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# Watermelons, Tee Shirts and Giorgio Armani: Eight-and-a-Half Epigrams on Italian-American Culture

Ron Scapp

At the close of the evening in which Bill Clinton was nominated the Democratic presidential candidate, he entered the convention hall at Madison Square Garden à la JFK and thanked everyone, including "magnificent Mario," for this great moment. Earlier that night, Governor Mario Cuomo of New York State addressed the Democratic Party and all those across America watching the convention coverage on television. In a speech that once again demonstrated his oratorical prowess, Cuomo was transformed (at least for that political moment) from what Clinton had previously identified (in confidence to Ms. Flowers) as a "real Mafia-type" to what Tom Brokaw of NBC News exclaimed was nothing other than the "Italian prince of American politics." This dual-image of the crude, brute-like gangster and the passionate, respected sovereignty highlights an important aspect of the contradictory representations of Italian-American culture while it also repeats a pattern to be found in many racist stereotypes, namely, the binary-imaging of a particular (ethnic) group.

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Part of the difficulty of exploring the complex image(s) of Italian Americans has something to do with the issue sociologists have come to identify as "white ethnicity". White ethnics are the Jews, Irish, Italians, Poles and others who emigrated from Europe to America, settled wherever they could and attempted as quickly as possible to integrate themselves into the economic, political and cultural mainstream of their new land: They assimilated. As a result, today most white ethnics view themselves as part of (white) America, yet many problematic representations still exist that might call their full assimilation into question.

*PADRE, PADRONE: ITALIAN-AMERICAN MASCULINITY, PART I*

Even before the huge success of Francis Coppola's "Godfather" films, the lore surrounding the Mafia in American popular culture was great. From the docks of the New York City shipping yards to the streets of Chicago, from the glitter of Las Vegas to the steps of the United States Congress, the influence of individual "mobsters" and of the "mob" itself is legendary, if sometimes exaggerated. The image of the ruthless, violent gangster swearing and shooting his way to the top is engrained in the minds of everyone. Names like Al Capone, Lucky Luciano and more recently Joey Gallo and John Gotti evoke images of strong and powerful (male) individuals. However crazy and lawless these men might also be, their sheer lust for and achievement of power attract the attention of many.

Whatever the "real" appeal of such men might be, part of the lure seems to reside in the very status bestowed upon "outlaws" in general: namely, the ennobling of the (metaphysical) dynamic of the pure assertion of one's will over and above another's. That is to say, there appears to be a vicarious identification that the population at large has with all those who, in an act of transgression, risk death for a moment of recognition or, to put it in the vernacular of the Mafia, "to get some respect." As Hegel formulated it in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, "[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (111). Perhaps then the appeal of the (god)father image of masculinity portrayed in so many ways is due as much to an attraction to some "higher" value system worked out through the "metaphysics of recognition" as it is to some simple and "base" appeal to a traditional masculine characteristic such as "toughness" itself.

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*THE PIZZA/PASTA PROBLEMATIC*

Just as the frankfurter and hamburger are not viewed as "German" food in any meaningful "everyday" sense, pizza is hardly considered an example of Italian cuisine, at least not by Italian Americans; pizza is *American* fast food. This can be no better highlighted than by the existence of a "real-pizza-parlor" for American NATO forces "on base" in Vicenza, Italy; as all Americans who order pizza in Italy have discovered, "it just ain't the same." The perception of "what's Italian" via eating and the food industry provides another interesting insight into the image of Italian-American culture.

From ads like "It's Prince spaghetti day" to the "Chef Boyardee autobiography," and from the "Ronzoni sono buoni" Italian lesson to the prototypical Alka-seltzer ad "that's som-spicy meatball," Americans have been presented with a number of roly-poly faces and bodies throughout the years consuming the staple of the Italian-American diet: a thousand and one pastas. And while there's no need here to contest the fact that pasta is an important part of Italian-American cuisine, it is the image of excess and unsophistication that goes along with the consumption of pasta (and of food in general) by Italian Americans that ought to catch our attention.

Oddly enough, however, what is also noteworthy about eating and food itself in the image-making of Italian-American culture is the fact that "fine" Italian restaurants are considered part of the haute culture of dining out in America. Although it is true that until relatively recently "fine" Italian dining meant exclusively "northern" Italian cuisine, the contemporary infatuation with "peasant" foods has elevated even the traditional "family-style" restaurant to a new status. This means that "pasta" and even "pizza," so much a part of the image of the working class diet, find their way onto the menus of the finest restaurants, mixing in with the elite of the culinary establishment, and of course costing a great deal to order. A sociology of the development of and demand for "ethnic" cuisine might reveal a common pattern of devaluation and elevation of the food and culture in question: for example, despite persistent racism on the part of many Americans, the popularity of "Chinese," "Japanese," "Mexican," "Indian," and most recently "Caribbean" foods has soared.

