

shrine-making project offers “an interactive encounter with loss, witness & community on the streets of the city.”¹ *Built with Faith* also serves as guidebook and companion for Fordham University students who conduct field work each semester at sites of spiritual meaning in New York City. For scholars, teachers, and students alike in fields ranging from the culture of American Catholics to Italian American studies, urban history, and the material worlds of American ethnic communities, there is no book as simultaneously revealing and as eminently usable as this one.

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Note

1. See <https://www.instagram.com/allsoulnyc/>.

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In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, & Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen.

By Samuele F.S. Pardini.

Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2017.

280 pages.

In his interesting study, Samuele Pardini argues that, as Italian immigrants to the United States achieved whiteness, along with gaining a racial distinction they simultaneously experienced cultural invisibility. During the height of the second great migration (1880–1924), even though immigrants arrived in America when racial categories were still relatively unfixed, Italians—along with Poles, Jews, and Slavs—were legally recognized as white. Nonetheless, according to Pardini, Italians in America have discursively revealed an “invisible blackness”

(81) willfully obscured but disclosed in narratives by both African American and Italian American writers and figures in popular culture. Taking a cue from historians and sociologists such as Matthew Frye Jacobson and David Roediger, who analyzed changing conceptions of racial identity in America, Pardini applies the idea of “racial in-betweenness” to propose that Italian immigrants’ ambiguous whiteness was actually a form of invisible blackness.

Pardini examines this invisible blackness in a variety of texts by black and Italian American figures spanning the twentieth century but with a special emphasis on its early and middle decades. Rearticulated in this way, Italian American cultural and racial identity undergoes persuasive scrutiny by Pardini, who places *In the Name of the Mother* in multiple contexts, inclusive of the color line, modernity, and transnational economies. Pardini sheds new light on the too often overlooked intersections between blacks and Italians, though equally effective studies such as Steven J. Belluscio’s (2006) *To Be Suddenly White: Literary Realism and Racial Passing* and John Gennari’s (2017) *Flavor and Soul: Italian America and Its African American Edge* serve on this front as companions in cultural criticism.

In the Name of the Mother is comprised of an introduction and six chapters, each chapter comparative in approach and roughly divided along chronological lines. Pardini extends Fred Gardaphé’s (2010) claim that the contested racial status of Italians began early in their migration history and compelled them to seek invisibility because of their shame and their refusal to be seen as anything other than white. Pardini argues that “Italian Americans are willfully oblivious of the racial otherness of their past and pass as white because they do not want to be seen as nonwhite” (5). While I find Pardini’s use of the word “nonwhite” a curious choice here, Italians feared too easy an equation with black Americans, a stance that quickly and irrevocably (except perhaps for those who achieved fame and wealth) separated them in mind and heart from African Americans, along with structural inequities in place that exacerbated many forms of segregation.

Thus, I would have liked to have seen Pardini place up front a rhetorical disclaimer that positions the racial reality of African Americans as qualitatively harsher than that experienced by any other ethnic or racial migrant group. The author’s reference to the “greatest lynching in American history” (the lynching of Sicilian Americans in New Orleans) might have been better balanced by references to African American histories of lynching (13). However, to his credit, Pardini’s final chapter on black/Italian musical duos thankfully references Frank Sinatra’s careful distinction between the discrimination suffered by his ethnic group and, as Pardini writes, the “unspeakable racism that African Americans endured” (227). Pardini also makes the probative point in his introduction that postbellum narratives such as Mark Twain’s *Pudd’nhead Wilson*

(1894) employ Italian characters as a replacement for blacks and as a commentary on African Americans' disenfranchisement during Reconstruction, prohibiting any political alliance between immigrants and former slaves for decades to come (17).

Chapter 1, "New World, Old Woman: Or, Modernity Upside Down," attempts a fresh analysis of Booker T. Washington's 1912 sociological travel narrative about Italy, *The Man Farthest Down*, and Emanuele Crialesi's 2006 film *Nuovomondo* to answer the question: "What does Washington's investment in southern Italians begin to tell us about their relationship to African Americans and modernity?" (38). Pardini convincingly argues that Southern Italian peasants subversively resist modernity and, in doing so, refuse to be degraded in their "essential humanity" (50). Such resistance may have proven paradoxically liberating for Southern Italian women despite anomic poverty and despite Washington's decision to orientalize Southern Italians; in doing so, the American educator of black subjectivity was able to examine how rural Sicilian peasants "live outside of modernity" but within an economy of faith symbolized by the "many black Madonnas on the Mediterranean Island" (33). Suggesting that Crialesi promulgates a Mediterranean "humanism" that challenges concepts of modernity cinematically through emigrants' eyes, Pardini reads the film as emphasizing a rejection of a manufactured reality in which the letting go of traditional identities requires the abandonment of complex, deeply rooted aesthetic and cultural practices.

Chapter 2, "Rochester, Sicily: The Political Economy of Italian American Life and the Encounter with Blackness," offers equally compelling examples of how Sicilian Italians in upstate New York resisted competitive individualism in favor of a communitarian logic at odds with an increasingly modernizing America. Pardini demonstrates how Jerre Mangione links Italian American life "to blackness in order to expose its incompatibility with the world of whiteness" and focuses on one of the most congenial of Italian American texts, *Mount Allegro* (1943), and the "subtle ways in which [Mangione] documents the importance of racial diversity to the history of their land of origins" during the era of Jim Crow (52).

