners, immigrants, and low wages, the rhetoric of literacy crises often compel feelings of resentment towards immigrants and dispel questions of unequal economic dispersion among the upper and lower strata of a corporation. Companies are not going broke; they are not falling apart because they cannot find "skilled workers" nor is this shortage the reason jobs are being outsourced.

Certainly within this type of environment, having an MBA gives one an advantage over the holder of a high school diploma, but within the working class it is unclear whether or not technical literacy programs will really increase its members' earning potential.⁹ Gaining certain contextually specific skills may help certain workers become more socially mobile. Yet, at the same time, "while some individuals find that attendance on literacy programmes does lead to jobs they would not have gotten otherwise, the number of jobs in a country does not necessarily increase with literacy rates" (Street 18). Instead, as more

individuals gain a higher level of marketable skills, the value attached to those skills decreases, leading to trained employees “leapfrogging each other for scarce jobs” (18). Take the high school diploma as a case in point. At one time, high school education was the province of the elite and a diploma the exception rather than the rule. Yet, with the opening of common schools, rising matriculation rates, and the rhetorical presentation of the “drop-out” as an amoral anomaly, the diploma became an employment requirement, while it, at the same time, lost much of its economic value. As Lassonde explains, “after World War II even managers who formerly spurned high school-educated workers in favor of those whose skills had been forged on the shop floor had come to regard the diploma as a hurdle that the most desirable of industrial workers would surmount if promotion and security were what they sought” (157). The diploma, today, might get an individual a job, but in almost all cases it will not get him or her economic security. As Alan Greenspan remarked at the U.S. Department of Labor National Skills Summit, “The heyday when a high-school or college education would serve a graduate for a lifetime is gone.” Greenspan hints that those with associates’ or bachelors’ degrees have also begun to lose their economic earning power. In 2005 on a National Public Radio program, Mark Zandi reported that “roughly one in five of the long-term unemployed have a college degree or higher, and that's very unusual. Usually college grads do much better. In the last few years, they've had more difficulty” (“Jobless”). For this reason, while there is a push to retool the working class through literacy, education’s place within the economic market has also come into question.

⁹ In a study of displaced workers enrolled in a GED course, for instance, Juliet Merrifield found that half of those receiving a GED went on to find full time work. While this may seem like a success story based on increased education, half of the displaced employees who did not obtain a GED also found similar full time employment (281-92). For the complete findings of the study, see Juliet Merrifield’s “If Job Training Is the Answer, What Is the Question?: Research With Displaced Women Textile Workers” in *Changing Work, Changing Workers*. 273-94.

From the in-depth exploration of literacy crisis rhetoric surrounding immigrants' entry into American industry in previous chapters and this brief discussion of contemporary crisis rhetoric, it is clear that literacy crises are grounded in something other than a simple lack of skills. While analyzing the current literacy crisis in its entirety is beyond the scope of this project, this cursory exploration highlights questions that can guide our future work as scholars and activists within and beyond the university. What entities are making claims of inadequacy? What skills are being called for and why? What communities are being labeled deficient? Who stands to gain by making and responding to such claims? We should focus also on the language of crisis, which often reveals the cultural tensions underlying the crisis. In the midst of the Cold War, the media was "waging a war on illiteracy," in the 90s as work became increasingly technological workers were being "retooled" and, today, their skills are being "upgraded." Reflected in this terminology is the realization that workers are not illiterate, but that their skills need to be upgraded to suit a new economy. Additionally, paying attention to and critiquing the language of crisis enables us to expose the ethnocentric, classist, and racist underpinnings of crises. While scholars within the field of literacy studies have raised many of these questions before, I am asking that we respond in venues outside of the academy by taking on a public and a political voice. By critiquing representations of crises and communities within popular media, raising issues of immigration, language, and employment practices within political debates, and holding corporations publicly accountable for their treatment of workers we can, perhaps, end the practice of further stigmatizing the already disempowered.

In a general sense, our current workplace literacy crisis is an attempt to show that jobs are available, but skilled workers are not. In this way, it is a means of focusing blame on the

individual and often shifting blame from the larger societal structures that cause such change. As such, it also becomes a means of pitting the groups comprising the lowest socioeconomic strata against one another. Just as working-class Italians faced resentment from their peers of Irish and German descent, so, too, do immigrants today often endure offensive treatment from native-born Americans embittered by their own employment prospects. Because of the attacks on their values and their language, I suspect, too, that these minority groups are resistant to educational outlets that require cultural and linguistic assimilation. Similar to my participants, contemporary immigrants find themselves enmeshed in negative discourses that may contribute to their desire for ethnically homogenous environments where one can survive with his or her language and values alone. The harsher mainstream media's criticisms of their home culture and language become, the greater the immigrants' stakes are in maintaining their connections to it, since assimilating means assenting to a position of cultural inferiority. As such, before we make assumptions about the types of literacies needed or desired by the working class to be competitive in the current economy, we should try to understand the communities that are not being reached by programs already—their goals, needs, values, and language practices.

