

and other users of culture in creating them, what Bruns called *produsage* (Bruns 2008). While the book brings together a wealth of materials and provides many suggestions for further study, it nevertheless leaves to others the task of making full critical sense of an extensive body of musical creation.

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Memories of Belonging: Descendants of Italian Migrants to the United States, 1884–Present.

By Christa Wirth.

Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2015.

406 pages.

Christa Wirth has written an ambitious book about Italian Americans; her aim is to write a "history of memory of migration, everyday life, and ethnicity" (17). Her book is a case study of eighteen descendants of Giovanni and Elvira Soloperto, who left Sava (Taranto province), Apulia, for the United States in 1913. Wirth herself is a fourth-generation descendant of this migratory couple and developed a sample that took advantage of her "insider/outsider status" (48). The research project focused on thirty-four interviews of the American and Italian progeny of Giovanni and Elvira over a nine-year span.

The core of the book is an exploration of "how memories within families were created, contested, and altered, and recreated across several generations" from "around 1900" into the new millennium (8). Drawing on the pioneering memory work of Maurice Halbwachs, the study "demonstrates *empirically* how

individual and collective memories are interlinked" (17). From Halbwachs, Wirth privileges memory studies because they allow for "competing narratives" and a "macro perspective" as opposed to "the single individual in oral history" (28). Wirth employs "narratology and motif analysis" (48) to interpret interview data against the backdrop of official records, secondary sources, family texts, and larger historical events. On the one hand, she asks how memory constructs experiences of migration, assimilation, and the homeland; on the other, she studies factors that shape memory, including gender, locality, and especially social class. The issue of how memories were recalled and transmitted intergenerationally but also confused and omitted is identified as a process of social transaction—family member talking to family member as well as sharing photos and other intimate texts. Wirth's interviews excavate a trove of cherished familial snapshots, like the "sensory impressions" of grandfather's grocery store (165) and of Beatrice Soloperto, who leaves Worcester High School (Worcester, Massachusetts) during the Great Depression, becomes a civil servant, rents an apartment with a roommate in Boston, and starts "going on dates" (10).

Individual and family memories are organized by means of the core frameworks of migration research: "firstly, U.S. immigration history that entails research on assimilation, the immigrant paradigm, and American pluralism[;] secondly transnational migration research[;] and, thirdly, whiteness studies" (30). The book first discusses transnational migration spawned by a global economy. This affords a crucial perspective on Italian migrants to the United States during the great wave of migration, half of whom returned to Italy. Building on the work of Donna Gabaccia, J. S. MacDonald, and Samuel Baily, Wirth calls attention to a pattern of sequential family migration, whereby migrants acted collectively with family and *paesani*. Wirth examines passenger lists of transatlantic shipping companies as well as Italian certificates of birth (*atti di nascita*) and of permission to leave (*nulla osta*) that were necessary for passport application and draft records. This research yields the example of a peripatetic Soloperto relative, ironically with the surname Stranieri (*foreigner* in Italian), who was a "foreigner" in both Italy and the United States. Wirth is Swiss, and her research project embodies this "circulation back and forth across the Atlantic" in the fourth generation (307).

The assimilation thread that Wirth follows consists of two family lines representing different trajectories. One group demonstrated ethnic persistence by staying in the old ethnic neighborhood in Worcester; the other group left in the second generation for rural New Hampshire and embraced what Milton Gordon termed "Anglo-conformity," even converting to Protestantism. Wirth uses motif analysis to excavate "local social experience" that is "beyond the symbolic and into the experienced reality" (229). She looks at examples of insider/outsider difference, connectedness, and togetherness in both family

histories to identify motifs “that diverge in the second and third generations only to converge in the fourth generation as the Worcester branch moves further into the mainstream and as members of the separated line return to ethnicity” (248). In the end, the fact that current family members draw so regularly on strong memories of earlier Italian American generations leads Wirth to reject the model of simple, linear assimilation.

