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Ethnic Regionalism in American Literature: The Case of Sicilian/American Writers

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ABSTRACT

Throughout the 1900s, the sense of a distinct Sicilian-ness manifested itself in a corpus of texts by Italian authors such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Leonardo Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, and Andrea Camilleri, just to mention a few. Interestingly, a parallel phenomenon seems to have emerged in the United States. While attempting to redefine the concept of Americanness and expand the canon of American literature so that it embraces articulations of ethnic identities, many Sicilian-American writers have turned their works into literary manifestations of ethnic regionalism.

In this essay, I have tried to answer questions such as: Why and how have many Sicilian and Sicilian-American writers engaged in literary regionalism? How did a sense of Sicilian-ness develop in the US, and turn into Sicilian Americanness, or as I have called it sicilianamericanità?

Ultimately, I suggest that the construction of a regional ethnic identity in American literature functions as a discourse that aims to question the reduction of the complex fabric of a population to a homogenous version of national identity, be it "American" or "Italian." Seen from this perspective, a seemingly particularistic study on sicilianamericanità could provide scholars of literary studies with precious insights about the meaning of cultural constructions of national identities and literatures.

KEY WORDS

literature, regionalism, ethnic, identity, Italian-American, Sicilian-American, Italian, Sicilian, Jerre Mangione, sicilianamericanità

> For the past fifty years, our politicians have tried to create the appearance of *Italian* uniformity: regions should have disappeared from the nation, and their dialects from the literary language. Sicily is the region which has most *actively* resisted this tampering with history and freedom. Sicily has shown on numerous occasions to have a national, more than a regional character of its own. . . .The truth is that Sicily preserves its own spiritual independence. . . .[1]
>
> Antonio Gramsci, "Letteratura e Vita Nazionale" (1916)

In 1970, Sicilian intellectual and writer Leonardo Sciascia commented on Sicily's being the chief object of the literary endeavors of local writers:

> It is certain, however, that Sicilian culture has always had Sicily as its topic and the object of its attention: at times, with particularism and narrow-mindedness; more often, though, by studying and representing the reality of Sicily and "Sicilian-ness" (or, as a Sicilian avant-garde poet calls it, "sicilitudine") with such strength, vigor, and completeness that speak to the intelligence and destiny of the whole humanity.[2] (*La Corda Pazza* 17)

Especially throughout the 1900s, in fact, the sense of a distinct

sicilianità—or Sicilian-ness—manifested itself in a corpus of texts, which, although subsumed under the broader context of Italian literature, have distinguished themselves as examples of an exquisitely regional literary experience. Writers such as Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Maria Messina, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Vitaliano Brancati, and more recently the aforementioned Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, and Andrea Camilleri, just to mention a few, have all contributed, in different ways and through different genres, to the formation of this literary phenomenon. Despite its local color—which takes various forms, ranging from a constant preoccupation with all things Sicilian, to realistic depictions of regional characters and situations, through an always recognizable linguistic experimentalism—Sicilian literature has managed to cross the Strait of Messina as well as the Alps, and become part and parcel of the world's literary heritage.

Interestingly enough, a parallel phenomenon seems to have emerged in the United States in the field of Italian/American literature.[3] Writers such as Jerre Mangione, Tony Ardizzone, Diane Di Prima, Sandra Mortola Gilbert, Josephine Gattuso Hendin, Rita Ciresi, Rose Romano, Ben Morreale, Nat Scammacca, Vincenzo Ancona, Gioia Timpanelli, Dodici Azpadu, Rachel Guido De Vries and others, regardless of generational considerations or inter-regional filiations, have in their works taken imaginative possession of the island and its *weltanschauung*, and have fashioned their Italian/American identity in regional terms. For all of them, Sicily plays a special role, as the source of emotional experiences and aesthetic inspiration. This is not just for those who, like poet Vincenzo Ancona, were born there, or like novelist Ben Morreale, spent a significant part of their life in Sicily, but also for those who visited it later in their life, like Jerre Mangione and Rose Romano; and even for those who have never been there, such as Tony Ardizzone. Some of these authors, notably Mangione and Scammacca, even initiated a sort of "Back to Sicily" movement, often getting involved in the civil struggles of the island against the two related phenomena of political and economic stagnation and the Mafia. Most of these first-, second-, and third-generation Sicilian-American

novelists, short-story writers, and poets focus in their works on their experience as Sicilian Americans and lay out a recognizable set of Sicilian cultural markers; these authors have engaged with ethnic regionalism in American literature. [4]