Understanding the Community and Building Consubstantiality

From the choices they made and their rationale for them, my participants taught me to trust workers much more and claims of literacy crises much less. My participants did not lack critical consciousness, they did not fall for the literacy myth, they refused to entirely assimilate and, yet, they did not fail economically as a result. Their sense of success, however, is often publicly and academically overshadowed because of the discord between

their cultural values and middle-class American values. Claims of literacy crises add to this disconnect, as they often do not come from the bottom. Instead, as Brandt argues, literacy sponsors who are usually “richer, more knowledgeable, and more entrenched than the sponsored” often set the terms of working-class education (*Literacy* 19). Members of the working classes, it is often assumed, do not even know which skills they need. As such, it is up to their government, their bosses, their educators, and sometimes even their detractors to decide what they lack. Often, as a result of this top-down approach towards education, even the basic physical limitations keeping some from educational outlets are not understood. As seen in the case of my participants and as is explained by Stuckey, not understanding the community supposedly in need of further training contributes to the “inability of literacy efforts to accommodate the basic realities of the lives of the illiterate. Programs are located outside of target communities, there is little or no child care, [and] the literacy volunteers tend to be older white females from socioeconomic strata far removed from illiterates” (Stuckey 103). This uninformed pedagogical framework is further problematic as no matter how popular assumptions are about a particular community, as argued in chapter three, discourses stereotyping the disenfranchised are inventions unless they are based on ethnographic knowledge of a community.

An argument for the importance of ethnography within literacy studies is not new. Since the value of any type of literacy is shaped by context, Scribner, Cole, Daniell, Street, Brandt, and numerous other literacy scholars have argued that we must examine literate practices within individual communities in order to reveal the complexities of literacy as it is experienced. Continuing in this tradition, I argue for a specific type of ethnography that blends scholarly research and social activism. Agreeing with Freire that “authentic thinking,

thinking that is concerned about *reality*, does not take place in ivory tower isolation, but only in communication” (64), I, in many ways, approached this project as a conversation. Rather than ending with my interviews, my ethnographic research continued throughout the duration of this project. By sharing my research and conclusions textually and orally with my participants, I was not only checking for accuracy, but also involving my participants in the interpretive work required to present their narratives within an academic context. I shared with them theories of literacy, and they shared with me the stories of their lives. Together we made these stories have meaning for scholars within the field of composition, rhetoric, and literacy studies, and we engaged in a reciprocal research relationship. Essentially, though not purposefully, I was engaging in the type of activist research Cushman calls for in *The Struggle and Tools*. As she explains, activist research is “a process where the researcher and participants interact in a variety of reciprocal, mutually beneficial exchanges” (Cushman 28).

Though far from enabling their critical consciousness, my contributions to our reciprocally beneficial relationship were steps towards enacting civic change. For instance, Tony Ruggiero and I engaged in a nearly two-hour discussion about the importance of his experiences to the field of literacy studies. At the end of the conversation, he had a tear in his eye and said, “Thank you for making this [his sometimes tragic, but always powerful experiences] make sense.” When another participant asked me to write to her great niece in English, as she was a student in Italy hoping to attend a college in the U.S. and wanted to learn English beforehand, I did not hesitate to begin the correspondence. Months after our interview sessions, instead of assuming that my participants were not dupes of the literacy myth, I explained the theory to them and invited their thoughts. Without assuming their needs and stepping into the territory of what Cushman terms “missionary research,” I tried in

many ways to make this project work for my participants since in giving of their time and sharing their narratives, they were working for the benefit of our fields.

Engaging in activist research is important for a number of reasons. First, it enables scholars to build a rapport with the community under investigation. Though my participants granted me access to their narratives because they viewed me as an insider with both working class and Italian-American roots, there are cultural factors that would have acted as communicative barriers if I did not continue to build upon this rapport. Italian Americans' subscription to the concept of *omerta* (intentional silence), their foreign language literacies, and their drive to protect the family name, for example, were strategies they employed their entire lives to keep interlopers out. As such, establishing my credibility through mutual exchanges and the building of consubstantiality were processes I necessarily had to engage in if I wanted to be invited into their gardens, kitchens, pasts, and lives. As Cushman explains, "because resistance takes place behind the public transpiring of events," it is intrinsic that we build "inroads to the forums in which urban and minority groups develop counter hegemonic attitudes and craft language skills" (25). While it may be easier to use the inroads already established by our race, ethnicity, gender, or class position, patiently observing and appreciating the rituals, values, and language use among community members we can also develop these important, reciprocal relationships.

Not only do we need these inroads in order to better understand the communities we are researching, but also to see our own cultural assumptions as researchers. Even researchers seemingly familiar with the community cannot escape accepting lurking ideologies. Before I began working with my research participants, for example, I imagined a much different conclusion to this project. Two years ago I thought I would be writing about the lack of

educational opportunities for those within the working class, particularly for immigrants within the working class. While certainly educational inequality is an issue faced by the members of the working class, it was not the main issue of concern for my participants. Instead, resisting assimilation efforts and adapting to a new workplace topped their list of concerns. Though these goals seem mutually exclusive, in the end they were not. Because of popular assumptions about the economic value of English-language literacy, linguistic resistance is often seen as a result of oppression or, worse yet, laziness, rather than a conscious act. When we consider, however, that “the unchanging message to Italian Americans, from the days of the melting pot, to the days of ‘white ethnicity,’ to the days of multiculturalism, has been that Italian Americans should abandon or disavow their heritage and identity,” we can begin to see how their choices about language reflect that they are not functioning under false consciousness (Cafarelli 40). Rather, their rejection of the ideological values attached to English-language literacy exhibits a state of critical consciousness. By engaging in linguistic mask-wearing when necessary and maintaining their home language in the face of discrimination, my participants were able to succeed both economically and socially. Yet, without knowing their histories, their values, their reasons for resistance, the literacy skills they developed within their communities and workplaces, it would have been difficult to understand how resistance and adaptation can occur simultaneously and take forms not accounted for within the popular mythology of literacy.

