

## A Note from the New Editor

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This issue marks the seventh year of continual publication of the new *Italian American Review* (*IAR*) and the beginning of my term as the journal's editor. As I take on the responsibility of leading the *IAR* in the next stage of its life, I am reminded of how I became involved in the study of Italian migration in the first place and how much the field has grown since I began my training in the late 1990s.

The intellectual trajectory that led me from my undergraduate literary studies in Italy to U.S. history and eventually to Italian America was not a predictable one. My interest in Italian American studies and the larger Italian diaspora began inadvertently almost twenty years ago when I arrived in New York City with a post-*laurea* fellowship from the University of Calabria to pursue a master of arts in history at New York University. While I knew little then of Italian America, I was immediately struck by the political discrepancies between Italians and Italian Americans and was disconcerted by the widespread characterization (and to some extent self-identification) of the latter as ultraconservatives whose only ties with Italy seemed to be, at least in the American imagination, the Mafia, food, and religion. I wondered how and why Italian Americans' political consciousness came to diverge so markedly from that of their Italian counterparts (and of Italian immigrants in other parts of the world) and why stereotypes have been so durable. Unlike some of the early scholars of the 1970s, I was not seeking any type of ethnic vindication; I had no interest in defending the good name of Italians or correcting popular distortions of Italian American identity—distortions that surely count as some of the most insidious attacks against an ethnic group in U.S. society. But in retrospect, I realize that I must have felt nevertheless a responsibility to understand, connect, and engage with a world that I did not know and did not identify with, but that was clearly linked to both the world I came from and the world I came to live in.

At that time, my scholarly interests leaned toward American political, cultural, and social history; I had written my *tesi di laurea* on U.S. radical culture during the Progressive Era, and, inspired by the “history from the bottom up,” I was planning to write my dissertation on the “young rebels” of Greenwich Village. Then one day in 1999, as I was reading microfilms from the radical magazine *The Masses* (1911–1917) for one of my research seminars at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY), I came across

an article by Italian American author Arturo Giovannitti. Naturally, given the context, I was curious about him; I wanted to know more about his life and his relationship to U.S. radicalism. I was very fortunate to then count among the CUNY faculty the late Philip V. Cannistraro, an internationally recognized authority on Italian Fascism, who also contributed greatly to the field of Italian American history and who would coincidentally play an instrumental role in transforming the *IAR*, which he edited from 1999 until 2004, into a scholarly journal.<sup>1</sup> Cannistraro encouraged me not only to study Giovannitti but also to investigate the larger immigrant world in which he had operated. I was stunned to discover that Giovannitti was the leader of the most important American strike of the early twentieth century—the 1912 Bread and Roses strike by textile workers in Lawrence, Massachusetts—and that he was also an important poet of his time. Yet, despite his national reputation, Giovannitti was largely absent from popular accounts of U.S. and Italian American histories; like many other immigrants he seemed to have vanished from history. How to explain this historical amnesia? What began as a research paper to investigate this question quickly evolved into a broader mission to rescue an important chapter of the Italian American experience from historical oblivion. Based on archival sources from both sides of the Atlantic, that research became the basis of my dissertation and then my book *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture: The Idealism of the Sovversivi in the United States, 1890–1940* (Bencivenni 2011).

At the time of my encounter with Giovannitti, Italian American studies were gaining more prominence. Whereas CUNY had hired Cannistraro in 1996 as a distinguished professor of Italian American studies (with a joint posting at Queens College and the Graduate Center), the doctoral program in history nevertheless did not offer courses in this field (and did not even have a minor field in immigration or ethnic studies; regrettably, it still does not have one today). As a result, I had to juggle courses from different fields and work with professors across and outside of CUNY. But still I was very lucky; my generation was in many ways the first to be fully trained as Italian Americanists. Research on ethnic studies was expanding in new and exciting ways, as the history of “old” and “new” immigrants began to intersect with new theoretical perspectives on ethnicity, race, class, gender, nation building, and culture. I read the classics of U.S. immigration history—works by Oscar Handlin, John Bodnar, John Higham, Rudolph Vecoli—and delved into the growing literature on the Italian American experience and the then-modest body of work on the “lost world” of Italian immigrant radicalism (Cannistraro and Meyer 2003). I quickly joined other historians in challenging Edward C. Banfield’s influential theory of “amoral familism” and its broader implications for the characterization of the Italian South, bringing attention to the immigrants’ own agency. The “new social history” with its emphasis on ordinary people and stories

was a crucial catalyst in bringing about a renewed interest in the study of U.S. immigration and ethnic identities. My own approach to the study of Italian immigration was also profoundly shaped by the cultural theories of Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall, and Antonio Gramsci, made popular during my PhD years by the provocative works of cultural historians such as Robin Kelley, Michael Denning, Maurice Isserman, and Alan Wald, who brought attention to the “cultural terrain” as a site of struggle.

