

## Food, Frenzy, and the Italian-American Family in Anne Bancroft's *Fatso*

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Early in the film *Fatso* (1980), at the funeral of the DiNapoli family's thirty-nine-year-old cousin Salvatore, Antoinette DiNapoli blubbers at her brother Dominick (Dom DeLuise): "You're such good people. The good people are the fat people. And the fat people die young." As played by Anne Bancroft, Antoinette's outburst regarding her brother's health resonates with constructions of fat men and hysterical women. Antoinette's tone, which moves from panic to anger to frustration to compassion and back again, juxtaposed alongside Dominick's struggle with his gastronomic excesses, precludes easy laughter about or simple tragic configurations of food addiction, obesity, and gender identity. While Dom DeLuise is known for his comedic turns on film, his portrayal of Dominick deviates from humorous and sentimental portrayals connected with Italian Americans and food and gender. Bancroft's and DeLuise's performances reveal the ways in which manifestations of violence emerge not only as outwardly reactive physical and verbal abuse (whether through Antoinette's volatility or Dominick's response to being denied food) but also as a self-inflicted attempt to subjugate feeling, as seen in Dominick's food binges.

*Fatso* pushes against Hollywood constructions of gender and ethnicity through the complicated relationships between male and female members of an Italian-American family, and Dominick DiNapoli is a valuable example of the "fat male body," which Sander Gilman suggests is a subject woefully "unexamined historically" (2004, 6). If the film is, as Roger Ebert has written, "ambiguous" (1980), its ambiguity serves as a parodic intervention that slices open a well-intentioned but overcompensatory mode of nurturance to reveal how food consumption complicates and confronts notions of gender and violence without directly engaging a gangster trope.

While the plot embeds a "love conquers all" message within an Italian-American frame, familial relationships are conundrums of love and disappointment. Dominick's connection to Italian-American epicurean traditions offers up cultural markers not as sentimental reminders of a simpler past but as weapons of suppression and denial. *Fatso* refuses the ubiquitous sentimental cliché of Italian immigrant culture and its love of all that is edible; while it includes carefully shot images of Italian-American food staples including tomato sauce, macaroni, and bread, these markers

are countered by erratic camera movement and disjointed camera angles whenever Dominick's feelings overwhelm him or the DiNapoli siblings' exchanges become verbally and physically violent. The physical absence of the DiNapoli matriarch and patriarch does not diminish their concrete influence on their children's behaviors; coping methods learned from their parents during childhood work against each sibling's effectiveness in dealing with both the quotidian and any crisis. After his cousin Sal's early death, Dominick finds himself in a role as the scapegoat illuminating the family's anxieties regarding death of the body, and of the family, through their violent interactions with Dominick and his self-inflicted violence via food consumption.

### Why *Fatso*?

Despite its potential contribution to ethnic, gender, and film studies, Bancroft's *Fatso* has been dismissed by critics and ignored by scholars. In *Food in the Movies* (2010), Steve Zimmerman argues that the film is a "disjointed affair" that never chooses "whether to play for laughs or pathos, neither of which is achieved to any commendable degree" (104). Zimmerman also insists that Bancroft's directorial and screenwriting debut is unduly and "unfortunately" influenced by her husband, Mel Brooks (104).<sup>1</sup> Ebert suggests the film is "ambiguous," but views this ambiguity as "problems with camera placement—*Fatso*'s an education in reverse about how often our audience reactions are cued by editing and angles" (1980).<sup>2</sup> Ebert also suggests that "DeLuise is not really that fat," which misses the point. Weight in and of itself is not an issue. Dominick's and his siblings' perception about how he looks or feels is at the heart of this film. In a 2005 column for *Fra Noi*, Otto Bruno offers the only positive review of the film when he states, "[*Fatso*] may not be the slickest film you've ever seen as it was not made with a big budget. But the story is one with lots of heart, lots of love, and LOTS OF FOOD!" [sic] (2006). Bruno's assessment is predicated upon a sentimental interpretation of the Italian-American aspects of this film, but he too dismisses the awkward camera angles as results of budget constraints rather than deliberate choices. None of these critics recognize that the seemingly chaotic camera angles highlight identities and relationships mediated through a minefield of complicated cultural markers tied to the siblings' anxieties about identity.

The only scholarship available on this film appears in a footnote to "Flesh and Soul: Food and Religion in Italian/American Cinema" (2010) where Alessandra Senzani suggests that Bancroft's *Fatso* is a work "of ethnic affiliation in the last stages of her career" (219).<sup>3</sup> This pronouncement, perhaps

more than any critic's dismissal of Bancroft's film vis-à-vis her husband's involvement, ignores the five-time Oscar-nominated Bancroft's lifelong theatrical, film, and television career.<sup>4</sup> When one denies Bancroft her talent, her ambition, and her artistic vision, her directorial ingenuity marks her as either a poor imitator of her husband's talent or an aging starlet looking back wistfully at the end of her career—an active one that lasted until her death from uterine cancer in 2005. Bancroft was born Anna Maria Louise Italiano in the Bronx, New York, to a mother whose maiden name was DiNapoli, and her film was produced by Mel Brooks' company Brookfilms and steeped in an exuberant and multilevel New York Italian-American vernacular; however, critical engagement with this work has been obfuscated by Bancroft's marital connection to Brooks as well as by expectations of sentimental portrayals of Italian Americans as gangsters (*The Godfather* [1972]; *Mean Streets* [1973]) or lovable, if mediocre, fat men (*Marty* [1955]). *Fatso* deserves a closer examination not only because of Bancroft's serious and long-standing commitment to her art (as well as the fact that she directed, wrote, and starred in the film) but because of the complex intersections of food, gender, and ethnicity within the film's narrative.

Bancroft's marginalized position as a female director is not unlike Nancy Savoca's. While Savoca co-wrote her first screenplay a short time after *Fatso* was released, it took seven years to find a producer willing to allow Savoca to direct *True Love* (1989).<sup>5</sup> While Savoca has gone on to direct numerous films, *Fatso* is the only film Bancroft ever directed or wrote. In examining Savoca's *True Love*, Edvige Giunta points out that the kitchen, rather than a site of sentimental ethnic affiliation, is shot as a "claustrophobic setting that epitomizes women's entrapment" and "the inadequacy of the cultural roles [with regard to both genders] become blatant" (2002, 251). Like Savoca's film, *Fatso* rejects ease within the domestic space, but it challenges the roles of submissive women and the brutish men who dominate them through its refusal to privilege those types within the narrative structure. Dominick is a gentle and kind man, a caretaker whose violence is directed toward himself. Antoinette is the dominant personality who loses her temper whenever she is frustrated. While Giunta suggests that *True Love* accepts the narrative of a "patriarchal system [that] victimizes primarily women, [but] it also dooms men" (2002, 296), Bancroft's film upends linear constructions of an overarching patriarchal power in favor of a more tenuous thread that binds men and women.

Fred Gardaphé's study of parody in the evolution of the Italian-American gangster figure is useful in this reclamation and examination of the complexities of gender relationships found within the domestic sphere of *Fatso*. Gardaphé suggests that there are three distinct stages in the

construction of the gangster figure in the American landscape – minstrelsy, self-narrative, and parody (2010, 57). The last stage, parody, seeks autonomy through new iterations of the gangster figure by renouncing the American creation of the gangster as “representative of [Italian-American] culture” (2010, 57). Gardaphé’s focus does not connect figures such as Vito Corleone and Tony Soprano with a parodic figure like *Fatso*’s Dominick DiNapoli or female figures as dissimilar as Connie Corleone or Carmela Soprano with DiNapoli’s sister Antoinette.