As Cushman argues throughout *The Struggle and the Tools*, “when we honor community residents’ day-to-day lives and vernacular means of striving, we illuminate our own discussions of politics and literacies, as well as our own roles as gatekeepers” (223). Our current literacy crisis does not impact all people equally. It is the disenfranchised—the

working-class immigrants, women, ethnics, and African Americans—that are being implicated in these calls for further literacy education. It is also, however, these same groups who have the least voice publicly, politically, and academically. Yet, as this project shows, top down approaches to education often fail because they do not take into consideration the goals and practices of the community in question. By engaging in activist ethnographic research, we can begin to “comprehend how our roles can be constructed as burdensome, troubling and demeaning by the people we hope our work serves” (Cushman 235), “discover the incentives and disincentives they [the members of the working class] have for acquiring and exercising literate skills” (Hull 4), and, finally, we can join our voices and knowledge to work towards social justice.

Developing Ethical Pedagogical Strategies

With composition studies’ adoption of Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in the 1980s, the classroom began to be seen as a space for promoting such social justice. Though not without criticism, feminist pedagogies, critical pedagogies, service learning pedagogies, and cultural studies pedagogies emerged and continue to inform our teaching today. Critics of politicizing the classroom have argued, as John Ruskiewicz does, that “I don’t use my classroom to promote *specific* political views or philosophies: I am not so steeped in my political beliefs that everything I do professionally must be shaped by them, nor do I think it is my mission to recast the political lives of my students” (28). Yet, even within seemingly traditional college classrooms, whether we ask students to participate in service learning projects or write a standard research paper, we are making choices about what types of knowledge are valuable, what type of writing is appropriate, what discourse is acceptable,

and what subjects should be of interest. Essentially, whenever we design a course, we are asking our students to assimilate our version of literacy—an agenda that involves our politics as well as the politics of the institution. As is commonly understood within our field, in order to be responsible literacy advocates, we need to keep in mind the politics and ideologies informing our choices and our classrooms, as failing to do so leads to univocal teaching and representations of literacy as a neutral skill, rather than one capable of fostering or obstructing social justice.¹⁰

Essentially, if we do not recognize the politics of literacy within our classrooms, we are not much different from the milk man who stood in front of Tony Ruggiero’s class, teaching immigrants English words without acknowledging his own complicity in the process of assimilation, social stratification, and the negation of the value his students saw in their own language practices. Though I imagine that within our own classrooms we address these and other issues of language politics, within classrooms filled with adult workers such discussions are too often eschewed because they have to get to business. As a result, many workplace educators, most of whom are not engaging in composition, literacy or rhetorical scholarship, still treat the classroom as though it is politically-neutral—a space where teachers give skills to the unskilled with little to no dialogue. For instance, the Workforce Skills Certification System (WSCS)—a system validated by the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Labor and developed by employer groups in multiple fields— involves a battery of testing in math, reading, problem solving, critical thinking or communication skills (“WSCS”). Similar to the No Child Left Behind Program, not only is the entire system assessment rather than learning based, but it is also taught using a

¹⁰ I acknowledge, here, that literacy alone is not capable of doing either. Rather it is the cultural value we assign to literacy and to certain forms of communication that gives it such powers.

generalized “standards-based curriculum framework for the skills and competencies assessed to help close the gap” (“WSCS”). As the curriculum is designed by a company outside of the workplace, based upon the skills a pool of employers argue are needed, and often taught by an independent certified assessor, it is clear that neither the skills nor the needs of the adult students is being taken into consideration. By becoming involved in the pedagogical practices within these classrooms either through direct participation or the production of scholarship focused on adult learners, we can help create an environment of mutual exchange where workers, who often feel outside of the debates about their future and without outlets to respond to their representation as unskilled, can feel empowered and capable of joining these conversations.

As Amy Lee explains in *Composing Critical Pedagogies*, “while many students (those both culturally and economically marked as other), may have indeed internalized this sense of difference, if they are given access to power as writers, they must confront not only the internal voice but also the external social inscription of themselves” (83). Creating spaces where such learning and cultural critique is possible is challenging, but also necessary. Studies of adult literacy programs reveal that “people can acquire whatever literacies they need given the right circumstances” (Hull, “Hearing” 15). It is the development of these circumstances—classrooms where students feel comfortable participating, where their backgrounds are understood and respected, where the standards reflect realistic expectations of academic growth, where both assimilation and resistance can occur simultaneously—that work towards understanding the rhetoric of crisis and engaging in activist ethnographic research could enable.

Activist ethnographies can help us understand what pedagogical techniques we can develop to enable communities to bridge the distance from one type of literacy to another. They can also facilitate the diffusion of the knowledge we have obtained into larger educational arenas. Within our field, it is commonly understood that literacies “have different meanings for members of different groups, with a corresponding variety of acquisition modes, functions and uses” (Heath, “The Functions” 25). As seen through the lens of my participants’ experiences, the “acquisition modes” they developed were much more useful for them than those offered in the public schools, night schools, and settlement houses. Larger studies of adult literacy education such as those contained in *Changing Work, Changing Workers* similarly reveal that “adults often acquired literacy spontaneously, without participating in formal literacy education classes, in response to the perceived needs they had for literacy in their lives” (Hull, “Hearing” 24). Though most ethnographies reveal that this type of spontaneous learning occurs within peer groups with like skills, the strategies these individuals use in order to obtain literacy are often not included as even part of the curriculum.