Since that time, the field has expanded enormously, attaining unprecedented levels of theoretical sophistication and critical analysis. Early histories of Italian Americans that emphasized Italian contributions to American life and successful Italian assimilation into U.S. society have been replaced by critical studies pointing to the enormous diversity and complexity of the Italian American experience. A rich and sophisticated literature in both English and Italian is now available to new scholars, ranging from general overviews of Italian immigration and comprehensive bibliographies to local, regional, national, and comparative studies focusing on aspects of immigrant life such as community formation, family dynamics, religion, folklore, and the workplace—and new topics continue to emerge every year.

New interpretative themes and categories have also evolved, as immigration scholars continue to advance innovative theories and interpretations. Transnationalism, in particular, has become a central paradigm for the study of Italians abroad; as early as 1962, before it became a buzzword, Ernesto Ragionieri brought attention to the transnational dimension of Italian emigration, particularly with respect to labor, urging scholars to internationalize Italy’s history. Since then, a growing number of scholars have explored Italy’s diasporic or global character, emphasizing its influence and connections to the rest of the world.<sup>2</sup>

Ethnic formation has become another major area of scholarly interest and debate. Sociologist Richard Alba has long maintained that Italian American ethnicity has declined to the point of assuming a mere symbolic or nostalgic meaning, as children of Italian immigrants assimilated into white American society and embraced its dominant values (Alba 1985). Many scholars, however, have called into question Alba’s claim, emphasizing the persistence of a distinct Italian American ethnic identity, albeit different from that of the earlier generations. Common assumptions regarding the nature and meaning of ethnicity have also come under attack. Ethnicity is now seen as something not fixed but rather fluid, contested, constructed, and contextual—something, to use Vecoli’s words, “grounded in personal and group memories, traditions and experiences” (Vecoli 1993, 297). Using ethnicity as a primary interpretative category in the study of the immigrant experience, many scholars of Italian American studies have also challenged traditional two-dimensional accounts

of race as white versus black, showing how Italians, along with other European immigrants, “became white” as a result of their adjustment to, and understanding of, American society.

Women’s and gender studies have also gone far to revise traditional assumptions about Italian immigration. Largely absent from earlier literature, Italian immigrant women have become the focus of many revisionist works in which “older images of passive ‘victimized’ females have slowly been cast aside for studies of immigrant women as active shapers of their own history” (Vecoli 1990, 44).<sup>3</sup> Bringing to bear the new feminist and gender theories that developed in the late seventies and early eighties, scholars of Italian immigration have focused attention on the important role of immigrant women not only in the context of the family but also in the spheres of work, politics, labor, and community.<sup>4</sup>

Italian Americanists today also utilize different types of methodologies, move easily between Italian and English, and tend to incorporate an interdisciplinary approach that draws from a variety of arenas and fields of study. Scholarship has also evolved from strictly immigration history, which focused primarily on the culture and experiences of the immigrants in the hosting country, to migration history, mobility, and diasporic studies where migrants are examined also in relation to their countries of origin and transnational connections. Putting Italian American studies in a broader conversation with transnational and global issues has allowed us to think more deeply across temporal, geographic, and political boundaries. As many scholars have pointed out, migration can be multidirectional, temporary or permanent, and voluntary or forced, and it affects both sending and receiving countries.<sup>5</sup> Identities and categories are not fixed over time. Whereas Italy was once a nation of emigrants, today it is also a nation of immigrants and a nation of transit, as hundreds of thousands of North Africans and Middle Eastern migrants pass through Italy each year to reach Germany or France. In the last decade, the global range of Italian migration has been further highlighted by world events such as decolonization, the liberalization of the market, and the communication revolution, which have in turn engendered cultural, political, and identity dynamics that transcend the traditional parameters of nation-states.

These developments make Italian American studies today a particularly dynamic and exciting field—a vibrant arena, as Joseph Sciorra put it in his farewell as the journal’s editor (Sciorra 2016), in which to explore new concepts and approaches. The work that has been published in this journal since its relaunching in 2011 is a powerful testament to the growth and distinction attained by the field in the last decade. Indeed, from its three most recent special issues—focusing, respectively, on Italian Americans and television, organized crime, and foodways—to its original articles and critical reviews covering a

wide range of subjects, the *IAR* has effectively promoted new perspectives and scholarship as part of its mission to advance critical debate about the history and culture of Italian Americans and the Italian diaspora.

The long article by Michele Presutto published in this issue is a case in point. Espousing a transnational approach, Presutto brings attention to a hitherto neglected episode in the history of Italian diasporic radicalism: the position and role of Italian radicals in the Mexican Revolution of 1917. As an expert in this field, I was pleasantly surprised to find so much new and interesting information in Presutto's research that I had not known; I hope that I will see many more of these types of contributions in the future pages of *IAR*.