In the light of what has been said above, it would not be too farfetched to suggest that at the core of these two literary phenomena, which take place on two opposite ends of an ocean, there is a similar process of identity construction. In both the Italian and the US contexts, writers of Sicilian descent have clung to the island's shores, and have defined their identity in regional terms. Given that Sicilian-ness as it surfaces in Italian literature has received plenty of critical attention, my interest shifts to a terrain that as yet lacks a thorough investigation. In this essay I argue for the valorization of a Sicilian ethnic identity in Italian/American literature. It is my contention that Sicilian ethnic regionalism in American literature, at its best, functions as a discourse that aims to question the reduction of the complex fabric of a people to a monolithic version of national identity, be it "American" or "Italian." I will therefore explore the historical and cultural roots of Sicilian regionalism in order to start a discussion on the emergence of ethnic literary regionalism in the 20th-century American literature by writers of Sicilian descent. I will finally provide a brief survey of the most significant contributions to this literary phenomenon.

In the field of Italian/American Studies, as far as the literary scene over the last decades is concerned, the critical community has deployed a strategy of representation which has tended to overlook regional Italian specificities. The Italian/American ethnic identity has been constructed discursively on the historical consideration that its culture was shaped by immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno*, an area that extends south and east of Rome, and which included the Abruzzi region, Campania, Puglia, Basilicata, Calabria, and the two islands of Sicily and Sardinia.[5] Therefore, from the incontrovertible datum of the southern matrix of Italian America, most critical discourses have derived the legitimacy of focusing on the experience of the forsaken South as a whole, thus equating the socio-cultural background of an immigrant peasant of the area immediately east of Rome, with that of a

fisherman of the west coast of Sicily. The common denominator for such different experiences is the status of second-class citizenship from which most of the immigrants from southern Italy tried to flee *en masse*. Also, by and large, the economic and political disenfranchisement of *meridionali*—or southern Italians—continued in the United States, where the immigrant status *per se* has historically forbidden a fuller political and economic participation. This has led to the tendency in the field of Italian/American studies to couch its literature in terms of the social and economic marginality that *meridionali* experienced both in the Old Country and in the New World, and to conceive of and represent them as a homogenous and coherent category of historically-muted subjects.

Admittedly, since Unification in 1861, the Italian southern masses as a whole have experienced various degrees of difficulty in accessing the decisional spheres of institutional power. The Kingdom of Italy was, in fact, constituted under the rule of the Piedmontese House of the Savoy at a time when the North of Italy was trying to keep pace with the European "first comers" of the industrialization process, i.e., England, France, and Germany. In this historical juncture, the *Mezzogiorno*, with a traditional agrarian economy, could hardly participate in the hegemonic project of newborn Italy. Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci provided a most lucid analysis of the problem of economic inequalities in relation to geographic distribution in Italy and of the subaltern condition of the southern peasant masses. In his all-too-famous 1926 article "Alcuni Temi sulla Questione Meridionale," [6] the economic developmental paradigm that Italy had chosen to adopt at the moment of Unification generated what he notoriously baptized as the "Southern Question." According to Gramsci, the *Mezzogiorno* had been reduced to a reserve of natural resources for the industrial North, to a supply of cheap labor, and, finally, to a market for the North's finished products in order to serve the needs of the capitalistic system. Early enough in history, then, southern Italy gave its share to what, after the famous 1980 Brandt-Report, [7] has become a commonplace expression that turns the South from a geographical location into a metaphor of slow

advancement and economic backwardness: the "World's South." With the programmatic recrimination "[t]he Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies" (*The Southern Question* 16), Gramsci managed to bridge the chronological gap between the Italian post-Unification and the postcolonial struggles in other parts of the world.