Instead, it is assumed that “if adult workers lack the literate competencies that we expect children to acquire, then the temptation is to imagine for workers the same instructional practices believed appropriate for children” (24). As shown in the previous chapter, however, adult learners are not *tabula rasa*. Rather, the knowledge that they bring into the classrooms is often not tapped into though it is often the most effective bridge to new knowledge. As the director of Chicano/Latino Studies at the University of California at Irvine, Leo Chavez explains, “The first step to understanding something is to understand it in the language you understand, and then you can understand it in another language” (qtd. in

Montgomery A01). When trying to articulate complex ideas to learners, it only makes sense that transmission would be simplified if it were to occur in the students' home language rather than expecting students to learn a foreign language and foreign ideas concurrently. Though this idea is a simple one to put into practice, to the detriment of many, it often is not. As is highlighted in D'Amico and Schnee's work:

there are many individuals prepared in different disciplines in their own language and they cannot succeed because there is not an entity who dedicates itself to capitalize those values and place them to function on the base of their preparation If we take a survey of the system of 'gypsy' cabs in the different boroughs of New York, we will find ourselves with the big surprise that the majority of the drivers are professionals such as lawyers, doctors, accountants, pharmacists and others. (worker qtd. in D'Amico and Schnee 123).

Similar to my participants such as Joe Russo who wanted to enter skilled professions, Current immigrants find that the English language and credentials remain a barrier. Though in a crisis where proclamations of a shortage of skilled workers are becoming the norm and discussions of increasing the percentage of skilled immigrants allowed to cross our borders are beginning, it is purblind that we would resist offering educational outlets for foreign language speakers who already have these skills. If we begin to meet students where they are and account for the linguistic knowledge they already have, we can lessen the burden of the transition into the shifting American economy.

This type of consubstantiality need not only be built through multilingual language education. Using symbols that reflect students' sociocultural/historical backgrounds is

another way to build consubstantiality and move the learner in new directions. By understanding the contexts students come from and the symbols that they share, educators can develop pedagogies that build upon this knowledge in ways that are not seen as threatening or entirely alien. This is essentially the tactic Florence Graham employed when she brought Roman Catholicism into the Murray Hill School. By connecting to her students through a shared symbol system, she was able to encourage students to continue their education in both English and Italian. While this may be a common pedagogical theory, putting it in practice in a multi-ethnic, multi-generational, multi-gendered setting is not a simple task.¹¹ We cannot assume that we understand a community's shared symbol system based on what we see about them in texts or visuals. As Said informs us, most of what we see about a particular community as an outsider is "not 'truth' but representations" that are manufactured in order to "other" communities (21). Within and outside of the university, then, activist ethnographic research provides the best path towards creating pedagogies that reach diverse learners. Brandt similarly calls for such efforts when she explains that "schools must make special efforts to provide for minority constituents the kinds of reading materials and other cultural products that consumer markets overlook and must devise language

¹¹ To give a contemporary example, similar to the demographics of the Hiram House, our classrooms are not homogenous. As a student and a teacher, I have noted that popular culture and/or history have become a means of creating what Burke refers to as consubstantiality, a sense of identification through the sharing of a like symbol or experience. A metaphor, for instance, can make two people consubstantial, as it enables us to understand an experience or an idea through the recognition of a shared symbol. Interestingly, though discussing rhetoric or writing by using the Simpsons, American Idol, or 9/11 as springboards may connect us with some students, it can actually further distance us from others. During the three years I spent tutoring international students this was, in fact, their largest complaint about their writing courses, surpassing even the difficulties with language they experienced. While these examples are helpful to young American students, to international students these examples only provide a further burden to succeeding in the course since they are not only trying to learn and understand foreign concepts in a foreign language, but are also trying to understand a foreign culture in order to understand the foreign concepts being taught in a foreign language. Similarly, students struggle in classes with a historical focus, as they are often being asked to write about events that have little relevance to their own backgrounds and, as such, they do not have the common basis of understanding that the professor often expects.

curriculums that better acknowledge the multilingual conditions in which English literacy finds its meaning for Americans” (“Sponsors”186).

In order to find out what is being overlooked, we need to enter the communities in need of further teaching, as the knowledge that they bring into the classroom cannot only serve as a starting point for further education, but can also cause them to view the classroom as a place of belittlement if not appreciated. For instance, several studies of workplace literacy programs discussed in *Changing Work, Changing Workers*, clearly show that workers feel as though they know a lot more about their work than their supervisors. When a group of housekeepers at a hotel is made to take part in a re-training program to increase their skills, for example, most of the lessons revolve around topics such as mopping and laundry—activities they engage in much more often than their supervisors (Hull, “Hearing” 18-20). Since most educational programs develop out of what those not doing the work determine is necessary knowledge, there is little acknowledgement as to what students already know and what motivates them to learn. As the contributors to *Changing Work, Changing Workers* found, a major factor contributing to the failure of workplace literacy programs is the “disparity between the workers’ goals for taking part in the program and the goals that employers and literacy educators had for employee participation” (Hull, “Hearing” 19). By attempting to understand the communities we teach through activist ethnography, we can begin to ascertain their skills, goals, and values and use this knowledge to build consubstantiality, allowing us to further educate these communities without pushing for their complete assimilation or unquestioning acceptance of a curriculum that does not serve their interests.

