Introduction to the Special Issue on Italian Americans and Television

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In 1948 a young Los Angeles TV station, KFI-TV, premiered a sitcom starring Anna Demetrio as Mama Rosa, an Italian immigrant widow who runs a boarding house in Hollywood for aspiring actors.[1] About a year later ABC picked up *Mama Rosa*, broadcasting it live from Los Angeles without a studio audience. The program ran for only one season (April to June 1950), and beyond such simple details little is known about the show. We do not know why it failed or what impact it had socially, culturally, or economically on the then-young medium of television, but from that moment Italian Americans would become part of the evolving nature of the small screen itself.[2]

U.S. commercial television, in its first years, became a central location where popular culture took advantage of shifting notions of ethnicity and difference in the United States. A quick look at the first wave of sitcoms illustrates this focus: *The Goldbergs* (Jewish American; NBC/CBS/DuMont/syndication, 1949–1956), *Amos 'n' Andy* (African American; CBS, 1951–1953), *Mama* (Norwegian American; CBS, 1949–1957), *The Life of Riley* (Irish American; NBC, 1949–1950; 1953–1958), and *Life with Luigi* (Italian American; CBS, 1952–1953).[3] Each of these shows began on radio, but they were adapted to television as it became an increasingly dominant medium. This process sometimes involved toning down the ethnic traits of the program's characters: For example, the Jewishness referenced in *The Goldbergs* was moderated (Weber 1998, 97–99). In the case of *Life with Luigi*, a variation of that strategy was taken on: Non-Italian viewers could often "empathize" with the self-proclaimed "little immigrant" character, as Dominic Candeloro (2010) has shown, but the program also tread a fine line "between laughing *with* and laughing *at*" Italian Americans (78).[4]

Despite a long list of characters that runs from Mama Rosa and Luigi Basco to Laverne DeFazio, Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino, and beyond, as well as a long list of writers, directors, producers, and showrunners that includes David Chase, Tom Fontana, Donald Bellisario, and Nick Santora, the presence of Italian Americans on (and in) television has been understudied in both television studies and Italian American studies. This lacuna cannot be overstated. We hope this special issue begins a critical and evolving discourse by revealing some of the strategies that have been used

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by TV producers and personalities to construct a group identity. While the articles that follow focus specifically on Italian Americans, we believe that they carry the potential to expose the tactics used to construct identities more broadly—be they ethnic, gender, sexual, class, or other markers.

Further, while the study of any group can work toward these ends, Italian Americans serve as a particularly compelling case study since their socioeconomic standing within the United States has varied so greatly. From the late 1940s and the early 1950s (the era when television began to emerge as a culturally dominant medium) to the present (when television's dominance has been challenged), Italian Americans have been a consistent presence on U.S. TV screens. Rather than merely entertainment, these representations serve as cultural artifacts that both influence and are influenced by changing notions of Italian American identity.

Today the ways in which television helps to construct ethnicity remain powerful despite a shift in how video images are circulated, distributed, and exhibited. In fact, the very meaning of "watching television" is evolving such that the material object of the television itself may become obsolete well before the term "watching television" does. Nonetheless, television's power to mold cultural identities and communities may be enhanced by changing models of media exhibition and fluid notions of media and viewership. After all, smartphones, tablets, gaming platforms, the Internet, virtual reality devices, and other forms of technology make video imagery even more ubiquitous.

Historically, television held certain distinctions over other media.[5] First, television was most prominently a domestic medium, most often consumed and experienced in a private home and therefore connected with family and community in unique ways.[6] Second, it was regularly integrated into viewers' other activities—from reading to cooking to socializing. TV viewing frequently occurred in well-lit living rooms, which did not afford the same privacy that darkened movie theaters did, and even when TV watching happened in more intimate parts of a home (i.e., the bedroom), individual viewers sometimes talked to one another while the television played in the background.[7] Of course, the so-called glance theory, John Ellis's idea that TV viewing was not practiced with as much concentration as were theatrical motion pictures (which required a more focused "gaze"), does not apply in all situations, but his idea was prominent in television studies for some time (Ellis 1982, 77–90, 160–171).[8] Third, television afforded a degree of "liveness" (that was and is not possible in film, a recorded medium).[9] Fourth, according to Raymond Williams ([1974] 1992, 80), "flow," which refers to the way programming is sequenced in order to maintain viewership, was "perhaps the defining characteristic of broad-

casting, simultaneously as a technology and as a cultural form."[10] Theater film going, on the other hand, tended to exist as a semi-autonomous experience. Viewers entered a theater, watched an individual film (which may have been preceded by commercials, trailers, or even another feature), then exited the theater and did something else.