Although DiNapoli is not a gangster figure, emotionally he is as direct a predecessor to Tony Soprano as Vito or Michael Corleone. Antoinette’s rage provides a reminder that, as John Paul Russo states about *The Godfather*, “the atmosphere of violence has seeped into the language and images of plenitude” (quoted in Giunta 2002, 267). *Fatso*’s display of plenitude is linked to markers of Italian-American culture including religious imagery (the ubiquitous images of the Sacred Heart and statues of the Virgin Mary, the crosses on the walls and on necklaces, the presence of the Catholic Church), food (pastry shops along the avenue, the tomato sauce and bread served at every meal), language (Italian interspersed within the American English dialog), and numerous character actors (Renata Vanni as Zi Marie, Argentina Brunetti as Zi Jule, and Delia Salvi as Ida Rendino, who people the Italian-American neighborhood in which the DiNapolis live and work). This plenitude is also revealed through the instability of Dominick’s consumptive habits and Antoinette’s attempts to control him: Dominick does not eat a meal, he eats everyone’s meal; and Antoinette does not simply become angry, she flies into a rage, hitting first and talking later. Dominick picks up his nephew’s birthday cake and eats one-fourth before delivering it to the party, he eats the Chinese food intended for Antoinette’s card party, and he and his sponsors at Chubby Checkers (the twelve-step-like group for overeaters) demolish his kitchen as they engage in an eating frenzy. Antoinette hits Dominick each time she is disappointed that he cannot control his appetite. Only after she expends her rage does her compassion emerge. Dominick does not hit her in return but remains passive, submits to her physical abuse, and blames himself.

The film emerges as an important example of how parody can be used productively to replace or reject the gangster figure of Hollywood’s imagination not by creating a more complex iteration of the gangster but by creating familial relationships devoid of Mafia references in a layered complexity of setting, character, and emotion. Gardaphé argues that *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) confronts national narratives about maleness in the twenty-first century through its parodic representation of the gangster figure. If so, *Fatso* serves as a bridge between earlier configurations of

gangsterism (as seen in *The Godfather* and *Mean Streets*) and sentimental portraits of masculinity, including *Marty*, and subsequent Italian-American constructions of gender in *The Sopranos* and *Goodfellas* (1990). In *Fatso*, the DiNapoli family serves as an important reminder that gangsterism is only one facet of parodic construction within an Italian-American context.

Discussions of gangsterism or Italian-American culture tend to compartmentalize constructions of gender, but *Fatso's* family members' identities are formed through each individual's words and deeds regardless of gender or hierarchal constraint. Michel de Certeau's ideas on tactics and strategies are useful to consider alongside notions of parody and power since "a tactic is determined by the *absence of power* just as a strategy is organized by the postulation of power" (de Certeau 1984, 38). In order to carve out a space within a hierarchal structure, individuals must understand the boundaries already in place that can make upward mobility a challenge. Mobility, then, is predicated not only upon an individual's identity within and without hierarchal constructions of power but also on that individual's understanding of his or her place within the power structure. Mobility between and among community members is contingent upon knowing where the power in a relationship is held and playing one's designated role accordingly. In *Fatso*, masculinity is defined not by outward violence, the cultivation of a macho persona, or institutions such as the Mafia, the government, or the police but rather by the ways in which males respond to and behave with females in the domestic sphere. This construction privileges females, usually viewed as submissive to a dominant and patriarchal hierarchy. The DiNapoli matriarch, Antoinette, and Dominick's love interest, Lydia (Candice Azzara), exert power within heterogenous domestic relationships. What is unique about this construction is Dominick's innate sense that the women in his life emanate power in a way that he does not. When Dominick finds that he has lost weight without "even trying," he and his brother Frank (Ron Carey) believe that it has to do with Lydia's presence in Dominick's life, and Frank states, "Boy, girls are powerful." This dichotomy between the sexes is a central premise that is used to reveal Dominick's repression and lack of confidence.

### Size Matters

In "Feminism and the Invisible Fat Man," Kirsten Bell and Darlene McNaughton argue that "major feminist approaches to weight issues," including iconic texts such as Suzie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (1978) and Susan Bordo's *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* (1993), "have . . . failed to question the experiences of males, largely as

a result of their commitment to the notion of patriarchy as an overarching framework for their material" (2007, 111). Bell and McNaughton see this dismissal of fat and masculinity as an "inadvertently" misleading trope of feminist rhetoric (2007, 111). Their argument challenges the notion of a male body being examined through patriarchal constructions of feminist rhetoric. *Fatso* cannot offer such an easy view of patriarchy, although in some respects Dominick's size is due to a familial structure that places the male at the head of the household. The film swerves away from strict patriarchal linearity in that Dominick's consumptive habits develop not from his unwillingness to control his eating or some defect in his psyche that causes him to be in conflict with patriarchal norms but through his mother's child-rearing techniques and his family's insistence that he lose weight. Dominick's situation is made more difficult by the fact that, until his cousin Sal's fatal heart attack, no one confronts Dominick about or is concerned with his eating habits. While Dominick is, as Antoinette intimates, loved by everyone due to his caring demeanor toward his family and his customers at the family-owned card shop, his mother's overcompensatory nurturance has taught him since birth to use food to quell sadness, disappointment, fear, grief, anger, and depression.

In thinking about how *Fatso* upends notions of gender without privileging or finding fault with a patriarchal construct, it is prudent to call upon Anna Camaiti Hostert's argument that Nancy Savoca's "films seem to embody a gendered perspective and portray stories that emphasize the unheard voices of invisible fragmented subjectivities, making—through the contradictory feeling and positions they occupy in society—visible their bodies, without glamorizing them" (2010, 143). Hostert's assertion focuses on gender constructions of the female, but Bancroft's *Fatso* challenges most directly the Italian-American gangsterism, prevalent in the 1970s, which constructs men as brutes and women as silent, submissive figures of denial, especially in the ways that Dominick and his sister Antoinette interact with one another. Before contemplating the siblings' relationship, *Fatso* predicates their interactions on a view of the mother that is at once caring and damaging to Dominick. She emerges as an "invisible fragmented subjectiv[ity]" (Hostert 2010, 143), whose face is never revealed. But Bancroft centrally locates Dominick's voice as the antithesis of both gangsterism and sentimentality and Antoinette's voice as a reminder that femininity is a complex, mediated, and dominant construction within an Italian-American vernacular tradition.

Dominick's mother's use of food, beginning with breast milk, is a tactic designed to comfort Dominick in the short term. *Fatso*'s opening montage reveals a mother who loves and cares for Dominick without thought to how

her actions will stunt her son's emotional growth. Each of her appearances on screen signals an end to Dominick's suffering; food empowers her as a mother but disempowers Dominick since he does not learn how to work through negative emotions. This love is not so much suffocating as it is a road map to the adult Dominick's pattern of food bingeing: His mother's love shields him from any emotional distress by feeding him whatever he wants, whenever he wants. Tactics, according to de Certeau, are meant to be flexible, adaptable, and easily substituted when they no longer empower the powerless—they are connected to the temporal and are thus meant not as stable entities but short-term solutions to long-term powerlessness (de Certeau 1984, 38). Dominick's mother's use of food is inflexible and unadaptable. She never varies how food is used or when it is used. The mother's centrality as caretaker privileges her agency, but her tactics are revealed as stopgap measures since her image is fragmented, her face is never seen, and the only words she utters are directed at comforting Dominick.<sup>6</sup>