In order to understand what skills will economically serve their interests, we also need to examine the contexts of the workplace as Rose does in *The Mind at Work*. Deconstructing the rhetoric surrounding the crisis both establishes the broad skills the government defines as needed for an information economy and also curtails the tendency to assign an inherent economic value to these often technological skills, but it does not specify the skills needed to keep members of the working class gainfully employed as we experience this economic shift. Similarly, while understanding what students already know will certainly help us eliminate knowledge from the curriculum that is not needed and make us aware of the goals that employees have for entering workplace programs, it does not enable us to understand the skills that will enable them to become economically mobile. As such, in addition to understanding the crisis and the community, we must also understand the skills required by the contexts our adult students already exist in and those they wish to enter.

A change in economic focus impacts the education of every U.S. citizen. From elementary schools to workplace learning centers, curriculums are constantly under revision as what it means to prepare for the future is constantly in flux, especially as technologies make these changes ever more rapid. The unchanging reality has merely been that increased educational credentials are becoming expected across the board. According to the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills:

The education and training requirements of the 2000-2010 projected total job openings, due to growth and net replacement are: 69.8% of jobs will require work-related training; 42.7% short-term on-the-job training; 15.1% moderate on-the-job training; 6.5% long-term on-the-job training; and 5.55% work experience in a related occupation. 20.9% will require a bachelor's degree or

higher, and 9.3% will require an associate's degree or postsecondary vocational award. (Hecker 83)

Within this current labor market shift, employees are being trained to involve technology and increase productivity in their current jobs or to seek out new skills to begin a different career. According to President George W. Bush's "High Growth Job Training Initiative," there are certain sectors where job opportunities are expected to increase in the coming years. The industries expected to see the largest need for a new breed of skilled employees are Advanced Manufacturing, Aerospace, Automotive, Biotechnology, Construction, Energy, Financial Services, Geospatial, Health Care, Homeland Security, Hospitality, Information Technology, Retail, and Transportation. Obviously, these industries are as diverse as the skills needed to gain employment in them. As they are decided by changing economic contexts, economically viable skill sets are difficult to define. According to the U.S. Department of Labor Employment and Training Administration, manufacturing jobs have become advanced manufacturing jobs requiring the following skills: personal effectiveness, academic, workplace, and technical skills ("Advanced" para. 3). What is meant by these categorizations is up to the grant seeker, the government, the employer, and the employee to decide. Hastily, curriculums for workplace education have arisen that are "rarely informed by research which actually attempts to describe the knowledge and know-how required in today's workplaces, including the ways in which language and literacy-related activities are embedded in work" (Hull, "Preface" xiv). In essence, not only is the community of learners being overlooked, but often the contexts they are receiving training to enter are often either not made part of the curriculum or become the entire curriculum—neither situation resulting in the type of literacy re-tooling desired by either the employers or the employees.

In the former case, what tends to occur is a conflation of literacy training with traditional notions of schooling. Classes are often offered to workers in community college or public university classrooms with a teacher at the front of the class armed with “prepackaged ‘teacher-proof’ materials—often in the form of textbooks and computer programs—usually written by outsiders to the program *for* rather than *with* teachers and learners” (Schultz 58). Though education is always contextually informed to an extent, classroom-based adult literacy instruction attempts to give off the appearance of neutrality: the teacher imparts neutral skills, the employees learn skills, which they then will be able to use in the workplace. Literacy training, however, is never neutral. It is the context of the classroom, after all, causing many to give up on further education. As Hull explains, “schooling is a bad memory for many adults who are poor performers at literacy, and workplace instruction which is school-based—that relies upon similar participant structures, materials, and assessment techniques—will likely be off-putting by association” (“Hearing” 24).

This type of classroom is also not the ideal setting for learning when it comes to teaching English-language skills to adults. As explained in the previous chapter, my participants generally gave two reasons why they turned away from the night school: first, the teaching felt too elementary and, second, the learning was acontextual and not applicable to their day-to-day activities. Research has found that “people carry out much more complex work practices than we generally would expect on the basis of traditional testing instruments and conventional assumptions about the relationship between school-learning and work-learning” (Hull, “Hearing” 16) Yet, these skills are difficult if not impossible to assess when applying a generalized curriculum far removed from the workplace and the workers. Without carrying out research to determine which skills employees use regularly and which skills they

are in need of, it is difficult to imagine a workplace classroom having anything besides an elementary feeling to it. Since these classrooms are devoted to teaching general skills to an even more general audience, “the result is that despite their diversity of learners and the complexity of their contexts, many programs look nearly identical” and are apt to fail (Schultz 60). While the implicit assumption of school-based approaches to literacy training is “that students will automatically reintegrate the predetermined and fragmented course content into a whole process, ability or skill,” this is rarely the reality (Kalman and Losey 86). The National Adult Literacy Survey, a report distributed by the National Center for Education Statistics, for instance, contends that “nearly 25% of America’s adults with an average of ten years of formal schooling had only fourth-grade literacy skills or lower” (Wagner and Venezky 21). When skills are decontextualized, their use within the workplace and the lives of the individual students is unclear, and, as Ida Casale earlier explained of her experience learning English, “if you don’t use it, you lose it.”