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NO, I'M NOT JEWISH . . .

Sometimes despite one's sense of ethnic transparency, others simply presume one's (ethnic) identity to be their own or of their own choosing. In cities such as New York this can lead to a seemingly endless series of corrections: No, I am not Greek, I'm of Italian ancestry; no, I'm not Lebanese, I'm Italian; and, of course the perennial, no, I'm not Jewish . . .

Part of the reason for the frequency of the "Are you Jewish?" question is due to the still very present anti-Semitic prejudices that work their way through American culture. But part of the reason for this misidentification is also caused by the confusion that is "white ethnicity." Despite the very rich and diverse cultural histories that exist, many Americans, including white ethnics themselves, see only two real divisions or categories within European ethnicity: Northern (light) and Southern (dark). Of course, people are aware of Eastern Europeans (especially since the reunification of Germany and the deunification of the Soviet Union), but for the longest time, it could be argued, white ethnics were viewed within the context of a light/dark continuum, a continuum, it has been suggested, that has determined much of Western culture both metaphysically and politically.

Italian Americans thus find themselves historically both in the light and the dark. Like many Southern Europeans (in particular, Spaniards and Greeks), Italians are somewhat in the shadows of contemporary Western culture. Although their "illustrious" past helped found the "brilliance" of Western culture, today the beacon shines elsewhere. Italy merely provides fashion trends and quality wines, two aspects of everyday existence that puritan-rooted America associates with the darker side of life, namely the body. And in America, it is the dark body that is still most devalued. The light/dark continuum constitutes the dichotomy in which and through which *Italian Americans* and all white ethnics are assigned value. The confusion of Greek for Italian, Italian for Jew, or Norwegian for German for that matter, may on the one hand indicate an inability in white-sighted America to see "subtle" differences, but it also clearly demonstrates a proclivity to identify *properly* light from dark. This vision of America is a cultivated myopia that ultimately forces everyone to see his or her world in the harsh simplicity of black and white.

*KISSING COUSINS (AND OTHER MEN):  
ITALIAN-AMERICAN MASCULINITY, PART II*

Just as there is a macho, violent dimension of Italian-American masculinity, there is also a gentler, more sensitive counterpart to that opposition. Images ranging from the operatic gesticulations of the local merchant to the excitable embraces of individuals and families greeting each other constitute the other pole of Italian-American "hot-bloodedness." It is within this context of passion and emotion that another representation of "lust-ing-for" is put into motion, and yet another violation of puritan-America committed.

It is not just the fact that Italian Americans continue the Italian habit of men greeting each other with a kiss, but the entire homosocial and homoerotic play of male interaction that gets characterized by the male kiss which is at issue here. Fathers kiss sons, cousins kiss cousins, and friends, young and old, kiss each other. But it is this passionate and emotional *male* kiss that almost gets erased within the matrix of images of the Italian-American male as the hot-blooded lover of women. This is not to say that Italian-American masculinity is free of homophobia, but that homophobia in America causes a suppression of the male kiss, even a familial one, and results in a further inversion of, if not erasure of, Italian-American males relating to other males (other male bodies). Thus, despite the domestication of the (Italian-American) male body as typified by images of Yogi Berra talking to kids about "Yoo-Hoo," Joe Dimaggio becoming "Mr. Coffee," Rocky Graziano endorsing almost anything, and most notably John Travolta's character being transformed in *Saturday Night Fever*, it is still the body of the sports hero, of the warrior, of the brute that undergoes stages of refinement, while the male who is already sensitive can only be the Latin lover (seducer) of women, or the hysterical Luigi-type character so prominent in the fifties television comedies still evoked today, or the ever present family priest.

*STATUES, FIG TREES, AND PLASTIC COVERS: BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS*

Every "ethnic" neighborhood can be said to manifest a particular "feel" or "flavor." From Miami's Little Cuba to San Francisco's Chinatown, from New Orleans' French Quarter to New York's Spanish Harlem, everyone can sense the predominant ethnic identity of a given area, even if it is just a few square blocks

(e.g., Seattle's "Asiatown"). Perhaps this is why Disney's Epcot Center is able to give many Americans the pleasure of experiencing country after country with little more than a thin "neutral zone" marked by muzak separating/connecting the different national exhibits.

