

*Oral History, Oral Culture, and Italian Americans.*

Edited by Luisa Del Giudice.

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269 pages.

This volume brings together a set of papers delivered at the 2005 Annual Meeting of the American Italian Historical Association, "Speaking Memory: Oral History, Oral Culture and Italians in America." It comprises eleven presentations, an insightful introduction by Luisa Del Giudice, and transcriptions of the keynote address to the conference delivered by Alessandro Portelli and an interview Del Giudice conducted with Alessandra Belloni, a widely acclaimed Italian folk percussionist.

It is important to note at the outset the interesting case of shifting identifiers: Italian Americans and Italians in America. Although used at times as if they are coterminous, they are, obviously, not homologous. This shift is symbolic of the "tension" outlined by Del Giudice as inherent in the "paradox" of the relations between Italian Americans and Italians. Del Giudice makes this tension the problematic of the essays and the theme of the volume: namely, how the differing histories of Italians in the United States and Italians in Italy have resulted in "Italian immigrants abroad (the Italian diasporic 'periphery') continuing many cultural practices long discarded in Italy ('the center')" (4). This accounts for what she sees as the "double vision" of Italian Americans looking back to discover through oral history and oral culture their "heritage" and Italians seeking to discover what happened to Italian emigrants: the double meaning of "hidden histories." While an interesting proposition, the essays do not always buttress the argument.

Most of the articles seek to discover through oral history or folklore, especially folk music, the Italian heritage of Italian Americans in a range of locations. Each responds to the challenge inherent in the theme of "Oral History and Oral Culture" but in widely differing ways. The most traditional use of oral history is by Stefano Luconi in his discussion of Italian-American voting practices during the New Deal era. Despite noting recommendations from other scholars that we seek a broad cultural vision of politics, Luconi's analysis is limited to voting patterns, while interviews are used simply to footnote other sources or to provide "impressionistic accounts" rather than to explore Italian-American political culture (36). In his study of the Gruppo Lonatese of San Rafael, California, and their contacts with present-day citizens of Lonate Pozzolo, Ernesto R. Milani points out the difficulty inherent in the uphill struggle to keep these affinities alive and how oral history is being used to assist in forging ties. The artist B. Amore uses oral histories archived at Ellis Island and the Lower East Side Tenement Museum as a base for her visual works and exhibitions mounted to keep "memories of ancestral roots alive" (77), in particular stories of daily life and struggle.

Two essays interweaving folklore and oral history – Augusto Ferraiuolo's study of heterogeneous festive practices in the North End Italian-American community in Boston and Michael Di Virgilio's examination of the alms-seeking tradition of Sant'Antonio Abate in the 1920s in Western Pennsylvania through a close reading of one *canto di questua* – raise interesting questions about the survival of Italian-American folk traditions. Working with the concept of "imagined communities," Ferraiuolo notes the commercial success of an Italian identity for the North End and speculates

that the area will preserve its ethnic identity even when the Italians are all gone—a phenomena that New Yorkers will immediately recognize. While he notes that the festivals that most concern him reflect a village sense of community, it is curious that no mention is made of, and no reference given to, classic studies of the same neighborhood by William Foote Whyte and Herbert Gans. Di Virgilio, too, is acutely aware of the ways in which historical change alters the meaning of traditions, noting that the performance of the alms-seeking song he analyzes has been so transformed in its meaning and practice by an American context as to contribute to the demise of the tradition it once represented.

The search for heritage is more radically explored through an examination of oral traditions rather than oral history in Sabina Magliocco's observations on the heritage of *stregheria* and Joanna Clapps Herman's essay, "My Homer." The first looks at vernacular religion and experience from a "new age" or "new pagan" "enchanted world view" (170–1) in order to highlight a non-Roman Catholic heritage for southern Italians. The second finds in the classical Greece of Homer's *Odyssey* a "psychogeography" (184) that explains the daily life, stories, and codes of Herman's Italian-American family. Magliocco's attempt at a "reclamation" that will revive and revalue stigmatized religious practices is complicated and nuanced. Whether or not it succeeds, it certainly provokes thought. In the case of Herman's claims, I think the essay points more to the reasons why *The Odyssey* remains a classic than to the documentation of a classical Greek heritage for Sicilians and Italian Americans.

What all of the essays show is how complicated and varied issues of heritage are, once we begin to deconstruct the term, and the fruitfulness of the methods available for that exploration.

The Italian in America side of Del Giudice's equation is explored for the most part through a set of memoirs of the southern Italian traditional music revival in Italy and its reception in the United States. John T. La Barbera, an Italian American, recounts his musical journey from New York to Italy and back again. It's quite a story that illuminates a number of tensions and traditions in both the United States and Italy in the 1970s and 1980s that spawned a rich cultural awareness of and a variety of venues for this music. Roberto Catalano and Enzo Fina, one a UCLA ethnomusicologist, the other a performer, who have joined together to spur the "transmission and translation of Italian oral traditions in America" (x), recount a somewhat similar trajectory but seek to place their experiences within a more theoretical context. Their essay is probably the most theoretically sophisticated in the volume, exploring the ideas of Mediterranean and metaphoric sounds. Both articles, however, paint a rather bleak picture of the ways in which the actual performance of traditional southern Italian music has been received in various Italian-American communities. The last third of the article by Catalano and Fina serves as a warning to anyone who would simplify a very complicated history.

The long interview with Alessandra Belloni, seemingly conducted in one sitting, is also a memoir of the Italian traditional music revival. It is in form a transcription. In substance, it is replete with interesting stories and descriptions of the vibrant personalities with whom she has worked over the past twenty years. The interview has much to tell us about the events of her life and her work but does little to set any broader cultural context for the stories or the ways in which they are structured.

In his keynote address, Portelli, in his usual elegant and insightful manner, using his work on the Nazi massacre at the Fosse Ardeatine as a springboard, sets forth a number of problematics for oral history work. Most importantly, the view of the oral history as grounded in relationships: those between past and present, between public and private memories, and those between interviewer and interviewee. Two of our authors respond to this last challenge. Christine F. Zinni faces the issue of how to present a variety of oral expressions in visual productions while remaining honest to the aural qualities that are so significant in the transmission of the paralinguistic levels of speech. Borrowing concepts from dialogical anthropology and the work of Dennis Tedlock, she documents the ways in which historians and anthropologists are always participants in the narrative process and what responsibilities follow from that insight.

Although probably not meant to be used as such, the reflections of Marie Saccomando Coppola on her experiences interviewing her own Italian aunt for her dissertation and her Italian family's reaction to that publication when it was read in Italy are poignant examples of what can go wrong with the oral history process, even with the best of intentions and contacts, indeed, even love. It is on the one hand a personal story, but, because of her ability to place herself and her family in their respective histories, the essay exemplifies the deep undercurrent in the whole volume, sometimes explicit, often implicit, of the gulf between how Italians view Italian Americans and how Italian Americans view their Italian heritage. "In Italy," Catalano and Fina tell us, "oral culture was largely denied a place in history, while in the United States it has been substituted by a nontraditional genre that is instead erroneously considered *traditional*. These have been historical decisions that bear no face or heart to which we can attribute direct blame, but they have cost . . . Italians – everywhere – dearly" (131). When viewed collectively, the essays in this volume explore those complexities.

–RONALD GRELE

*Columbia University Oral History Research Office*