While decontextualized learning often does not lead to the development of functional skills, classrooms that are too focused on a singular context are also prone to failure. In addition to school-based programs, two other types of on-the-job literacy training have emerged. The first is based upon literacy audits, processes where an instructor or other agent observes the work being done and the knowledge needed to complete it and then tries to replicate these activities in the classroom. As Katherine Schultz explains, while “job audits can be a vehicle for teachers to become more familiar with the workplace and a basis upon which to build a curriculum that is tied closely to the needs and interests of both the learners and the company,” too often, “job audits are conducted by outsiders—educational specialists or curriculum developers—and used to generate lists of skills and to restrict the focus of a

program to activities tied only to a worker's present job, not to the future or to the wider context of a person's life" (55). Similar to the issue earlier raised about Rose's conclusion in *The Mind at Work*, in the case of job audits, while educators are seeking to import knowledge from the workplace into the classroom, the skills needed on the job are determined by the scholar/teacher, rather than the worker.

In much the same vein, a development axiom for many other programs is "basing instructional materials for literacy training on texts that are used on the job—application forms, brochures, warning signs, manuals, memos" (Hull, "Hearing" 10). Though this contextual learning can be helpful to employees in their current jobs, it does not prepare them for future economic changes that may come their way. These rigidly contextual skills, for instance, do not encourage workers to become critical or innovative thinkers. They do not invite workers to become active learners or engineers of their own education. Most importantly, they do not offer skills that are transferable once the company, too, has stopped breathing.

Instead, we need to find some pedagogical balance between using what the workers bring into the classroom and the knowledge needed within the contexts workers live and work in today and in the future. Therefore, in addition to encouraging activist ethnographic research of the communities arguably in need of further training, I, building on Schultz, contend that we should engage in qualitative studies of the current and new workplaces so that we may understand what "literacies are required for work" (Schultz 69). I do not, however, suggest that we carry out this research alone. Instead, the people who carry out these tasks on a daily basis, the workers, should inform our understanding of literacy at work. Giving them the opportunity to investigate and create their own educational resources is a

means of involving the skills they already have in the classroom and provides opportunities for critical discussion about the values of their skills and the skills being imparted in the classroom. On a small scale, these types of classes have already begun to develop. Schultz, for instance, provides an example of a course designed for apparel workers where “program designers take a broader view of literacy and ground it in the everyday competencies and events of the learners’ lives. Thus, learners rather than the person who performs the task analysis to determine the skills required for the job, are the experts and architects of their own learning” (50). This model allows for the expectations of the literacy sponsor, which in most workplace classrooms is either the government or the company, while at the same time this type of classroom enables the participants to also work towards their own goals and recognize their own skills. Hull, for instance, argues that instead of programs where workers are “sequestered in classrooms, we might imagine apprenticeship arrangements whereby workers who need to carry out a task involving complex literacy skills learn on the job with someone who can already perform that task ” (“Hearing” 25). This approach most closely resembles the type of learning my participants (and I imagine many within the working class) already engage in.

By asking scholars to analyze and respond to the rhetoric of crisis and engage in activist ethnographic research, I am arguing for a more Freirian approach to workplace education. Moving our knowledge outside of the university, we can create a workplace pedagogy that accounts for the interests of the student as well as the sponsor’s, that shifts authority from the teacher to the students, that is not driven by panic or crises, that can take a myriad of forms depending upon the context, and that acknowledges that literacies are multiple, political, and should be learned with caution. This vision of the workplace

classroom may sound utopian and, perhaps it is idealistic to expect composition scholars, many of whom are already overworked, to take on more social responsibility. At the end of the semester, buried under my students' portfolios, facing the pressure to publish or perish, and with "miles to go before I sleep," it is easy to believe my social contributions as a teacher and scholar are enough (Frost ln. 14). Yet, I still feel compelled to agree with Edward Schiappa that "we should not allow ourselves the easy out of believing that being "political" in the classroom is a substitute for our direct civic participation" (22). Because the view from my window is of a silent factory, because my past is a story of class struggle, because headlines proclaiming workers' and immigrants' inadequacies jump out at me, and because my participants put their faith in me, the current literacy crisis is something that I, and I hope we, cannot ignore.

Conclusion:

Growing up, *nonna* always had a way of working out complex issues through very simple symbolic exchanges. She encourages me to plant tomatoes, learn her secret recipes, and always pronounce meals in Italian rather than English. She boils down her attempts at promoting my ethnic awareness with just a simple phrase: "you are what you eat, and you, mia cara, are Italian." In this conclusion, I, not too dissimilarly, am evoking an old cliché by asking us to practice what we preach or, in other words, to be what we aim to teach our students to be: socially aware, linguistically capable, responsible citizens of a global community. The goals I have forth in this chapter are not complete. Rather than providing right answers, my aim in this chapter is to raise awareness, provide options for activism, and open a discussion, so that as scholars, teachers, learners, and activists we can work to publicly undo the lies of literacy.

The more I worked with my participants, the more I began to regard Stuckey's claim in *The Violence of Literacy* that "we must stop being almost hysterically convinced that students who cannot read or write the standard language cannot 'make it.' Students of nonstandard languages in the United States do not fail because of a language failure; they fail because they live in a society that lies about language" (122). The lies Stuckey refers to are those that I have discussed throughout this dissertation: the lie that education is equally distributed to the masses, the lie that people without literacy suffer under false consciousness, the lie that literacy makes one more moral and, most importantly, the lie that gaining literacy inherently enables upward mobility. Though, it does appear that those with higher levels of education fare better economically than those without, it must be remembered that in most cases education is the result of wealth or status much more often than the cause of it.