Despite their immigrant roots, most (white) Americans see not a cultural "melting pot" but something more akin to an ethnic jigsaw puzzle of which their own particular group represents the only piece conforming to the whole: It is the other groups that so loudly, colorfully and otherwise stand out as misfits, that is, pieces that do not quite fit into place and so mark off their own turf (neighborhood, block, house, or even apartment). It does not matter that sociologists and historians can offer other explanations. The simple fact remains: Others are the issue.

Although other ethnic groups, especially those from warmer climates, have gardens when they can, decorate their homes with baroque-like ornamentation and bright colors, Italian Americans are "known" for their "gaudy" homes and gardens. Here as before, it is not the case so much that all the images are inaccurate but rather that there is an act of devaluation of things "Italian."

At a time when books and television shows on and about gardening have reached a new high, as is true with shows about home repair and renovation, it is interesting to note that there is a distinctly New England aesthetic (perhaps asceticism) that clearly characterizes the look and feel to the homes and gardens being viewed. This is the case not only for the prototypical home renovation show, "This Old House," but also for the many replicas of this show that seem to name no particular place other than somewhere in suburban America. What we as viewers see are the proverbial New England home and barn being restored, however modernized, to recall the "spirit" of the original. What we get is American colonial, neo-classical, neo-colonial *simplicity* and *calm*, if not an outright denial of excitement and pleasure. The moldings all are properly squared and the colors match perfectly the sedate hues of homes evoking American-pastoral, and the "victory" gardens that accompany such homes are filled with perennials and vegetables that perhaps nostalgically remind us of the growth/harvest cycle that was American agrarian society until the explosion of urban life at the end of the nineteenth century.

But the religious and faux-Roman classical statues along with the plush velour couches covered with plastic, the bright colors of the exterior and interior walls, the thick pile rugs, the lawns

filled with pink flamingos and the gardens of dandelion and other greens scream out something rather offensive to an aesthetic that deems itself the master of discerning and subtle tastes. And while many Italian-American families have tastes that follow the trends of *Architectural Digest* and *Yankee* magazines, it is the image of the "gaudy" working-class Italian Americans that is "viewed" as lacking *good taste* or *control*: Everything it seems is to excess!

But while one can identify such a "gaudy-Italian" look, it is also Italian designers such as Giorgio Armani who have brought the "continental" look to the shores of America and have been embraced wholeheartedly by all those desiring to dress well. What is at odds here, perhaps, has as much to do with an aesthetic of high and low cultural values as simply with "loud colors." For example, especially with the recent explosion of enthusiasm for golf and country-club culture in America, the "classic" plaid pants and white belt look of the Anglo-American is hardly viewed as "gaudy." Even if this look receives its share of comments, it appears to provoke jokes more about martinis than about one's lack of taste. One's home, one's look, one's taste ought to express control, order and calm; the gaudy house is too busy, too loud and just too much! And while many might be tempted to opt for a different style, the presumption that it is simply a case of *better homes and gardens* ignores a value system that extends way beyond living rooms and lawns; it extends right into the spirit of American taste.

MAMMA LEONE, ANNETTE FUNICELLO, SOPHIA LOREN, MADONNA:  
ITALIAN-AMERICAN FEMININITY

According to critic Camille Paglia, Madonna responds to the deep spiritual contradictions within her Italian Catholic upbringing; Madonna uncovers the paganism below the surface of the church.

The torture of Christ and the martyrdom of the saints, represented in lurid polychrome images [in the video "Open Your Heart"], dramatize the passions of the body, repressed in art-fearing puritan Protestantism of the kind that still lingers in America. Playing with the outlaw personae of prostitute and dominatrix, Madonna has made a major contribution to the history of women. She has rejoined and healed the split halves of woman: Mary, the Blessed Virgin and holy mother, and Mary Magdalene, the harlot. . . . But Madonna's most enduring cultural contribution may be that she has introduced ravishing visual beauty and a lush Mediterranean



sensuality into parched, pinched word-drunk Anglo-Saxon feminism. (11-13)

Whether or not Paglia is fair in her attack on Anglo-Saxon feminism is less the issue here than is her identification of Madonna as a source of powerful, if divided, Italian eros: *virgin* (*mother*) and *slut*, an identification that has been made before of many (all?) women.