The repressive qualities of consumption are reinforced from the first shot of the film, which opens upon a black screen. Only the diegetic sound of the infant Dominick's cries and the film score by Joe Renzetti are heard through the darkness. *Fatso's* opening shot is an intertextual visual and aural parody of *The Godfather*, which opens with a black screen and Nina Rota's iconic score. The parodic implication emerges with the way in which the male voices are constructed. Instead of a male infant crying, the first line in *The Godfather*—"I believe in America"—is uttered by Amerigo Bonasera, an undertaker. Bonasera's plea for justice to Don Corleone after his daughter has been assaulted is as much of a plaintive wail as the infant Dominick's. Bonasera's face comes into focus slowly, but in *Fatso*, a bedroom lamp is turned on to reveal the infant Dominick to the right of the frame, his mouth wide open in a cry. If Amerigo Bonasera is the archetype of death dressed in a black suit in his role as the undertaker, Dominick DiNapoli emerges out of the darkness and into the light as the epitome of innocence with a white dressing gown and an unquenchable need. Dominick's mother appears in the frame at the left of the screen. At first, she is only a pair of arms in a nightgown reaching for her son, then she becomes a torso holding her child, and, finally, her gown is opened as Dominick's mouth is coaxed to her breast. Rather than an erotic object, the breast is both a source of nourishment and repression. The camera never reveals the mother's face—only her torso, arms, and a hint of her breast are seen. This portrait reenacts a Madonna and Child image—the mother's nightgown reminiscent of Mary's blue robes. The mother and child in this frame, however, are not a static image of unconditional love but of the beginning of Dominick's inability to express emotion in a healthy manner.

Dominick's father is revealed as a hand reaching toward his wife, offering encouragement. He pats her arm as she feeds their son. He repeats twice, "buona, buona," before stating, "What a good mama." After this approval, he removes his hand and retreats back to his side of their bed. While the mother is the one offering succor to her son, it is the father who controls how the mother behaves—she is rewarded as a "good mama" for feeding her child in the middle of the night. The father offers an approving hand, an image that evokes Bonasera kissing Don Corleone's hand in a pledge of loyalty. Although in *Fatso* the father's presence is only a hand upon his wife's shoulder, like Don Corleone, he is a hand of power. In order to be a "good mama" and receive a pat of approval from her husband, Dominick's mother must administer to her infant's every need. In this configuration, Dominick is squeezed into the corners of the frame. The father's hand creates a pressure on Dominick to be satisfied, to be quiet, to be still.

Complicating the father's agency is the knowledge that the DiNapoli parents lost two sons before Dominick was born. Dominick's birth is viewed as a miracle. His mother's nurturance fulfills not only his every need without understanding what that need might be but also assures his survival. Once Dominick's younger brother Frank is born, the tactical maneuver, now stagnant and routine, continues to be used on Dominick even though neither Frank nor Antoinette is nurtured in this all-consuming way. The endless supply of food available to Dominick becomes not only the proof that his mother will not abandon her son and is thus a good mother but also of the way he learns to abandon himself each time he eats rather than work through his emotions. When as an adult Dominick dates Lydia, allowing him, for a time, to eat without bingeing, he has no foundation on which to build this sense of connection.

If Dominick's infancy were the only period during which we witnessed his mother's role as caretaker, that image might be construed as the bond of a mother and child such as the connection seen in *Marty*, but *Fatso's* aims are different. The next image is of the toddler Dominick sitting alone on the living-room floor while Antoinette watches him cry. His mother's appearance continues to be fragmented. First, her hand (holding a cannoli) emerges from the left side of the frame. Next, there is a cut to her legs walking toward her son and then a third cut to her hand giving Dominick the cannoli. There is another abrupt and quick cut to a close-up of Antoinette scrunching her face and saying, "Blech," before cutting back to a close-up of Dominick sloppily eating the cannoli, cream smeared across his mouth. The older sister's reaction reinforces how Dominick's appetite, developed with his mother's tactical nurturance, is transgressive and does not jibe with the rest of the family's eating habits. Antoinette's disapproval also



suggests that not all Italian Americans have an insatiable urge for Italian gastronomic staples. Throughout the film's narrative, Antoinette expresses no interest in pastries, and her family eats boxed cereal for breakfast and take-out Chinese food on special occasions.

In the next sequence of the montage, a preteen Dominick watches as his mother changes the infant Frank's diaper. The father's disembodied voice yells, "Watch out, Dominick, you're gonna get it" before Frank accidentally urinates on his brother. His mother's comfort is a ciabatta roll with butter, while Antoinette wipes his face with a kitchen towel, and his father remains the all-knowing, off-screen presence. As Dominick ages, the parents' influence, particularly the mother's tactical nurturance, is innate. His cousin Sal, whom Dominick equates with his mother since "he always had something to eat," sneaks Dominick a Hershey chocolate bar during their First Communion. The opening montage ends with the DiNapoli siblings in bed with the measles. Antoinette and Frank are incapacitated, but Dominick is eating a bowl of spaghetti. The cultural markers of an Italian-American household are prevalent throughout this montage, but they are not sentimental reminders of a cohesive community. The fragmentation of the mother, the disembodied voice of the father, Antoinette's disapproval of and impatience with her brother, and Dominick's skewed appetite privilege familial conflict and an ethnic identity in transition.

Dominick's first appearance as an adult is in a medium full-frontal shot at his cousin's funeral. Dressed in a black suit, he stands in front of a window covered in a white sheer curtain reciting a prayer in Italian. Tears stream down his face as he struggles to continue the prayer. The camera pans out to reveal a living room filled with members of a connected and familial community. A seemingly incongruous and abrupt cut focuses on a pot of tomato sauce cooking on the kitchen stove. The shot lasts only as long as it takes the priest to utter, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost." The image of the sauce is a reminder that the wake takes place in a domestic space and food is as spiritually central to the ritual as the priest. When the scene returns to the living room, Zi Marie, Sal's mother, approaches her son's casket and cries out, "Figlio mio, che' successe?" (my son, what happened?) (translation mine). Zi Marie appears in a full-frame shot of her entire body, and as she weeps a close-up centers on her face. This is in contrast to Dominick's mother, who when she nurtures is shown only in fragment.

The model of courtesy, Dominick comforts his aunt until he is sent by the priest to fetch her a drink of water, but this caring gesture, typical according to Antoinette, is also a mode of self-preservation that he has learned through his mother's tactical actions. The camera cuts to the pot of sauce and pans

up as Dominick enters. Before bringing the water to his aunt, he stops to stir the sauce. He even adds a sprig of basil from a plant by the window over the kitchen sink. Between his sobs, he takes a sip of water before turning to the loaves of thick and crusty Italian bread on the table. Zimmerman suggests that Dominick is being gluttonous and is “stuffing [the bread] into his mouth” (2000, 105), but this view is inaccurate. Dominick does not stuff anything into his mouth; he carefully slices the bread, delicately dabs a bit of the sauce, and judiciously sprinkles the Parmesan cheese before he nibbles at his creation. He savors each bite before his choked sobs subside and he exhales fully. His movements create the outward structure that denotes the Italian-American love of food narrative, but his exhalation conflicts with this sentimental trope since the viewer already knows Dominick may love to eat, but he has also been taught to use food as a stopgap measure for any emotional upset. The kitchen’s privileged place as a site of satiety is transformed into a space of self-destruction.