We live in an inequitable society where those who quite possibly could benefit the most from education receive the least of it. Yet I am hesitant to throw my hands in the air, as Stuckey does at the conclusion of her book, and argue that the only ethical answer is to stop teaching literacy because continuing to do so will only perpetuate an oppressive system based on class divisions. Literacy can be oppressive: economically, culturally, and socially. But I have to disagree with Stuckey's assertion that "when and if literacy affects the psyche, the effect is fleeting in both a historical and developmental sense. Literacy is not a religious conversion" (93). This quote reminds me of an experience I shared with an uncle who has long since passed. He was racing through traffic downtown and, not unexpectedly, was pulled over by the police. As he often did in moments like this, he pretended not to speak nor understand English. The police officer, talking to me, asked me to explain why he got pulled over and that he would be receiving a ticket. When the officer returned with the ticket, my

uncle looked at him, smiled, and said, “*Nessuno me lo ficca in culo.*” This made my eyes bulge. If you understood what this meant, your eyes would bulge as well. Clearly since he nodded at my uncle and smiled, the officer did not understand. That’s the psychological power literacy has: it can keep certain people in and force others out. It can be oppressive, but it can also be powerful, sometimes in ways that we cannot understand because of our own cultural and ideological backgrounds. Literacy, for my participants, allowed them to keep their history and culture alive, it connected them to their peers, and it served as a mechanism of cultural resistance. Their literacy may not have been imbued with economic value in the U.S., but it did give them a sense of power that is often unrecognized because of our own tacit acceptance of the literacy myth.

Arguing that we should respond to the current literacy crisis, I mean not to further promote this myth. By contending that we should work to analyze and respond to the rhetoric of crisis, I am asking us to be skeptical—to question claims that jobs are sent overseas because workers there are illiterate and willing to work for nothing—to question claims that workers in the U.S. lack the skills to be globally competitive—to see the irony when looking at these two claims side by side. Stuckey is correct in assuming that “a system takes a lot of trouble. A system must be devised and implemented. To be sure, much of its design is tacit, its implementation an extension of usual modes of comfortable life. That is why uncomfortable people can often change a system. They can see it” (126). Workers may or may not be uncomfortable with the change in the labor market. Most of them do not have a public voice, so if we do not continue to enter these communities through activist ethnographies, their abilities to “change a system” will continue to be hampered. Though Stuckey argues that continuing to provide literacy education is oppressive to many, not

providing the working class with the education, the public outlet, and the opportunity to question, can be even more oppressive. Members of the working class are not just statistics. They are stories of war and immigration, of raising children on a single paycheck, and facing abuse in their homes. They are stories of resistance and community unification, and, sometimes, they are stories of success that are beyond our understanding because they do not fit within the narrative of “the American Dream.” Most importantly, they are stories that need to be told if we are to understand literacy, oppression, and the relationship between the two.

The steps I offer here are general and a bit amorphous. They are not meant to be easily applied solutions, but an invitation to scholars within the fields of composition and rhetoric to step outside of the bounds of the college classroom and get involved in the debates that shape literacy education for the masses. Since the crisis, the community, and the contexts of learning shape literacy, there is not an ideal pedagogical framework that can serve all. What is troubling is that many current workplace classrooms function as if this is a possibility, as if the workers are to blame, and as if literacy is politically neutral. According to Stuckey, scholars too advance these ideas by promoting “the extraordinary power of the educational process and of literacy standards not merely to exclude citizens from participating in the country’s economic and political life but to brand them and their children with indelible prejudice, the prejudice of language” (122). By working to analyze the crisis, understand the communities and contexts, and build pedagogies from a state of consubstantiality, I am asking us to work towards eliminating “the prejudice of language.” For some, this work lies inside of the classroom, helping students recognize the inequities that are perpetuated by the transmission of disparate types of literacy. For others, this work entails further investigation into literacy issues in the workplace and their relationship to the

economic shift. For some this work requires getting involved in workplace literacy programs so that the knowledge we have gained by studying and theorizing about the ways literacy is taught within the classroom can be applied outside of it. Finally, for others this work requires gaining a voice in a political forum in order to ensure that the work of body and hand does not continue to diminish in social, economic, or political power. For many of us, it was the work of body and hand that enabled us to do the type of intellectual work we are currently pursuing; we owe it to the individuals who made this type of work possible not only to pay attention, but also to respond.

Informed Consent Form: Investigating the Bilingual Literacy Practices of Italian Americans

You are invited to participate in a research study of language practices among Italian-American immigrants from the working class. This project will contribute knowledge to the academic fields of literacy studies, rhetoric, and composition, as well as inform others of Italian-American culture. The following information is provided in order to help you make an informed decision about whether or not you wish to participate in this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Participation in this project will require approximately four hours of your time, during which you will be asked a series of interview questions related to your acquisition of and practices in both English and Italian, as well as your experiences in both of these cultures. These interviews will be tape recorded and played back for your approval. If at any time you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can choose not to answer it.

Any information obtained during this study which could identify you will be confidential. If the information in this study is published, your identity will continue to be kept confidential. If you would prefer to have your name included in the project, you will need to sign in the additional space provided below. There are no risks or discomforts associated with this research.