Turning to black male writers during Jim Crow, Pardini's chapter 3, "Structures of Invisible Blackness: Racial Difference, (Homo) Sexuality, and Italian American Identity in African American Literature During Jim Crow" focuses on five works in which the authors incorporate Italian American (male) characters to examine the "relationship between race and processes of modernization in the twentieth century" (79). Pardini locates the invisible blackness of Italian American men to illuminate African American homosexual identity in such texts as Richard Bruce Nugent's long-unpublished novel *Gentleman Jigger* (2008) and James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956),

challenging hetero-patriarchal norms in order to represent different intersections between working-class and homosexual formations. In addition, Pardini locates the recurrent trope of the ethnic gangster within several of these texts, to examine further how marginal status triggered other forms of outsider status, inclusive of social and sexual mores. Willard Motley's best-selling *Knock on Any Door* (1947) epitomizes the intersection between Italian and black identities, and Pardini's attention to this African/Italian American novel is quite excellent, showing how Motley reinvents "blackness after the New Deal and World War II" through the Italian American character, Nick Romano, whose queerness frees him from conventional desire, middle-class assimilation, and white respectability.

Chapters 4 and 5, "In the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Gun: Modernity as the Gangster" and "In the Name of the Mother: The Other Italian American Modernity," are shaped by Pardini's assertion that "No trope in our (post) modern culture epitomizes the cultural power of patriarchy as well as the Italian American gangster. No trope in modern American literature embodies as subversively as the Italian American woman and mother" (128). Pardini's focus on the intersection between capitalism and gangsterism is eminently persuasive (and has been made before by many Italian American scholars, beginning with Rose Basile Green). Suggesting that the Italian American gangster metonymically replaces the African American man in criminal guise allows the author to offer an intricate reading of Mario Puzo's *The Godfather* (1969) (and the Coppola films) alongside Don DeLillo's *Underworld* (1997) and Frank Lentricchia's *The Music of the Inferno* (1999). Improvising on Gardaphé's (2006) *From Wiseguys to Wise Men: The Gangster and Italian American Masculinity*, Pardini argues that the texts under his consideration constitute a move from wise guy to white guy (131). Particularly apt is Pardini's referencing of the reading influences in DeLillo, whose homage to Motley's *Knock on Any Door* is featured in Nick Shay's plot sequence of a young man who murders, winds up in juvenile detention, but does not die for his criminal action perhaps because he killed an Italian man rather than an Irish cop. I very much liked Pardini's discussion of the too little discussed *Music of the Inferno* and that novel's ceaseless riffing on canonical and particularly Italian American literary culture, reminiscent of Puzo's own deep reading of the generation of writers before him.

Perhaps the most Italian American character in *Underworld* is Nick's mother, Rosemary Shay, an Irish American. Fostering a feeling of mutuality within the neighborhood community, Italian American women are often represented as maternal figures with a cooperative ethic and a politics of hospitality divorced from modernist culture. Chapter 5 focuses on four novels and on the songs of Bruce Springsteen, arguing that the recurring trope of the Maria character is represented widely as a figure of recuperation and a subversive figure in

her own right, resisting “class and cultural oppression” (171). This is a very insightful comment and offers a rich vein of thought. The texts chosen for this analysis include classics in Italian Americana: John Fante’s *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), Mari Tomasi’s *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), Michael DeCapite’s *Maria* (1943), and Carole Maso’s *Ghost Dance* (1986).

The lion’s share of the analysis remains deservedly on the underrepresented Maria, and Pardini offers a rich reading, indeed. However, in a forty-seven-page chapter on mothers, the author dedicates only ten pages to analyzing the works of the only two women writers represented in the entire book. Pardini inexplicably dismisses Antonia Pola’s important book *Who Can Buy the Stars?* (1957) (calling it an “unachieved spinoff” of DeCapite’s *Maria*), and reduces the lifelong relationship represented between women in *Ghost Dance* to a “lesbian affair” (215). This disappoints. In addition, I would like to have seen more accurate close readings (especially of the final scene between Svevo, Arturo, and Mrs. Hildegard). Fante’s Maria figure vis-à-vis a chronically abusive spouse (who did not represent the norm for fathers of Italian American families) begged for more analysis. Further cultural context also would have better informed Springsteen’s multiple references to the name Mary/Marie/Maria throughout several years on multiple albums. Though I am a huge fan of “The Boss,” I am no expert on Bruce Springsteen’s lyrics, but I can say this: Springsteen grew up in a multiethnic neighborhood, has Irish/German/Italian heritage, and most likely knew girls whose names were Mary or its many variations. The slippage that results from moving too easily toward interpretation of these songs as if they were movable pieces within a decontextualized time period is dubious.

Functioning more as a fascinating epilogue than a proper conclusion, Pardini’s final chapter, “The Dago and the Darky: Staging Subversion,” discusses perhaps the two most famous biracial duos in American musical history: Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr., and Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons. While much has already been written about these figures, Pardini manages quite well to locate the trope of invisible blackness within the performances of each pair. By signifying the inclusiveness of sharing, such musical twosomes reinforce Pardini’s analysis of a politics of generosity that functions subversively in the lives and texts of Italian Americans and African Americans. *In the Name of the Mother* is an important and useful addition to the scholarship on literary Italian American studies, extending and complicating the essential topography of race and ethnicity in America.

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Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank Nancy Caronia for her responses to my queries on the lyrics of Bruce Springsteen.

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