Patricia Mellencamp argues that when rituals and their “strict sequence” are “interrupted, the compulsion will begin over again until it is completed. Rituals are repetitive and stereotyped (like sitcoms), becoming progressively complex and time-consuming (like catastrophe coverage)” (1990, 29). At his cousin’s wake, Dominick quietly comforts himself with food. His ritual is short-lived, immediate, simple, and within the public view. Up until this point, Dominick’s emotional discomfort is assuaged with a roll, a pastry, a bowl of spaghetti, a piece of bread. As *Fatso* unwinds, Dominick’s ritual eating becomes more complex and secretive, making the kitchen a threatened and threatening space where violence erupts. Giunta, in her assessment of *True Love*, suggests Savoca “demolished [the image of the kitchen as] the domestic haven” (2002, 262) through a breakdown of emotional and cultural expectations. Bancroft’s direction and DeLuise’s unsentimental performance enact the same schema that Giunta finds in *True Love*, but in *Fatso*, the kitchen also is destroyed literally when Dominick, along with his Chubby Checker sponsors, go on a binge in Dominick’s kitchen. Together, the director and actor destabilize normative notions of fat men as depicted in film by allowing Dominick a complex emotional landscape with regard to his relationship with food. Food emerges not as a tactical and mobile strategy but as a stultifying and grotesque escape hatch, and the kitchen can no longer be considered a safe or neutral place. Dominick hides his binges from his family until food becomes his primary marker of identity and he can no longer deny his anxiety or his self-loathing.

Dominick’s self-consciousness about his food intake is not revealed until after Sal’s interment. The ritual that has been used to comfort becomes disrupted by Dominick’s first view of Lydia during his early morning hot

dog run. He has already eaten two breakfasts — his and Frank's, but he stops at the hot dog cart before opening the card store. As Dominick lifts one of the two hot dogs he has purchased to his mouth, he spots Lydia across the street and is smitten. There is no dialog, only five-second cuts that offer close-ups of Dominick's and Lydia's first view of each other. He hesitates in taking his first bite of his hot dog, but after an extended contemplation where he lifts and lowers the hot dog, consumption wins. He takes a bite and walks away rather than taking a chance and introducing himself. Dominick hides his bingeing from Antoinette and Frank; although they are not present, their attitude about his weight contributes to his hesitation in this scene.

The siblings' intrusions in Dominick's comfort rituals are both covert and overt. At the wake, Antoinette's interruption of Dominick's eating of the bread is an aural signal that suggests he has heard and been a target of her tirades in the past. There is a medium shot of Dominick jumping slightly as he hears his sister screaming, "You son of a bitch, you son of a bitch." The camera leaves Dominick and cuts to focus on Antoinette leaning over Sal's casket while she rants at her cousin's corpse. Her face moves from background to foreground as though she might jump out of the frame. Her violent speech, although directed toward a dead man, is intrinsic to understanding the family's difficulty in dealing with sadness and grief and its inability to take responsibility for assisting in Sal's consumptive habits. Her behavior at the wake also illustrates that ranting first and compassion later is Antoinette's default reaction to most events that upset her.

The difference between Dominick's and Antoinette's responses is that she uses violence extended outward while Dominick self-inflects pain. Antoinette laments, "Why didn't you listen?" and shifts from anger to sobs as she wails that she is "gonna miss [him] so much" before she breaks out into screams of "you son of a bitch" once again. This is an operatic moment, one that Antoinette repeats whenever she becomes frustrated with Dominick. Bancroft's choice to refuse easy comedy or a strict dramatic arc complicates notions of women as submissive or victims of circumstance. These choices also refute sentimentality or reminiscence as the implied tropes of Italian-American ethnicity or culture. Bancroft's performance parodies both the silently suffering Corleone matriarch and her daughter, the willful and explosive Connie, in *The Godfather*, but the difference in Antoinette's behavior is that she stands on her own and is not afraid to offer advice and take charge when she deems it to be necessary. The narrative privileges Antoinette as an equal member of the family, not a minor character relegated to the background like the Corleone matriarch or a plot device like Connie.

Antoinette's interruption of Dominick's calming ritual immobilizes him, and he returns to his default position, comforting others, a tactic also learned from his mother's seemingly selfless and endless action as a caregiver. But as his mother's behavior traps her in the role of "good mama," Dominick's causes him to be viewed as one of "the good people. The fat people." Only after he calms Antoinette and promises to see a diet doctor is he able to return to the kitchen where he partakes in another slice of bread with sauce, only in this instance, he looks more like his toddler self as a bit of the Parmesan cheese becomes stuck to his upper lip. His only means of escaping his grief—because the rosary in his hand, the prayers in the living room, and his caretaking of Zi Marie and Antoinette do not comfort—is in the deliberateness of his food preparation. His single-mindedness with regard to creating the perfect delicacy subordinates his grief. The ritual's transgressive nature is most overtly seen in the way that Dominick is framed on a slant within the shot, with his body in the same position as in the opening montage—slightly off-center as though this connection to food is compromised. The sauce, bread, and cheese cannot be trusted as simple markers of Italian-American ethnicity any more than the look of contentment that passes over Dominick's face after the third bite can be viewed as a gesture of epicurean delight. His exhalation, followed by his gesture of resting his hand on top of the stove, demarcates food as a pacifier, but now the kitchen is Dominick's crib.

Dominick's discomfort reemerges at an increasing level whenever he is challenged. His siblings view his food consumption as a "morally or mentally defective" behavior that can be changed (Stearns 1997, 117). All Dominick needs, according to Antoinette, is willpower to overcome his addictive eating.<sup>7</sup> His inability to display the necessary willingness to be thin is viewed as an attack on the family. Neither Dominick nor his siblings recognize or will admit that his mother's tactical behavior created his default strategy—something that becomes a permanent solution to an ever-changing dynamic. This twisting of a short-term tactic into a life choice is what makes him powerless over his emotions, his eating habits, and his weight. Avi Santo argues that Tony Soprano's relationship to "his fatness [is based upon] a lack of control, which he exhibits in both bursts of violence and greediness as well as in his anxiety attacks" (2002, 78). This inability to express clearly how one feels can be connected with Dominick's inability to control his appetite in *Fatso*. Eating becomes a violent action that leaves him unable to express himself clearly, confidently, or maturely.

Early in Dominick's journey to curb his appetite, Dominick returns from the neighborhood bakery with his nephew's birthday cake—a Neapolitan ice cream cake. After Antoinette opens the cake box and sees the piece with the letters "O-N-Y" missing, she turns on Dominick with a knife. Only

Frank and her husband (Robert Costanza) hold her back from a full assault on her brother. The camera jumps from one sibling's point of view to the other, refusing to maintain a stable connection with anyone as though to commit to one or the other would be to choose sides. Antoinette's response lacks empathy toward her brother, but she is also a mother who does not want her son to be disappointed. Dominick upends Antoinette's attempts to emulate *her* mother, the perfect caretaker and nurturer.

Her husband intervenes and attempts to assuage her by sending Dominick out to purchase another cake, although Antoinette screams, "Don't give him any money." She wants Dominick to suffer for his actions, but she cannot see that he has been in pain since he snuck into their kitchen and quietly handed her the cake box. Before leaving to find another birthday cake, Dominick turns to Antoinette, Frank, and his brother-in-law to ask what they are going to do with "that cake." Antoinette reduces it to crumbs by plunging her hands into it over and over again as though she is punching a person and not destroying a cake. This moment is shot in a manner reminiscent of the way in which in *The Godfather's* Connie Corleone is beaten by her husband Carlo and then Carlo is beaten by Sonny as retaliation. The victim is in the background of the shot and what is foregrounded are the perpetrator's actions. Even when the camera focuses on the destruction of the cake, Antoinette's hands dominate the frame. Her rage, which Dominick downplays as "dramatic," is as dangerous as Dominick's eating binges. Frank and Antoinette's husband become casualties in this battle for control of Dominick's eating habits. Neither Dominick nor Antoinette can win this war since Dominick always feels helpless and Antoinette tells him that she loves him while physically abusing him and yelling, "You son of a bitch." Neither is able to hear the other, and their automatic reactions reinforce this pattern of engagement rather than break it.