Today, while much of the above-mentioned culture around television persists, the medium is to a great extent experienced in myriad ways that were not possible even just a few years ago. The burgeoning popularity of digital video recorders (DVRs), on-demand television, and various streaming possibilities have changed the ways viewers interact with television (and other media, like film), and these changes have challenged previous arguments about the specificity of the TV medium. As Jonathan Nichols-Pethick (2011, 183) writes, "New conditions should also force us to rethink our core ideas and to reconsider the concept of 'flow' as a foundational principle of the television experience."[11]

These "new conditions" have, for example, promised viewers greater control over television (and other media). While viewers in the pre-TiVo world lacked the power to pause live television, they nonetheless could choose which station to watch, and the introduction of VCRs in the 1970s and 1980s afforded TV audiences even more command over not just the programs they watched but also the movies they purchased or rented. As Daniel Chamberlain (2010) states, "The promise of such emergent modes of television viewing is explicitly one of personalization and control over both the content and the frame of the television screen, as individuals fine-tune their viewing experiences by interacting with screen-based interfaces" (87). The current prevalence and continued evolution of Netflix, Hulu, and other streaming services promise even greater control to the viewer, even as algorithms persistently track viewer choices and recommend new programs.

With the upheaval that such convergence has introduced, it is worth recalling that the medium of television has always been unstable (Kompare 2011, 161).[12] "Regardless of how we define it," Derek Kompare has written, "television, or more specifically *concepts of television*—as a technology, an industrial system, a set of aesthetic practices, an ideological apparatus, or even a 'plug-in drug'—will continue to matter for the foreseeable future. Given that television will be there, in many forms, we must continue to pursue *why* and *how* it matters" (161). For John Fiske ([1987] 2000), television mattered because it allowed for agency in its viewers; its "textuality," Fiske argued, made it open to interpretation and different ways of being experienced. Viewers are able to create multiple meanings through an individual's agency in watching itself—"watching television is a process

of making meanings and pleasures" (537).[13] Thus, despite the changing nature of television, which will continue to evolve as new technologies come to prominence, it is a useful site for rendering more visible the ways ethnicity is coded and circulated within popular media.

Italian Americans, Television, and the Politics of Race

The emergence of television's cultural prominence aligns with the era when Italian Americans en masse shifted to a more firmly planted position of whiteness. This shift was neither wholesale nor clear-cut; instead it was and is an ongoing process of cultural and political negotiation that stemmed from a number of factors (e.g., regional prejudices that accompanied immigrants from Italy, anti-immigrant discrimination). As a result, Italian Americans retained an ambiguous racial status for many decades (Guglielmo and Salerno, 2003; Luconi 2010, 33–44). The media—especially film and television—strengthened and reflected this ambiguity. Twentieth-century media representations of Italian Americans and Italian American cultures evolved, paralleling other changes, especially with respect to Italian Americans' general socioeconomic standing and dominant perspectives toward race and ethnicity (Bertellini, 2010; Cavallero 2011; Connell and Gardaphé 2010, Gardaphé 2006). Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century, the majority of Italian Americans became politically entrenched as "white" even as they retained a position of difference that labeled them as "ethnics" (Di Biagi 2010, 34). The shifts in Italian American identity were much more complicated than our swift overview suggests, and scholars continue to unravel this apparent contradiction: Popular media and consumer culture at once represent Italian Americans as not completely or simply white while frequently imparting on that not-white status a favored popular stance.