As anyone who has contributed to the journal as a reviewer or author knows well, the *IAR*'s success would not be possible without the hard work of its staff: Rosangela Briscese, our managing editor, without whom this journal could not operate; Siân Gibby, our assistant editor; and Lisa Cicchetti, our production manager—all work diligently to ensure that the journal meets the highest academic standards. An enormous thanks goes especially to my predecessor Joseph Sciorra for his devotion to the field, his conscientious leadership, and his perseverance. He has been instrumental not only in successfully relaunching the *IAR*, but also, and more importantly, in giving it stability and credibility. It is that same sense of responsibility and commitment to advance the state of the field that guides me as I embark on this leadership position. Building on the wonderful work that Joseph Sciorra and the *IAR* editorial team have done so far, it is my intention to support and promote the journal in every way I can.

I would also like to acknowledge the work of the other editors of the journal, our departing film and digital media review editor Laura E. Ruberto, who has served the *IAR* for the past six years; our book review editor Robert Oppedisano; and our exhibition review editor Melissa Marinaro—all of whom have gone well beyond their expected responsibilities and duties to keep us up to date with the latest and most provocative books, documentary films, websites, and exhibits. In the process of the editorial transition, during the past few months I have been able to discover firsthand their passion, impressive knowledge of the field, and ability to reach out and uncover the most interesting material; I look forward to working with them and getting to know them and their work better.

While we are sad to see Laura Ruberto go, I am happy to announce that we have found a new film and digital media review editor: JoAnne Ruvoli. Ruvoli's academic training and interests include American literary traditions, film and gender studies, as well as Italian American studies. She has published articles and reviews on early cinema, Jane Addams's Hull House, Italian American literary texts, and transnational circuits. She is currently finishing a book tentatively titled *Framing Ethnicity: Storytelling in Italian American Novels*, which locates

Italian American novels from the post–Civil Rights era in the canonical U.S. literary tradition.

I am also incredibly grateful to all the colleagues who have volunteered their time and shared their expertise serving as peer reviewers for submitted articles or to write book, film, and exhibition reviews for the journal. The *IAR* would not be able to operate without their services, and I hope that more scholars from both within and outside the field of Italian America will join us in our efforts to sustain, advance, and expand the journal.

Maintaining the *IAR*'s interdisciplinary character, I will work to continue to grow the pool of contributors to the journal as well as its readership. In the past three years the *IAR* has increased its subscription to 128 paying members, doubling 2014's numbers. While this is a considerable progress, we clearly need to do more.

One of my top priorities will also be to increase the number of databases that include *IAR* among their publications. Currently the journal is listed among the periodicals of the Modern Language Association and is indexed by EBSCO's "America: History and Life" database. I have applied to CINECA (Consorzio Interuniversitario del Nord-Est Italiano per il Calcolo Automatico, the Italian consortium made up of Italian universities, research institutions, and the Ministry of Education) for the inclusion of the *IAR* in the list of "Category A" scientific publications, and I will also apply to other leading U.S. databases in the near future. These procedures, however, take time, and acceptance can be jeopardized by problems such as low subscription numbers and publishing delays. I want to assure you that we are taking all the necessary steps to ensure that *IAR* obtains the highest level of visibility and recognition it deserves, but we cannot do this alone. Much of our success depends on what you, as a reader and scholar in the field, are willing to contribute.

Therefore, I invite and urge each of you to reach out to, connect with, and support the journal in any way you can, starting with the first step: subscribing to the journal and promptly renewing your subscriptions. You can also help increase subscriptions by asking your institution's library to subscribe or by purchasing subscriptions as gifts.

Please consider submitting a scholarly article for consideration of publication if the subject matter is appropriate and the article is academic in nature (remember, however, that the journal does not publish literary criticism or creative writing). We strive to have a large pool of reviewers and contributors beyond those scholars working primarily in Italian American studies to reflect the field's interdisciplinary character and its interconnections with Italian history and culture.

It is an honor to serve as the editor of the *Italian American Review*, and I look forward to what I hope will be a productive, enriching, and rewarding

experience. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have ideas for special issues or suggestions on how to enhance and promote opportunities for fruitful collaborations and conversations between Italian American studies, Italian studies, and ethnic and immigration studies or merely if you want to chat about the directions that the journal might—or should—take in the years ahead.

## Notes

1. For a detailed history of the *IAR*, see Sciorra (2011).
2. See, above all, Gabaccia (2000), Gabaccia and Ottanelli (2001), and Gabaccia and Iacovetta (2002).
3. For a review of the historiography, see Gabaccia (1993).
4. See, for example, Guglielmo (2010).
5. For an overview of these shifts, see Bukowczyk (2015).

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