Michael Kimmel argues, "[A]ggression will take other routes besides gendered violence" when men are viewed "more 'like women' . . . —nurturing, caring, frightened — and [women] more 'like men' . . . —capable, rational, competent in the public sphere" (2008, 317). Kimmel's ideas on aggression explore what emerges once males are in touch with attributes gendered as feminine, but they do not take into account what occurs when males caretake and nurture, but instead remain repressed emotionally. Dominick is "more 'like women'" in that his body is soft, not hard, he cries openly at his cousin's funeral, and he lovingly creates breakfast for his brother each morning, although his submissive caretaker role is compromised by Frank's insistence that Dominick does not understand his taste. The outward markers of Dominick's emotional availability are disingenuous, and his food rituals suggest that other emotions are being

ignored or pushed aside. This emotional repression cannot be a sign of maleness but is a rewarded mode of expression within the DiNapoli family structure. Antoinette is an opinionated and tempestuous woman, suggesting an innate aggression that is typically viewed as male, but her love for Dominick cannot be stereotypically gendered since she verbally and physically assaults him when she is frustrated by what she deems his masochistic, suicidal behavior. Dominick's preferred mode of avoidance is food; he binges in a secretive and violent manner whenever he is overwhelmed, but he does resort to physical violence when food is withheld. *Fatso's* parodic portraits of masculinity and femininity suggest that gendered violence is not erased simply through male nurturance and female empowerment, but that "other routes" emerge and aggress toward violence of the self and others unless and until these modes of discourse are more than compensatory (or consumptive) and allow for an individual to mature emotionally and break free of stultifying rituals.

Due to Dominick's discomfort with asking for what he needs, the camera uses an inordinate amount of close-ups on Dominick's responses to Antoinette's diatribes and Frank's accusations. The reaction shot reinforces Dominick's dependency on his family's words and actions. The tragic and grotesque implications of their familial roles, as when Frank yells at Dominick after his older brother berates him for not knowing how to "run his plate" during breakfast ("You love bread," Frank responds. "I don't love bread. I like bread."), suggest that unless they can listen to each other their family will break apart—both literally and figuratively. When the film employs the reaction shot in such a ubiquitous manner, the family dynamics are seen as tied to Dominick's pain, which no one acknowledges. While Ebert suggests that the camera placement is problematic because Bancroft did not understand how to construct a shot for the audience's maximum understanding and response, he disregards the possibility that Bancroft has constructed the shot in just such a manner. Antoinette's rants may be the active site of engagement, but they don't vary much beyond, "You son of a bitch, how could you do this to me?" and could be translated into the gibberish spoken by the adults in a *Peanuts* cartoon although their ubiquity points toward a kind of pathology. What is important is Dominick's response to her ranting, which is more uncomfortable to watch since DeLuise plays these moments quietly and without any fight as if Dominick is to blame for her emotional tirade. The stereotype of the brutish Italian-American male who takes revenge first and eats spaghetti afterward is nowhere in sight. Giorgio Bertellini makes an interesting argument that Italian-American cinema of the 1970s examines "superficially the moment of ethnic redemption" even if "the protagonists . . . still exhibit ancient

wounds in an intensive desire for revenge" (2010, 100). *Fatso* breaks this rule since Dominick does not seek revenge on anything or anyone. Bertellini argues that "violence and pathos [in these films] . . . mark a range of actions and passions tied to a generosity that is, at times, epicurean (in terms of food, sex, and friendship), but more often stoic, if not martyr-like, of both body and mind" (2010, 102). Dominick's stoicism is repressive in nature rather than self-sacrificial although this repression is the result of his mother's behavior, developed due to her fear for his survival. While his mother's actions compromise Dominick's psyche, he cannot be considered a sacrificial object. His journey allows him to accept the consequences of his actions as an adult without placing blame or responsibility upon his mother. Ultimately, his life is not diminished by his mother's fear. His experiences suggest that living is not simply about learning how to survive to adulthood but rather about acceptance and embracing the possibility of change through living a full and complicated existence.

### Genre Bending

In *Fatso*, Dominick serves as the most physically obvious perpetrator and victim of an outsider rhetoric, but each family member participates in a destructive discourse that mirrors the narrative trajectory of a film such as *The Godfather*. In thinking about parody as not only a renunciation of a representative, if stereotypical, figure, Yury Tynyanov argues that literary constructions of parody must create "a disjunction" within the work itself and the work that is being parodied ([1921] 1979, 104). Tynyanov suggests that a "dislocation of intent" may be as simple as creating a comedy out of tragedy or it may be more subtle in that "a double nuance" can be "perceived from a double standpoint" ([1921] 1979, 104, 117). In *Fatso*, Bancroft and DeLuise upend notions not only of gangsterism but also of comedy. *Fatso* purposefully doubles the rhetoric of criminality and inverts comedy through the increasingly chaotic and destructive representation of Dominick's consumption and his family's role in pushing him toward this destructive behavior. If this construction parodies a film like *The Godfather*, it is also the most direct and obvious precursor to what Santo suggests is *The Sopranos'* "struggle over the construction of masculinity" (2002, 73). Dominick's weapon of choice is food, but the destruction to both his psyche and the family structure is as palpable as if he possessed a loaded gun.

The space where this criminality comes to its most violent and destructive end is not at a tollbooth on the Jones Beach Parkway as happens to Sonny in *The Godfather* but in Dominick and Frank's small and claustrophobic kitchen space. Dominick's enlistment of the family's assistance in

developing a workable strategy to control his eating occurs after joining the self-help program the Chubby Checkers, a group based on the strategy that there is help in communal empathy. Once he commits to the program, his bingeing can no longer remain a secret. When he is in crisis, he is told to call “a checker” and ask for someone to talk him through his desire to eat; he does not have to feel helpless, and he does not have to go through his feelings alone. As Peter Stearns points out, “By the 1970s . . . it was generally acknowledged that men’s eagerness to lose weight began to match that of women.” Stearns further suggests that “[m]ale worries about appearance, and the resultant need for slenderness, increased, along with ever-wider publicity about the perils of cholesterol for men” (1997, 102). In *Fatso*, Dominick’s and his siblings’ fears are exacerbated by a media and health frenzy that suggests men are unhealthy consumers if they do not control their eating habits. In this regard, his siblings’ insistence that he needs to control his eating habits and Dominick’s preoccupation with dieting, weight control, and his willingness to engage assistance from a twelve-step group are consistent with “standard parts of American middle-class life” (Stearns 1997, 108).<sup>8</sup> If *Fatso*’s narrative structure is a parodic reinvention of *The Godfather*’s criminality and masculinity, the Chubby Checkers are a further parodic interpretation that examines twelve-step rhetoric and the growing diet industry of the 1970s. In confronting Italian-American ethnicity and identity through parodic reinventions of these two American obsessions—gangsterism and weight control—*Fatso* points the finger not at constructions of Italian-American vernacular practices or community insulation but at American capitalism, which causes the DiNapoli anxiety over the purported life-threatening practices of their culinary tradition and demands asceticism in order for Dominick to be “cured.”