If television is a cultural forum, as Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch ([1983]1999) have suggested, then the popular representation of Italian Americans on U.S. TV screens becomes a kind of cultural artifact around which a culture's hopes, dreams, values, and conflicts can be discussed (561–574). The representation of Italian Americans, like the representation of all groups, is and always will be contradictory. And the early years of television are no exception. From live TV productions like "Marty" (NBC, 1953) to *The Continental* (CBS, 1952–1953) and from the Kefauver hearings (1950–1951) to *The Untouchables* (CBS/ABC, 1959–1963), early television offered a varied representation of Italian characters that recycled old stereotypes like the gangster and the Romeo[14] (see Bondanella 2004; Tamburri 2010, 214) while increasing the visibility of more sympathetic, everyman

figures like Marty Piletti, a thirtysomething bachelor searching for love.[15] Soon other representations of Italian and Italian American cultures were circulating.[16] An increase of goods and images imported from Italy as well as performers who came to work in the United States (not to mention an increase in the number of Italian immigrants to the United States in general), helped develop a particular Italian look or style across a myriad of consumer products where television figured prominently, especially in variety and game shows; for example, the whimsical Italian mouse puppet Topo Gigio, a regular guest on the *Ed Sullivan Show* (CBS, 1948–1971) or the Italian visiting musicians and actors who regularly appeared on *What's My Line* (CBS, 1950–1967).[17] Meanwhile, a series of more veiled or seemingly haphazard Italian ethnic characters peppered TV shows, suggesting the need for much more discussion about the role Italian Americans played in popular culture in the decades after World War II.[18]

The civil rights movement led to another dramatic shift in American sociocultural history. As Matthew Jacobson (2008) has shown, the "White Ethnic Revival" had destructive implications for race relations in the United States. Just as the country had started to come to terms with its past history of discrimination and prejudice, the roots phenomenon took over, effectively repositioning American whiteness. Jacobson writes, "[The White Ethnic Revival] relocated that normative whiteness from what might be called Plymouth Rock whiteness to Ellis Island whiteness" (7). This shift in perspective mitigated white ethnics' complicity and investment in discriminatory policies. Framing many Americans as the descendants of twentieth-century immigrants and then situating the immigrant narrative as the quintessential American story effectively diminished the magnitude of slavery and racism in U.S. history.

It is, therefore, no coincidence that U.S. television (as well as film) in the 1970s witnessed an explosion of ethnic characters, including those of Italian American backgrounds. Indeed, on popular TV sitcoms and dramas, high-visibility storylines centered on working-class Italian American heroes (or antiheroes) and urban Italian American families, for example, Arthur Fonzarelli from *Happy Days* (ABC, 1974–1984), Laverne DeFazio from *Laverne & Shirley* (ABC, 1976–1983), Vinnie Barbarino from *Welcome Back, Kotter* (ABC, 1975–1979), and Louie De Palma and Tony Banta on *Taxi* (ABC/NBC, 1978–1983) (Ruffner 2010; Tamburri 2010; Cicciò 2015).[19] This Italian working-class prominence on U.S. television was intensified by the so-called Godfather effect, stemming from the Mario Puzo/Francis Ford Coppola enterprise (Santopietro 2012). Put together, such popular culture images of the 1970s helped reinforce the idea that being Italian American was hip and interesting, even as it defined Italian American-ness

in limited, mainly masculine roles (Tricarico 1989; Cinotto 2014). In fact, audiences today, looking back to these images, may instead find far less appealing characters, given the texts' emphasis on brazen, heterosexual male homophobia, sexual aggression, and overall racism that makes the images anything but cool.[20]

In the latter half of the last century and first decade of this one, we trace another defining moment in how Italian Americans are represented on television.[21] At a time when the medium of television itself was changing, showrunner David Chase's *The Sopranos* (HBO, 1999–2007) (re)defined an Italian American ethnic identity (Lavery et al. 2011; Gardaphé 2006).[22] Within a few years of *The Sopranos*, *Jersey Shore* (MTV, 2009–2012) presented a national (and eventually international) audience with a re-popularized youth culture, so-called "Guido culture"—exploiting and decontextualizing what sociologist Donald Tricarico has documented as a distinct youth identity and community (Tricarico 2011).[23] For some scholars, this ethnic commodification marked a moment when ethnicity was more and more a performative identity to be borrowed, adopted, or challenged in various ways (Sastre 2014; Sherry and Martin 2010).[24]