You are free to decide not to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time without adversely affecting your relationship with the investigator or Texas Christian University. Your decision will not result in any loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You may ask any questions concerning the research before agreeing to participate or during the study. If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant which have not been answered by the investigator, you may contact Jan Fox at the Texas Christian University Office of Research and Sponsored Projects, telephone (817) 257-7516, or Dr. Tim Hubbard, IRB Chair, at (817) 257-6417.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Printed Name

I would like to have my name included in the final project: _____

Cassandra Parente, Principal Investigator
Charlotte Hogg, Secondary Investigator

(817) 244-2116
(817) 257-6257

Interview Script

Demographic Questions

Date of Birth

Place of Birth

Literacy in Italy

Describe the daily activities when you were growing up in Italy.

What type of work did your family do?

Describe your experiences with schooling in Italy.

In Italy, what types of reading and writing activities did you engage in?

Which Italian dialect are you most fluent in and which others are you familiar with?

For which activities did you use Standard Italian?

How was schooling and your daily activities impacted by the onset of WWII?

How did you know the war was coming to your area?

Was it difficult to communicate with the soldiers?

What were the race/ethnic relationships like in Italy?

What was the relationship between Northern and Southern Italy like?

What was schooling like after the war?

What was your occupation in Italy?

What had you heard about the United States and from who/what?

Literacy in the United States

What made you decide to come to the U.S.?

What was the immigration process like?

Where did you live and what made you choose this area?

What first major difference did you notice between the U.S. and Italy?

How much English language knowledge did you have when you came to the U.S.?

Did this amount of knowledge pose limitations for you?

Can you recall any specific instances where language barriers became an issue?

How were you able to overcome these barriers?

Did you experience any type of discrimination based on your language practices?

Did you learn how to speak, read, and/or write in English? If so, how did you learn these skills?

Were there any organizations/schools involved in your learning process?

What type of employment did you acquire in the U.S.?

How were you able to gain this employment?

What types of literacy practices did your work require?

Can you describe the naturalization process?

Did you ever have to take any other literacy tests? If so, can you describe them?

For what purposes did you use Italian after entering the U.S.?

For what purposes did you use English after entering the U.S.?

Which language do you feel most comfortable using and why?

Are your children multilingual?

What languages did you encourage your children to learn and why?

In what ways do you think your language practices impacted your family?

Which Italian cultural practices do you continue to engage in?

What made you join the Home Family Club?

Literacy Practices Today

Which languages do you speak, read, and/ or write in?

What literacy artifacts (books, magazines, prayer books, etc.) do you have in your home?

Do you enjoy reading and writing? Why or why not? In which language do you most enjoy engaging in these activities?

What is your relationship with technology?

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Vita

Cassandra Parente was born April 14, 1980 in Parma, OH. She is the daughter of Jacquelyn and Nick Parente. A 1998 graduate of Brunswick High School, she received a Bachelor of Arts degree with a major in English from the University of Akron. She graduated *magna cum laude* in 2002 and was named “Outstanding Woman Student” by the Department of English.

In August, 2002, she enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University. While working on her doctorate in English, she held a Radford Fellowship during the years 2002-2003, a Teaching Assistantship from 2003-2006, and a Research Assistanship from 2006-2007. While at TCU she served on the composition committee, on the job search committee for the Lorraine Shirley Chair of creative writing, as associate editor of *Descant*, and as a graduate student mentor. She presented at the Society for the Study American Woman Writers Conference (2003), Rhetoric Society of America Conference (2004), Confernce on College Composition and Communication (2004, 2006, 2007), and at the Feminism(s) and Rhetoric(s) Conference (2005). She graduated with a PhD in Composition and Rhetoric in August, 2007. Her dissertation, “Manufacturing Literacies,” was awarded distinction.

Since August, 2007, while working on a book manuscript, she has been volunteering with Cleveland Reads and as an ESL tutor. She is a member of the Rhetoric Society of America, College Composition and Communication, National Council of Teachers of English, Society for the Study of American Women Writers, and the Modern Language Association.

She is married to Matthew Richlovsky of Cleveland.

ABSTRACT

MANUFACTURING LITERACIES

by Cassandra Parente, Ph.D., 2007
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As we shift from an industry to an information-based economy, headlines proclaiming a skilled worker shortage abound. In response, workplace literacy programs hastily sprouted up at community colleges and in the backrooms of corporations. In order to respond ethically to the literacy crisis at hand, however, this project argues that we must first understand the communities, the history of crises, and the contexts for which literate skills are to be applied. In that vein, this project looks back at history to see how people before responded to similar literacy crises and uses their responses to help us ethically proceed during this current climate of educational and economic crisis.

Through ethnography, this project tells the stories of Italian immigrants who sought entry into the United State's booming industrial economy and were falsely told that English-language literacy was a necessity for employment and cultural acceptance. By exploring Italy's history, educational structure, and the impact of WWII on the participants' literacy practices, the first part of the dissertation focuses on the education these immigrants brought with them, showing that literacy sponsorship is not always economically determined nor sought for social mobility. Analyzing popular rhetoric regarding the arrival of Italian

immigrants, the second section focuses on the creation and perpetuation of the literacy myth and its ethnocentric underpinnings. The third section compares the adult education programs created for immigrants within Cleveland, OH with the participants' accounts of their development of literacy skills and strategies within the same city, revealing that most of the immigrants learning took place within their own community, rather than in the schools. Further, it illustrates that the participants limited use of the English language did not exempt them from social mobility nor stem from ignorance or false consciousness, but was an act of cultural resistance. The final section uses the conclusions drawn in previous chapters to call for composition and rhetoric scholars to engage in working class issues through activist ethnographic research, rhetorical analyses of claims of literacy crises and portrayals of the working class as illiterate, and the development of ethical pedagogical strategies for adult learners.