In the most absurd construction of control within the film’s narrative, Dominick and Frank secure the food in the kitchen with an oversized chain and numerous locks. Whether this is a good or realistic strategy is beside the point: Their action is a short-term solution for Dominick’s increasing food binges. It also satirizes the 1970s diet industry motto that “fat people should be able to control themselves” (Stearns 1997, 117). Male thinness is reinforced within a paradigm that is dependent upon “a chance to display male character and independent initiative” (Stearns 1997, 101), but Frank and Dominick’s initiative, tellingly American in its overkill, is akin to taking a chainsaw to a birthday cake.<sup>9</sup>

Dominick’s plan is compromised by late-night television’s ubiquitous images of food. Bancroft intersperses this scene with shots of food and Dominick’s reaction to what appears on the television screen. Dominick’s attempt to use the television as a narcotic to help him sleep is confounded



by the images of homemade noodles, ice cream sundaes and pies, and Charles Laughton as Henry VIII spouting, between bites of a chicken leg, "There's no delicacy these days. . . . Refinement is a thing of the past." Bancroft's choice in using this clip from the 1933 comedy-of-manners film *The Private Lives of Henry VIII* amplifies the absurdity of Dominick's situation. Dominick clicks off the television after Laughton shouts, "Am I the king or a breeding pool?" This line emphasizes food's power over Dominick, which compromises his ability to enter into a procreative relationship with Lydia. The choice itself is absurd and reveals the pressure that a single forty-year-old man such as Dominick feels. Dominick's and his siblings' perceptions of his weight and appearance have created a false picture of who he is: an unlovable, defective bachelor who will never be good enough to marry. The pressure to conform so as to be worthy of a wife causes Dominick to engage in an unrealistic and dangerous plan to keep himself away from food. The television reminds him not only of all the food that he is missing but also of what this denial has reduced him to—an insatiable man who insists that no identity is complete unless he is seen as the king of his castle.

In the next series of shots, Dominick's image is fragmented. At first, only his hand holding his nephew's water pistol is visible in the darkness of his brother's bedroom. The frame is dark, however, and at first the gun appears real. The shot is also a reversal of the opening image of Dominick's father's hand on his mother's shoulder. If his father is the hand of power, Dominick's power is illusory. This shot, with its dark palette, also mirrors the framing device used in Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973) when the hitman (played by Scorsese) in the back seat of the car shoots Johnny Boy. What is dissimilar between these two shots is that Dominick is not holding an actual gun, but a child's toy. He wakes his brother from a sound sleep with a threat to "blow [his] nose right off [his] face" unless Frank hands over the key to the locked kitchen cabinets and refrigerator. While the knowledge that Dominick does not have a real gun in his hand might suggest a slapstick moment, the ambiguous tone of the scene reinforces and complicates notions of violence. Dominick's violence, whether in this interaction with his brother or as his food binges escalate, is simultaneously debilitating as depression and energizing as hysteria. The violence is one more repressive mask that Dominick wears to cover his sadness and fear, and it works against Virginia Wright Wexman's argument that the clown figure in television and film "conquers fear by incorporating it" (quoted in Mosher 2001, 177, footnote 8). Although Dominick might be viewed as a clown figure, this image is upended first by his violent impulse and second by the fact that his fear is not incorporated but acted out.

The framing splits the screen evenly between Dominick and Frank. The brothers' vulnerability resonates in their dress—white boxer shorts and white sleeveless T-shirts. Once Frank points out that the gun is not real, Dominick places the gun on the kitchen counter in defeat, but the camera shifts to Dominick as he picks up a large knife on the counter. Any comic tenor to the scene vanishes as Dominick becomes an actual threat. Power resides in the weapon Dominick brandishes, which has turned Dominick into a malevolent figure capable of grotesquery—not to comic but to murderous effect. He threatens his brother with gutting, when he screams, “Gimme those keys or I’ll cut your throat down to your balls.” Beneath the rhetoric of the kind and gentle fat man lies the story of a frightened male who would murder for a meal. Dominick’s threat to his brother’s life upends notions of gangsterism that suggest the threat to the family emanates from an outside force. Although Dominick is squeezed by an American diet industry that profits from individuals’ insecurities, the violence is an inside job.

Dominick points the knife first at his brother’s throat and then at Frank’s genitals. The camera follows the movement of the knife in a long shot. Frank’s pleading convinces Dominick to “look at [himself]” and he drops the knife on the sofa, but the camera does not acknowledge Dominick’s weeping. The long shot pans over to catch Frank as he picks up the knife and chases his older brother into a corner. At this point both brothers are in a reactive position, and after Frank exhausts his anger and puts the knife on the television set, Dominick picks it up and chases Frank to the center of the living room. This role reversal between perpetrator and victim occurs three times before Dominick recognizes how disruptive and dangerous he has become and Frank empathizes. Once Dominick puts down the knife permanently, he clings to Frank like a child needing comfort. While the knife has not been used to emasculate them, their behavior has. The entwined pair make their way to the phone in order for Frank to call Dominick’s Chubby Checker sponsors. The brothers are locked in learned emotional reactions due to the way in which Dominick has been conditioned to use food. They are consumed by Dominick’s bottomless need and the self-inflicted violence of his new and impossible dietary regime. Dominick’s use of physical violence escalates because the solution to his consumption is tied to denial, a denial of all that he loves and values about his family and community. Dominick’s love of food is criminalized in the dieting rhetoric, which in turn causes him to behave like a criminal.

When the Chubby Checkers arrive, Frank moves to the periphery of the frame as he performs the role of waiter for Dominick and his two sponsors, Sonny Lapidus and Oscar Lapidus, fetching the men hot water and lemon.

Frank has moved through the roles of family supporter, victim, perpetrator, anchor, and waiter in one short scene. Frank's dismissal is also a warning that the family has been pushed aside in favor of outside influences, in this case the sponsors who share a similar experience with Dominick regarding food. Each time Frank attempts to add to their conversation, he is ignored. The camera frames the men in close-ups, and Frank is relegated to an occasional moment in the background. The topic of Lydia dominates the conversation at first, she being the sustenance that Dominick is denied and denies himself; he is missing her signals of romantic interest. Rather than assisting him in working through his feelings of helplessness, the three men's conversation becomes consumed with a recounting of their favorite foods and meals. Dominick recalls that the only thing that his dead cousin Sal "could be involved in was a meal," which mirrors how Dominick, Sonny, and Oscar cut Frank out of their conversation. In this scene, the business of eating, like Don Corleone's criminal business dealings in *The Godfather*, is relegated to those whose appetites fill gargantuan needs. Frank becomes suspect and untrustworthy and must be isolated because he does not understand the rules and threatens the power structure, and his presence calls into question the place that food has in their lives.

The men's discussion of their favorite foods becomes more obsessive, and the camera's close-ups spill over the frame so that only their mouths, nose, and eyes are emphasized. Their conversation is both intimate and criminal in nature. Food is sustenance and weapon, and as their focus shifts from helping Dominick to avoid an eating binge to recounting their favorite foods, Frank becomes the reminder of what it means to be emotionally attached to food and the obstacle who keeps them from indulging. The camera cuts to a medium shot of Frank as the three men's demands on him become increasingly unreasonable and bizarre. The camera shifts to a medium shot as Dominick and the sponsors, like zombies, march toward Frank in order to take the key by force. The Chubby Checkers' intervention turns from a conversational frenzy about food into an eating orgy. Dominick's behavior has escalated throughout the narrative of the film, but there is no preparation for what ensues once he and the sponsors literally take the doors off the kitchen cabinets. The camera shoots the men from above as if the roof has been blown off the apartment. The men cook everything in the cabinets and refrigerator, and even this food is not enough; Dominick calls for take-out.

