

“Working” relationships emerged between bootleggers of every ethnicity, just as conflicts within and between groups intensified, calling for ever more lethal weapons, ever larger arsenals and armored cars, ever more sophisticated strategies to launder money, bribe police, corrupt politicians, and take down competitors. In this context, the American Mafia outstripped its Sicilian counterpart in capital accumulation and attempts at central coordination and control in order to contain the violence—that is, until the Sicilian Mafia became the global mediator of heroin trafficking in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Taken together, these books suggest new ways of thinking about organized crime and Italian migrant communities in the United States. It is not just that the American version was a simple transplant from Sicily; as Lombardo emphasizes, each developed in a specific historical context and adapted in its own way to very different social contexts. Thus, for example, the Sicilian Mafia played an organic role in the development of mass political power on a national scale in Italy (an aspect that Lupo explores but is not discussed here), while the American Mafia was considerably more involved in labor racketeering and gained special power from supplying the population’s thirst for alcoholic beverages during the Prohibition years. Yet, as part of the same world system, with members who easily traveled back and forth, transporting resources and evading arrest, each organization provided support and manpower to the other at critical moments in its history.

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The Value of Worthless Lives: Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiographies.

By Ilaria Serra.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2007.

244 pages.

Ilaria Serra’s book sets out to contradict Giuseppe Prezzolini’s observation, as stated in his 1963 book *I trapiantati*, that “immigrants left tears and sweat, but no memories” (quoted as epigraph on page 1). To support the argument that Italian migrants to the United States and their descendants did, indeed, write and preserve a large number of memoirs, Serra “hunted down and discovered dozens of forgotten texts that had been buried in archives and in the drawers of private houses” (2). Hence, as the title of the book claims, Serra’s aim is to rescue and give value to the lives of Italian migrants whose stories of what she calls “quiet individualism” would otherwise be forgotten or interpreted as “worthless.”

The book is divided in two main parts, with the second part containing further divisions to account for the different aspects of the works discussed. In the first part, given that the life stories included in Serra’s book are defined as autobiographical works, Serra carefully situates these works within the field of autobiography and, in

particular, its relationship with immigration and migrant writing. The second part consists of a selection of autobiographical works belonging to fifty-eight authors and divided according to the following categorizations: The Working-Class Writer, Immigrant Artists, The Spiritual Immigrant, Immigrant Women, and Toward Success. The majority of the stories were written in Italian and citations are translated by Serra who deliberately endeavors to reproduce “a style that corresponds to the grammatical (in)correctness of the original” (5). Many of the authors cited in Serra’s book, in fact, had received very little or no formal education in either Italian or English, and as such Serra wished to retain the “character of each of their voices” even at the expense of clarity (5).

The inclusion of what could be defined as “illiterate” or “unliterary” authors (Serra’s words) is a strength of the book. However, the decision to account for an accurate, if somewhat descriptive and partial, discussion of the autobiographical genre detracts from the aim of the book. This is because Serra treats the works included in the second part as rescued historical accounts, taking them at face value. Nonetheless, if viewed as literary texts, as Serra herself seems to suggest when she ascribes some of them to specific literary genres such as the merchant autobiographies of the Middle Ages, these works also need to be analyzed with greater depth in order to tease out that which they also reveal about the ways in which life experiences are narrated. The focus on the genre of autobiography in the first part sets up the expectation that this may be the case, only to discover in the second part that very little attention is paid to the analysis of the texts themselves. The second part, in fact, consists of an anthology of excerpts, grouped in sections according to themes, approaches, or gender. The sections are preceded by introductions and conclusions. In the introductions, Serra discusses the style in which each autobiography was written, the methodologies used by the authors and by herself in writing about these works, and the intentions of the writers. The conclusions comprise brief summary statements that do not move beyond the proposition that many of the authors included were “quiet individuals” who struggled with the experience of migration, and lived lives shaped by difficult circumstances.

Taken as an attempt to recover and bring to light the accounts and memories of otherwise forgotten individuals, Serra’s book makes a very important contribution to the fields of Italian American Studies and migration studies in general. The meticulous and moving accounts reported in this book provide us with a much needed insight into the desire and determination of ordinary men and women to inscribe themselves into history. Serra’s book also contradicts the limiting assumption that “immigrant autobiographies are stories of Americanization” (5), and such attempts at questioning accepted views greatly benefit the field of migration studies.

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