While both of these programs were highly criticized by some for their representations of Italian American ethnicity, reducing either program to a simple display of stereotypes minimizes the opportunities the shows provide to discuss the meaning and place of Italian American ethnicity. As Laura Cook Kenna's article in this volume illustrates, the extent to which protests of *The Sopranos* essentially fell on deaf ears while those of *The Untouchables* led to changes in the program indicates that the cultural place of television itself had changed, and so, too, had the place of Italian Americans.[25] Italian American identity is not stagnant or static; rather, it represents a contested site around which competing discourses continue to vie for dominance. But it is also an identity category that includes a diversity of people from varying genders, sexualities, social classes, and regions. In the contemporary moment, television remains a dominant space where the meaning of Italian American ethnicity is engaged and negotiated.

This special issue, as with this introduction, is not comprehensive as much as it is exploratory. The four articles in this collection touch upon a number of sometimes overlapping themes: organized crime, food culture, gender, politics, race, antidefamation, and genre. In some cases, they provide the first serious consideration of the shows under discussion. In others, they add a new dimension to an already existing body of work. But in each, they demonstrate what is possible when the intersection of Italian American ethnicity and television is engaged critically. Rather than being a medium where programs wallow in crude stereotypes, television forwards and

always has forwarded competing discourses on the meaning of ethnicity generally and Italian American ethnicity specifically. The articles in this collection dig deeply into just a few of the programs that have played a role in shaping this discourse. Much more needs to be studied: from recuperating historical programs and those involved in their productions, to rendering visible the ways gender and sexuality are coded across ethnic images; from analyzing the role of Italian American viewers as consumers of media images to studying the impact of new media. We hope these articles both inform the scholarship that follows and also spark an interest in the further study of Italian Americans and television.

Michael Frontani's article "'Narcotic': Constructing the Mafia—The Nationally Televised New York Hearings of the Kefauver Committee, March 1951" looks at the U.S. Senate Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce. One of the first TV events, the hearings generated tremendous interest in television's early years with millions of viewers tuning in to watch the showdown between Washington politicos and reputed underworld crime figures. Frontani holds that the hearings worked to cement the idea of a transnational criminal conspiracy, an idea that was driven in no small part by the political and financial interests of committee members, the media, and various government agencies. A 1954 episode of *The Steve Allen Show* (that preceded the host's move to the newly created *The Tonight Show* [NBC, 1954–present] just a few months later) demonstrated the widespread acceptance and popularity of the Mafia image presented by the Kefauver Committee, an image that has permeated popular culture for many years since.

Laura Cook Kenna's "TV Gangsters and the Course of the Italian American Antidefamation Movement" investigates the reception of two of the most popular televisual representations of Italian American *mafiosi*: *The Untouchables* and *The Sopranos*. *The Untouchables* aired on broadcast networks from 1959 to 1963, an era when CBS, NBC, and to a lesser extent ABC, dominated the TV landscape. *The Sopranos* ran on HBO, a subscription-based cable network, from 1999 to 2007, a period that saw the proliferation of TV channels. However, while many differences separate the programs, Italian American organizations protested their ethnic group's representation in both shows. While the protests of *The Untouchables* led to concessions from the show's producers, those of *The Sopranos* did not. Kenna suggests that the relative success or failure of these groups' campaigns speak to the cultural standing of television. In the era of *The Untouchables*, television was characterized as a suspect medium that might erode public morals, but by the time of *The Sopranos* television had become an artistic medium whose potential, many thought, should not be censored or silenced by protesters.

Kevin Hagopian's "*Toma* to *Baretta*: Mediating Prime-Time White Ethnicity in the Post–Civil Right Era" provides the first serious consideration of the detective drama *Toma* (1973–1974), a short-lived but nonetheless important ABC series that later transformed into the more widely known and formulaic *Baretta* (ABC, 1975–1978). Central to each program is the white ethnic character's relationship with urban space. Hagopian holds that the transformation of *Toma*, a program more focused on social problems and cross-cultural interactions, into the more mainstream *Baretta* in which the white ethnic outsider dominates urban space and enacts vengeance upon the perpetrators of crime, manifests a larger trend within 1970s U.S. television. What was once an ambiguous picture of race relations, white ethnic assimilation, and other issues becomes a more clearly defined narrative where a white ethnic character conquers an often racially different urban environment, thus providing an allegory for white ethnic, working-class anxieties in the post–civil rights era.