Dominick's binges have only been hinted at, and until his meeting with the Chubby Checkers, his food consumption has been controlled, and even, as in the scene at his cousin's wake, delicate and sophisticated in nature. It is only once he and his siblings engage with the rhetoric of the diet industry

that his violent nature emerges. The only physical violence that has been witnessed up to the arrival of the Chubby Checkers is Antoinette's outburst when she destroys what is left of her son's birthday cake, but even this outburst comes after Sal's death when she and Frank have put pressure on Dominick to conform to a more rigid standard of consumption. This displacement of aggressive behavior onto the female upends expectations of Dominick until an actual binge erupts on the screen. It is not enough that Dominick acts out. This behavior is supported by his cohorts in food crime; suddenly, Dominick is part of a gang, a legitimate enterprise, but their devolution into a gangster mentality occurs without too much provocation and in spite of the legitimacy of the Chubby Checkers. Dominick's binge is not a singular action since the men's violence develops out of their conversation, almost pornographic in nature, about food. Although the sponsors are supposed to "check" Dominick from committing this type of transgressive behavior, they wind up as participants. These men's violence is palpable. The comic frame is nothing more than a false construct that smashes to pieces the notions that Italian-American food is only sustenance and that violent men are agents of power. In this moment, the "leave the gun, take the cannoli" mentality is refused and eating the cannoli *is* eating the gun.

Until the destruction of the kitchen, neither Frank nor Antoinette have witnessed one of Dominick's food binges. As Dominick and his sponsors eat through the night, Frank and Antoinette hide in the hallway, observing the carnage. Frank whispers, "Dominick put up a pot of spaghetti, first thing, but the big guy couldn't wait so he ate my leftover lasagna. Frozen. Then Dominick ate a big pot of pasta fa'zool. He ate the whole thing himself. All of them. Nobody shared." Ironically, sharing their struggles and no longer hiding their addictions does not create community; a deeper isolation is reinforced by the group's coming together. The singularity exhibited in their food orgy is indicative of the men's disconnect to their communities and to each other. This isolation is also exhibited in the way that the siblings have been pushed aside and marginalized so that these men can maintain (and further develop) a pathological connection to food.

The camera shot of Antoinette and Frank supports the growing isolation between Dominick and his family. While the kitchen is lit in a bright, almost florescent glare, the hallway is dark, and the siblings' position is marginalized by placing them in the background. The hallway that connects them to Dominick and his Chubby Checker sponsors dominates as the siblings walk downstairs to Antoinette's apartment. The hallway's transformation from a space of mobility and connection to a place that cannot be breached is most obviously rendered in Antoinette's silence. While her expected response would be to rage at her brother, and the destruction of the kitchen

would seem to be a legitimate reason for one of her rants, here she not only does not lose her temper but she is in awe of what has transpired. By forcing Dominick to control his diet through a rhetoric that is not supported by the numerous connections to Italian-American culture portrayed within the film's narrative, they become witnesses to the destruction that is possible when Dominick's identity is compromised and isolated from all that he knows and loves.

This scene demarcates an essential moment in Antoinette's understanding of what has happened to Dominick. After witnessing one of Dominick's binges, Antoinette changes tactics. Instead of berating Dominick after the Chubby Checkers leave, she talks to Lydia. This conversation occurs off-screen and is only revealed when Lydia visits Dominick during his food hangover. Lydia, unlike Dominick's family, is circumspect, equating his "fall" with Christ, who "fell three times. And he was Christ." Lydia's expectation that people will fail bolsters Dominick's confidence, and the two begin a relationship. In an extended montage of the couple kissing, Lydia's lips become manna for Dominick. They kiss outside in parks, inside in Lydia's apartment hallway, on the street outside the card shop, on a sofa between an intimate conversation. The couple's closeness is also revealed in Antoinette and Frank's relative silence during this wooing period. The change in the family dynamics allows the family to remain intact and Dominick to mature emotionally. The film, however, is not interested in a storybook ending that enfolds Dominick safely back into the community as a permanently changed man. Instead, the film works toward a more ambiguous and open ending that suggests Dominick and his siblings will never be free from their pasts – for good and ill.

On the evening that Dominick plans to ask Lydia to marry him, she disappears. He does not realize that her brother, a firefighter, has been injured and that she has gone to Boston to be with him during his recovery. Her absence sends Dominick spiraling downward into despair. There is one final binge – \$40 worth of Chinese take-out – intended for a card party in Antoinette's apartment. The binge is relegated to the hidden actions of a distraught man – only Dominick jumping the curb in the car that he has taken to pick up the food indicates what he is about to do.

If Dominick's binge returns to the place of hidden shame, Antoinette's behavior is revealed in a mirror image of his food orgy with the Chubby Checker sponsors. Her movement as she confronts Dominick is also a reversal of the scene in *The Godfather* where Carlo chases Connie Corleone into their bathroom and beats her. The action moves from the foreground into the background until the married couple disappears and the only indication of what is happening are Connie's screams. In *Fatso*, Antoinette

enters the apartment and discovers Dominick sitting by a window in the foreground of the frame. She beats her brother with a cane while she yells, "You son of a bitch. You rat bastard" over and over again until Frank and her husband pull her away from Dominick. The moment is made uncomfortable, with its rage and shame, since the camera focuses on Dominick sitting silently while Antoinette's physical and verbal blows rain down on him. Antoinette's rage is as frightening and transgressive as Dominick's compulsion to eat when he is emotionally vulnerable.

What is different in this scene is Dominick's ability to self-reflect, which forces Frank and Antoinette to listen. The siblings' positions become reversed as Antoinette weeps when Dominick states, "I'm trying to blame that darling Lydia for what I did. . . . Mama started it all. How she loved to feed me . . . but look what you did. . . . You made me a fatso. . . . I can't stop the fat, Mama. It's killing me. Mama, mama, mama." In the first sign of sibling understanding for the depth of Dominick's pain and shame, Antoinette holds him as they both cry. This closeness allows Dominick to further clarify his position and acknowledge that their mother "did what she thought was best" and now he needs to be a responsible adult. He turns to Antoinette and Frank and suggests he may not be able to "control" himself and both he and his siblings will have "to love me the way I am. Fat. You gotta love me for who I am and so do I. So do I." Dominick's self-awareness that he cannot be perfect and will, more than likely, fall again, draws upon the complex mediated identity both he and Antoinette have been negotiating since the film's opening montage. *Fatso's* narrative privileges community over isolation, messiness over order, and dysfunctional nurturance over mainstream American practices. While Dominick discovers that Lydia had to return home and does want to marry him, the ending refuses to wrap up the family in a neat blanket of positive assimilation or Dominick in the pervasive rhetoric of the diet industry. The family will continue to evolve and change as the closing images of Dominick's growing family of many children attest.

*Fatso* suggests that problems within the Italian-American family arise not from one source but from a clashing of interests and needs. While violence is prevalent in Dominick's interactions with his family and food, it is not a marker of masculinity. Antoinette's use of physical and verbal abuse dominates constructions of violence normally viewed as tropes of gangsterism. Dominick's masculinity emerges from his willingness to engage in an emotionally vulnerable manner with Lydia and his siblings. He cannot reject his love of food, but he does recognize that until he can be emotionally truthful, food will be a substitute for human interaction rather than a positive marker of his heritage. After his last binge, when he believes he has lost

Lydia, Dominick is at his most fragile, but he refuses to retreat from uncomfortable feelings. He confronts Antoinette and Frank with his awareness of who he is and who he wants to be as a man, as a brother, and as a husband and father. The film suggests that his siblings embrace this admission as a sign of masculinity and maturity, and that male and female dynamics may be complex, but men and women must mediate identity together.

Bancroft's film, although not as rigid in its artistry as Coppola's *The Godfather* or Scorsese's *Goodfellas*, offers a fresh and innovative view of the Italian-American male and the myriad relationships that exist between Italian-American men and women. Bancroft and *Fatso* need to be treated with as much respect, detail, and interrogation as Coppola, Scorsese, and Puzo—or female artists as diverse as Savoca, Diane DiPrima, and Louise DeSalvo. This multifaceted exploration of the film's parodic reimagining of Italian Americanness—through both gastronomic and gender lines of inquiry—has sought to offer further insight into how these complex themes might enrich future research in the fields of film, gender, and Italian American studies.