Finally, Wirth turns to whiteness studies in the work of David Roediger, Matthew Frye Jacobson, and Thomas Guglielmo in which Italian Americans are seen not as “white” but as “dark” to frame memories of Italianness for the Soloperto descendants. Irish Americans emerge as a local boundary for the Worcester-based group and white Anglo-Saxon Protestants for the separated group in New Hampshire. It is interesting to note that she discovers that in Worcester Italian Americans are often conflated with the city’s Brazilian immigrants (238). Whiteness is also situated in a larger context, notably the history of race as an idea (scientific racism) and the ensuing Immigration Act of 1924, which Wirth contends is “central to the understanding of the Italian experience” (190).

Wirth’s book advances Italian American studies on several levels. First, the case study approach adds to the empirical base of the research literature. Second, it thrusts the study of historical memory into the conversation about ethnic persistence and change, including the production of memory cultures or shared remembrances within groups—in particular, families—and across generations. Third, it underscores the importance of transnational migration for the overall Italian American experience. The latter two contributions will be appreciated by those who take a social science approach to Italian American studies.

More problematic are the book’s contributions to the assimilation debate, which remains central to the sociological approach to Italian American studies. Although Wirth maintains that “what people say” in the interviews “also provide[s] data that shows what they do” (61), memories alone do not provide definitive evidence that ethnicity is *lived*, especially in later generations. Moreover, how her subjects actually live can pose problems for her critique of the applicability of the linear assimilation model, most notably her finding of a robust incidence of exogamy in the third and fourth generations of both family lines. Curiously, Wirth attempts to debunk the concept of symbolic ethnicity, in which memories can become cultural capital utilized in third and fourth generations that are occupationally mobile, have more discretionary income, and are more educated. The evidence she offers that there is a return to ethnicity in later generations is often flimsy, as in this statement from a descendant in the separated family line: “By converting and becoming a practicing Catholic, she integrated ‘Italianness’ deeply into her everyday reality . . . she

brought ethnicity back full circle” (248). Wirth does not supply convincing evidence that “the assimilation paradigm [is] obsolete” (41) in her own case study. It is by no means certain how memories of belonging translate into a *lived* ethnicity for later generations in the United States even when there are relatives who returned to Italy or, for that matter, never left. She fails to account for the persistence of an assimilation paradigm and to consider that the problem is not so much with the linearity of the model as with its failure to recognize ethnic persistence and change (see Tricarico 2017).

Although memory “put in a societal and historical context . . . is the main aim of this book” (61), there is often a disconnect among analytical levels, resulting in explanations that are too abstract. For example, the omission of the Sacco and Vanzetti case as a topic in interviews is attributed to a climate of “coercive Americanism and xenophobia” (128) while “a reclaimed Italianness” in later generations is viewed as a response to “the coercive experience of Anglo conformity” and “a longing for community and social intimacy” (312). At times, generalizations verge on cliché: “The diversity of those born before and after the 1960s reflects how the civil rights, women’s rights, and LGBT movements of the 1960s and beyond fostered cultural diversity and a plurality of identities and lives” (77). In these examples, a middle ground of concrete experience is missing, notably at the level of local culture, which is necessary to bridge the gap between wider structural conditions and individualized events like Beatrice’s leaving Worcester. This middle-ground experience is suggested in some places, for example, in regard to the racial positioning of Italian Americans in Worcester, but it begs to be fleshed out.

Wirth’s book works best as a study of the memories shared over time by individuals in a kinship network. After assessing the assimilation trajectories and ethnic possibilities of later generations, the book continues with a chapter that revisits memories of the migratory couple, followed by a discussion of a primal “American Dream,” which includes an interview with the current mayor of Sava (Taranto province). Ending the narrative back where it all started, in Apulia, provides a vicarious experience of the transnational migration experience and closes the loop that ties living memories to the past.

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