Since the time American GIs returned home from World War I, the image of voluptuous Italian women "doing anything" for some chocolate and silk stockings has been part of America's view of Italian-American femininity. If Italian-American men were viewed as "hot-blooded," Italian-American women were simply "hot." And the typically sexist projections of mother-versus-lover images of women in general are interestingly reconfigured within the food-and-sex matrix of Italian-American culture: women provide pleasures for the (male) body.

Thus we have the image of the old, short, round, black-dressed "Mamma Leone," selflessly working day and night over the stove, preparing meals for the entire family, and at the same time, we also have the young, voluptuous, dark (if not darkly dressed) woman, stirring the passions within the men she meets. From the moment Sophia Loren hit the big screen, transformed from wartime prostitute to playing wartime prostitute in Hollywood, Italian-American femininity has been defined as sex. Even the child actress Annette Funicello was to become the sexy, busty "mouseketeer"; for those unable to visualize the transformation completely on their own, America was provided with the now obscenely pedestrian "beach party" movies in which fans finally got to see what was always under Annette's mouseketeer sweater.

Even when the woman in question is not stereotypically voluptuous, her sexual desire and availability are the focus. Take for example the image we are given of the character Carla Tortelli from the TV sitcom "Cheers." Though not considered a "sexy woman," Carla's sexual appetite and fertility are to her what beer is to the character Norm Peterson. Carla is not only a counter to the "icy" Diane Chambers; she is the personification of Italian-American female lust itself. As a result, up until 1993 when "Cheers" went off the air, one of the best known images of Italian-American femininity was defined by a character whose passion for sex led her to work innumerable hours at a bar ("Cheers") in order to support her many children, while the main character of

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the show, Sam Malone, only had to care for his little black book full of the names of the many beautiful women he had had sex with. Carla the fecund, Italian-American hot tomato appears to pay dearly for her pleasures, while Sam, the All-American stud, simply retires from such excess, a legend in his own bar.

*BENSONHURST: WHOSE WATERMELON IS THAT ANYWAY?*

The nation knows the story of Yusef Hawkins, a black teenager shot down in the streets of Brooklyn, in an "Italian" neighborhood, by a group led by Italian-American Joey Fama. The story is as absurd as it is tragic: Hawkins was shot because his group (his brother and friend) was misidentified. They were confused with some other *blacks* who were to turn up at a party. As Hawkins walked the streets of Bensonhurst, looking for an address in order to inspect a car that was for sale, his attackers were on guard for the "black guy" who might show up at the house of one of the local teenage girls who was having a party. The rest is part of the history of violence against blacks in America.

There are many interesting issues to pursue: the relationship between African Americans and Italian Americans; illegal hand guns; mob mentality; male domination over women. Discussions in the print and television media at the time covered a wide range of topics but one of the many things overlooked was the image of Italian Americans presented to the nation. One could focus on the stories of Joey Fama and the Mafia or the role of the local Catholic Churches as examples of a certain representation of an Italian-American community. But instead of analyzing any of these issues, let us look at something different.

One of the responses to the Hawkins killing was a march through Bensonhurst organized by the Reverend Al Sharpton and other black clergy. It was a march of protest, made in defiance and for justice. As the mostly black marchers worked their way through the streets, crowds of neighborhood bystanders looked on. Some of the onlookers reacted to the march by taunting the protesters. The marchers were called names, cursed and told to leave the neighborhood, to go home. But one particular image was aired on all the local news stations and printed in all the papers: A group of hecklers holding up watermelons, screaming "go back home, watermelon eaters." This group of Italian-American men dressed in tee shirts (i.e., Italian tee shirts)

believed that the watermelon was the perfect symbol with which to insult the marchers.

This gesture of shoving the watermelon into the faces of the protesters as they marched by is but another reminder of the lack of self-consciousness some (Italian Americans) have concerning their own identity. The “perfect insult” that evidently was “ready-at-hand” was, in effect, a dead metaphor for the hecklers, for they clearly failed to identify this fruit as something very Italian; for them it was the comic fruit of those blacks walking by. But a moment’s reflection would have perhaps caused the watermelon-insulters at least some hesitation—if not an outright rejection of their strategy. While garlic, tomatoes and eggplant are among the roots, fruits and vegetables that many identify with Italian-American culture, the watermelon is no less part of that collection.