Rocco Marinaccio's "*Cucina Nostra*: Italian American Foodways on Television" considers the celebrity chefs Lidia Matticchio Bastianich, Mario Batali, and Giada De Laurentiis and the various representations of Italian American ethnicity that they forward. Best known for their various cooking shows—*Lidia's Italian-American Kitchen* (PBS, 1998–2004), *Lidia's Italy* (PBS, 2007–present), *Molto Mario* (Food Network, 1996–2007), and *Everyday Italian* (Food Network, 2002–2007), among others—each of these three chefs has become an economic and cultural force through their consumer products, restaurants, and media personas. Marinaccio notes that Italian American foodways once marked the culture as different, but programs and celebrities like these have helped to commodify ethnic identity to the point that ethnically specific foodways have been transformed into mainstream U.S. culture and are now, therefore, consumable by the masses.

Taken together, these articles consider a multitude of TV genres, including news programming, cop shows, detective dramas, action programs, gangster narratives, and food series. They cover a range of historical eras from the 1950s to the 2010s, and the era of broadcasting with three major TV networks to the era of narrowcasting where specialized cable networks seek to attract niche audiences. Each of these different contexts affected the representation and rhetorical use of Italian American ethnicity, and the articles herein consider and comment on those dynamics. Collectively, they provide a snapshot of the place of Italian American ethnicity in the larger history of U.S. television. They also realize and demonstrate the immense potential this area holds for scholars of both Italian American and television studies. We believe that they provide a robust set of articles that also serve as an effective starting point for scholars interested in exploring new topics in these areas.

Authors' Note

This special issue grew out of a series of discussions we had over the course of the last five years, including panels we organized at the annual conferences of the Italian American Studies Association and the Society for Cinema and Media Studies. We are grateful to our contributors for sharing their research with us as well as to a number of other scholars who are not included here but who nevertheless inform our thinking on the topic. We thank the *Italian American Review*'s team, including its blind reviewers, for recognizing the need to give space to the topic of television and Italian ethnicity.

Notes

1. In addition to Demetrio, Beverly Garland and Richard Anderson, who both went on to larger television fame, played Nina and Roberto, Mama Rosa's children. And the character actor Vito Scotti was cast as Nikolai, a Frenchman.
2. *Mama Rosa* is arguably the first televisual representation of an Italian American woman (Ruggieri and Leebron, 2010), but more research is needed to understand what that image was and what impact it might have had on later programs.
3. Thomas Cripps (2003) writes, "[*I Remember Mama*, *Life with Luigi*, *Papa Cellini* (ABC, 1952), and *Bonino* (NBC, 1953)] shared a pool of interchangeable parts: an extended family, crotchety but warmly sentimental old folks, happy problems happily resolved in twenty-eight minutes of air time, and a division of characters into an older generation encrusted with cultural survivals from the old country and a younger group of super-Americans who had assimilated the virtues of the new land. Unfortunately, *Amos 'n' Andy* was asked to perform similar service for an ethnic group whose history included slavery, discrimination, and exclusion from the opportunity for easy assimilation implied in the gently comic plots of the European ethnic shows" (34). See also Lipsitz (1992). For the history of sitcoms, see Jones (1992) and Marc ([1989]1997). For a discussion of Jewish American ethnicity and sitcoms, see Brook (2003).
4. Although challenging to know how any group of viewers received such images, we find it noteworthy to recall Herbert Gans's (1962) classic sociological study of Boston's Italian American community, where he observes how Italian Americans viewed television, illustrating their critical engagement with it, "West Enders enjoy making fun of the media as much as they enjoy the programs" (194).
5. Although often subsumed within other communication and media-related disciplines, for some general texts on television studies, see Miller (2009), Fiske (2010), and Mittell 2009. See Horace Newcomb's (1999) edited collection *Television: The Critical View* for an overview of the possibilities that exist within the field of television studies; and for a discussion of televisual style, see Caldwell (1995).
6. For more on television's placement in the home, see Spigel (1992). In Italian American contexts these connections are multifold and often extend beyond the home. Still to be studied are the ways Italian American communities developed in relation to TV transmissions from Italy as well as U.S.-produced (sometimes only locally transmitted) Italian-language television. Such programming often played on televisions in Italian American-run bars and restaurants as well as in Italian American community centers and social clubs—places where Italian immigrants and their families connect(ed) and where certain traits of domestic space tend to carry over into shared public space. For a discussion of the relationship between home television watching and a greater Italian American community in the life and work of Martin Scorsese, see Ruberto (2014, 60–66).
7. See Spigel's (1992) seminal *Make Room for TV* for a study that teases out some of the changing aspects of domesticity as television came into U.S. homes, especially the