## Notes

1. Leonard Maltin expresses the same idea, almost word for word, when he states: "Film veers unevenly between comedy and pathos, with a few too many excrement jokes, perhaps the uncredited contribution of Mel Brooks" (2009, 444).
2. Gabbard and Luhr note that "the film industry has always operated upon gender presumptions about the likely tastes of their audiences. . . . In the 1970s feminists argued that spectatorship was tightly gender-specific, but only a few years later a new wave of feminist theorists argued there are many ways in which women, or in fact the same woman, can respond to a film" (2008, 2). Film critics' negative responses to *Fatso* seem predicated on their inability to read the film without these gender presumptions.
3. For an interesting read on mothers and their children in mainstream cinema, including a brief acknowledgment of *Fatso*'s mother figure, see Esposito (2002).
4. Bancroft's portrayal of Annie Sullivan in the Arthur Penn-directed film *The Miracle Worker* (1962) and its predecessor on Broadway received an Oscar and a Tony Award. By her own admission, "Arthur Penn taught me everything. . . . He really was, I think, more help to me in my acting than any other person alive or dead" (quoted in Ridge, 1999). Penn went on to direct *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967), *Little Big Man* (1970), and *The Missouri Breaks* (1976), films similar to *Fatso* in that they work against easy categorization and stereotypical portrayals. In 1967, at the age of thirty-six, only five years older than Dustin Hoffman, Bancroft was nominated for an Oscar for her role as Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate*, and in 1978 she received another Oscar nomination for her work in *The Turning Point* (1977). After making *Fatso*, Bancroft starred in *Agnes of God* (1985) and *'night, Mother* (1986), for which she was nominated, again, for an Oscar.
5. For the specifics regarding Savoca's journey from first idea to finished production of *True Love*, see Giunta (2002).
6. The 1955 film *Marty* attempts a similar upending, but its sentimental love story undoes the connection between mother and son through the intrusion of an outsider female

who is educated, unattractive, and not Italian American. See Casillo for an interesting sociological reading of the way in which *Marty* examines lower-middle-class values and connections (2011, 585–598). See also Blake for a summary of how *Marty*'s need for connection threatens not only his relationship with his friends, but also and most especially, his connection with his mother (2005, 51–52). See Bondanella for a discussion of the Italian female immigrant in *Marty*—women who fear displacement by the white ethnic female (2004, 44–46).

7. Stearns notes, “[I]n 1950 7 percent of men and 14 percent of women professed to be on a diet, whereas in 1973, the numbers had risen to 34 percent and 49 percent. But the main point was the impact of the steady pressure of diet advice and *the growing need to believe that discipline was required*” (1997, 125) (emphasis added).
8. See Gardaphé (2002) for a discussion regarding gangsters and class issues, particularly the way in which *The Godfather* plays with notions of assimilation (2002, 62–64).
9. Mosher (2001) suggests that dieting is such an American staple that “sitcoms sooner or later do a ‘dieting show’” (188, footnote 7). What is interesting in this connection is that “sitcoms showed that eating disorders affected men as well as women,” including with regard to such iconic figures as Ralph Kramden and Archie Bunker (2001, 188, footnote 7). In addition, Mellencamp suggests, “The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous (which is free) are at the base of other therapies, differentiated to deal with various problems— which, like cars, cleansers, and lipstick, have multiplied” (1990, 28). The ubiquitous and growing nature of the diet industry during the 1970s alongside the rhetoric of twelve-step groups reveals *Fatso*'s plot to have more than a passing concern with American middle-class stress and confusion.

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## Notes and Documents

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### Vita Brevis: An Appreciation of the Life and Work of Paul Giaimo (May 8, 1962–June 8, 2012)

FRED GARDAPHÉ

When I was young, I used to think that death was something that happened to old people. When my family would bring us into the rooms of dying relatives—the ones we watched, touched, and gave last kisses to—they were always very old with gray or white hair, wrinkled skin, and thin hands stretching out fingers that could barely squeeze ours.

Now I am a survivor of the deaths of many others. Grieving the death of someone you know and love is difficult, but more difficult still is when the person who dies is younger than you. This is what I face in the death of Paul Sebastian Giaimo. I can accept Paul's death at age 50, and have, but I can also wonder just how much more he could have given the world had his life continued even a few more years. Paul was a committed scholar and colleague, and though his energy and ideas will be missed by all of us, his works and actions will live on through the art of his academic writings and through the memories that those who met him continue to carry with them.

I first met Paul at one of the American Italian Historical Association's conferences in Chicago, just after he had landed his first job. He was filled with such enthusiasm and creativity that I knew his work would eventually have a strong impact on the field, and it did. Paul's insights into the relationship between Italian American studies and the larger field of American studies were cutting-edge and transformative. His 2003 *MELUS* essay "Ethnic Outsiders: The Hyper-Ethnicized Narrator in Langston Hughes and Fred L. Gardaphé" was a great example of how his mastery of American studies helped to expand the audience for Italian-American subjects. I will always be appreciative of this.

Reading his obituary made me realize that the people we meet in academic contexts, even those we go on to call colleagues and friends, offer only a small part of who they really are at the annual venues when we gather to exchange ideas. We are all so much more than the arguments we present, than the social behavior we exhibit when we are away from home, than the knowledge we reveal through talks and after-session conversations in restaurants, bars, and hotel lobbies. While I knew that Paul was close to

the Catholic Church (you can read that in some of his articles and especially in his study of Don DeLillo), I was unaware that he was a member of such organizations as the Catholic Worker and the Knights of Columbus.

The last time I saw Paul was at the March 22, 2012, presentation he made at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute on his new book, *Appreciating Don DeLillo: The Moral Force of a Writer's Work*. The energy with which he presented his ideas and the force of his rhetoric masked the fight against cancer that his body was waging. He cut a fine figure that night as he took people through some of the main points of his past work and revealed to us the direction he would be taking going forward. You could not tell from his physical presence during the lecture that he was dying, for he projected so much energy that it couldn't help but enter the audience. It was as though his intellectual life had taken over his physical life, pushing it to extremes that his body was incapable of maintaining. In that presentation he sketched out the scope of his study and carefully built arguments for the value of reading DeLillo as no other critic had done before. Paul challenged the typical ways of viewing DeLillo as a postmodern writer and made strong arguments by including the Italian-American and Catholic signs in his novels. Paul's book is mandatory reading for anyone working on DeLillo and will no doubt affect future DeLillo scholarship. At the end of his talk Paul revealed an elaborate and ambitious plan for his future work.

After the presentation I suggested we walk back to his hotel and grab a drink, as we often did after the conference presentations he made earlier in his life. He looked at me very seriously and said that he just couldn't do it and asked if we could take a taxi. We did, and when we arrived at his hotel he excused himself from the drink, saying that he had to recoup his energy for meeting his family the next day. He left me with an incredibly strong hug, stronger than he usually gave, and one that must have taken whatever energy he had left that night. We promised to see each other soon, but it was a promise neither of us kept, for just a few short months later I received news of his death.

Paul's work here is done, and with it he has advanced Italian American studies by shining the light of American studies on this growing field. While he never completed all he planned, he has left a legacy of thought to future scholars who will certainly benefit from his enormous contributions to the field. We thank Paul for enriching us through his scholarship, his collegiality, and his friendship. Hippocrates wrote, "Ars longa, vita brevis," and Paul's life reminds us that indeed the things one does can live on long after their maker's life when they are done well and with passion and precision. *Grazie*, Paul, for your life and work.

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