In Italy, of course, at the peak of the season watermelon stands can be found everywhere and the crowds standing and sitting around eating the fruit are quite a sight. However, one need not go to Italy to appreciate the love Italians have of this fruit: right in Bensonhurst, or any neighborhood with Italian Americans, one can find the prevalence of this fruit. From flavoring for “Italian-ice” to an ingredient for cookies, in addition to the classic slice, the watermelon is simply an integral part of the Italian-American diet. Yet for the hecklers attempting to poke fun at the protesters, the watermelon’s Italian-identified significance was all but erased—its total familiarity, its very availability at every (Italian) vegetable store in Bensonhurst rendered it merely a fruit for them to elevate to the status of symbol. As they raised their sleeveless arms to hold this symbol high for the marchers and the news cameras to view, they transformed themselves for the nation into the very kind of caricature they sought to impose upon the African-American marchers. Their racism led them to attempt a metonymic move, a gesture to devalue a group of people by way of metaphor. However, in their hysterical moment of crude sarcasm, those not-so-sophisticated symbol-makers indelibly reinscribed their own ethnic stereotype into the open book of American prejudice and racism for all to read.

*AMERIGO VESPUCCI AND THE IRRELEVANCE OF EPONYMY*

There was a great deal of excitement leading up to the celebration of the 500th Anniversary of Columbus’s “discovery” of

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America. A number of groups, including some Native Americans and academics who consider themselves "multiculturalists," voiced objections to the uncritical view many Americans have had of Columbus and his place in *American* history. Rather suddenly the "great" Italian explorer's reputation was in question: Columbus led the European charge to the New World which set off the downfall of the indigenous peoples who found themselves and their cultures all but destroyed by greed.

However, the reconsideration of European colonialism symbolized by the criticism of the Columbus celebration was seen by many Italian Americans as yet another attack on "Italian Pride." Any tarnishing of the image of Columbus as portrayed in school history books (at least pre-1990 books) was a tarnishing of an (Italian) American icon. In diminishing Columbus's stature one diminished all Italian Americans: Columbus after all is the beginning of American history. Despite the attacks and the demands for a day of mourning rather than of celebration, the Columbus celebration did go off as planned and his place in history, however revised, is still intact.

One of the many interesting questions that arose during the 500th Anniversary, of course, was whether or not the discovery of America was in fact to be credited to an individual (Italian) or to the state that financed the expedition, that is to say, Spain. The Spanish government sponsored its own celebration including the reenactment of the trans-Atlantic crossing—Columbus was honored as an agent acting in the name of the king and queen of Spain.

The claiming of Columbus, American, Spanish or Italian hero, and the disclaiming of Columbus, slave trader, murderer, thief, "Admiral of the Ocean" and religious zealot, caused a great deal of thought about the beginnings of "America." But even those whose emphasis was on preserving Columbus's "Italian" identity seem to have given little, if any, significant consideration to the naming of the New World itself: both continents bear the name of an Italian cartographer and navigator. Yet America is nothing Italian.

For most Italian Americans, it is the quintessential American story of the pilgrims arriving at Plymouth Rock that represents the true beginnings of America: New England is the real name of the (American) New World. Italian-American history is relegated to a place in the story of "mass" migration to the land of opportunity. Columbus, however Italian-identified, is part of pre-

American history and while acknowledged as the “discoverer” of the New World, it is the story of nation-states battling for this new land that quickly becomes the focus of history lessons in schools across America.

The name America evokes many things but it rarely evokes anything Italian. Some may still argue that this is in fact what made America great: Everything simply becomes American. The recent trend towards a genuine acknowledging of ethnic and cultural differences strikes many as the unmaking of America. For the Italians who emigrated from a depressed European economy along with millions of others, the process of becoming American was much more than a bureaucratic procedure; people did not simply want green cards in order to work, they wanted to become Americans and they became American.

First languages died, if rather slow and awkward deaths, and people eager to improve their lives moved as quickly as possible into the matrix of the powerful capitalist economy, legally and not. Today the grandchildren and great grandchildren of the immigrants of the early 1900s care little for the importance of names, save those which indicate success. *America* is a name that today refers only to itself, its telos of progress.

Naming has always been a wondrous and difficult affair; it has always suggested the power of those who name over and above that which has been named (“And whatsoever Adam called every living creature, that was the name thereof,” *Genesis* 2:19). Many Americans today find themselves struggling to name and rename themselves within a context, a history, resistant to such an expression of power. For many Italian Americans the very name America is the name of a complex of identities, the name of a past, present and future unfolding differently each time someone enunciates it. What exactly is named remains a question.

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