chapter "Woman's Work," which considers how the placement of a television set historically changed everything from interior design to daily schedules while reinforcing normative gender roles.

8. See Ellis (1982). Caldwell (1995) famously challenged this theory in *Televisuality*.
9. For an extended discussion of liveness and its relation to flow, see Feuer (1983).
10. A number of noted theorists have challenged Williams ([1974] 1992). See, for example, Feuer (1983), Newcomb and Hirsch ([1983]1999), and White (2003).
11. "Today's television systems," Spigel (2005) argues, "demand new inquiries and theories." (83).
12. For more on convergence, see Jenkins (2008).
13. Fiske's interest here is decidedly on conventional domestic broadcast TV viewing rather than comparing or otherwise considering film or other kinds of screen media. Nonetheless, his interest in the agency of television viewers made an important contribution to the then-nascent field of television studies. Elana Levine (2011) writes, "Fiske arguably positioned television as the central medium of popular culture and sought to understand culture through the lens of British Cultural Studies – that is, to understand culture as a site of struggle over power" (181).
14. What Bondanella labels a "Romeo" (referring to film, television, and other forms of popular culture) other scholars have called a "Latin lover" (Reich 2004, 1–23).
15. On *Marty*, see Hey (1985), Kraszewski (2010), and Smith (2006). For an analysis of various stage productions of *Marty*, see Cavallero (2015).
16. Our intent is not to be comprehensive in our review of Italian American televisual imagery but rather to highlight suggestively some of the key moments in television's history with respect to Italian American identity.
17. For Italian Americans and variety shows, see Tamburri (2010, 215). For Topo Gigio on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, see Ilson (2009, 83–88). For Italian Americans and consumerism, see Cinotto (2014). For Italian immigration to the U.S. after World War II, see Ruberto and Sciorra (forthcoming).
18. Consider the character of Larry Mondello (played by Robert Stevens) on *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS 1957–1958; ABC 1958–1963) or the character of Johnny Staccato (played by John Cassavetes) on the show that bears his name, *Johnny Staccato* (NBC, 1959). For other examples of such Italian American characters, see Tamburri (2010) and Sciorra (2011).
19. For other genres and themes focusing on Italian Americans in cinema and television in this, and other eras, see Tamburri (2010) and Cavallero (2016).
20. For a discussion of popular media and television news images of Italian American youth in light of racism and violence, see Sciorra (2003, 202–204).
21. Overlapping with this time period, but outside the scope of our introduction, is the role RAI Italia/RAI International has had in shaping media imagery of Italian Americans. It began programming in 1992, geared specifically to the global Italian diaspora.
22. In the 1990s Italian American characters played prominent roles on a number of TV programs including *Friends* (NBC, 1994–2004), *Seinfeld* (NBC, 1989–1998), and *The Practice* (ABC, 1997–2004). See Cavallero (2004). Also noteworthy are the various Italian and Italian American characters on *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989-present), especially the reoccurring Marion Anthony "Fat Tony" D'Amico (voiced by Joe Mantegna), introduced to the show in 1991.
23. Other shows from this era include *Mob Wives* (VH1, 2011–2013) and *The Real Housewives of New Jersey* (Bravo, 2009–present).
24. On performance of ethnicity in relation to Italian Americans and U.S. popular culture, see also Ferraro (2005) and Gennari (1997). For the performance of ethnicity through the ways in which Italian American (and other) television characters are translated for Italian audiences through rewriting and dubbing, see Ferrari (2010).
25. For an extended discussion of antidefamation protests of *The Untouchables*, see Kenna (2009).

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