Publicized as a "national" venture, the Italian Unification was, in fact, supported by an imperial ideology that even resorted to the disturbingly familiar rhetoric of a civilizing enterprise—one which, incidentally, continues to inform current neo-imperialist projects. Cultural and social sophistication were especially deemed to be lacking in the rural South, while the northern stock, eager to embrace the industrial model set up by the most powerful European countries, was assumed to prove a superior civilization. In Italy, the Manichean polarization that characterizes any imperialist project—based on dichotomies such as rationality vs. irrationality, modernity vs. backwardness, progress vs. obsolescence, and the like—followed territorial criteria, where the category "good Italians" was occupied by Northerners, while Southerners were "bad Italians." At the beginning of last century, Italian socialist Camillo Prampolini condensed the unhappy situation with a sentence that has become a common expression in Italy: "L'Italia si divide in nordici e sudici." [8]

The anthropological doctrines of racial superiority and inferiority that saw the light at the end of the 19th century also played a major role in the construction of the relations between the North and the South of Italy. Through the works of Social Positivists such as criminologist Cesare Lombroso, Alfredo Niceforo, Giuseppe Sergi, Enrico Ferri, and others the racial theory of the social and moral inferiority of the *meridionali* vis-à-vis Northerners became the dominant mode of understanding the problem of the "two Italies." [9] In his "Alcuni Temi," Antonio Gramsci tackled not only the economic aspects of the Unification, but also the ideological propaganda that served as a justification for the exploitation of southern masses. In a tone that calls to mind, once again, the later postcolonial contestations, Gramsci thus deplored the northern hegemonic ideology:

> It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in innumerable ways by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie among the masses of the North: the South is the ball and chain that prevents a more rapid progress in the civil development of Italy; Southerners are biologically inferior beings, either semi-barbarians or out and out barbarians by natural destiny; if the South is underdeveloped it is not the fault of the capitalist system, or any other historical cause, but of the nature that has made Southerners lazy, incapable, criminal and barbaric. This harsh fate has been only slightly tempered by the purely individual explosion of a few great geniuses, like isolated palms in an arid and sterile desert. (*The Southern Question* 20)

Gramsci was pointing out how apt these theories were in absolving those who enjoyed the privilege of decisional power from any responsibility as to the unequal economic development of the country. However, despite the opposition of some of the most influential scholars of the time,[10] the pseudo-scientific discourses elaborated by the "social Darwinists" managed to take roots in Italy, and are at the origins of a series of prejudices and divisions that continue to trouble the country today. [11]

In light of the considerations presented above, the "Southern-Matrix" politics adopted by the Italian/American critical community for interpreting its culture and literature as representative of a monolithic southern bloc could be a rather plausible representational model. However, in the field of sociological studies, Donna Gabaccia points out that a politics that constructs *meridionali* as a homogenous class of subaltern subjects is, at best, a scholarly construction. In her 1999 essay "Two Great Migrations: American and Italian Southerners in Comparative Perspective," [12] Gabaccia writes:

> No matter how defined, the southern provinces of Italy shared no common language. They did not acknowledge the leadership of a single regional elite, and neither did traditional ties of marriage, common agricultural practices, arise or commercial exchange bind

> the southern provinces into a single region. Regional identities meant *siciliani* and *napolitani*, not *meridionali.* (221)

Gabaccia's sociological analysis ultimately disproves the assumption that southern Italian culture is a monolithic culture.

Of all the regions that make up the national Italian patchwork, Sicily seems to have distinguished itself for its regionalist character. For the purpose of a deeper understanding of this phenomenon, it is essential to briefly investigate the historical causes that push Sicilians and Sicilian Americans to rewrite their positions in both the Italian and the US contexts in "exceptionalistic" nuances. Due to it being an island of modest size, and by consequence easy prey to conquest, and because of its geographical location, embedded as it is between Europe and Africa,[13] and on the east-west axis between Western Europe and western Asia, Sicily has historically been the strategic epicenter of colonizing enterprises.[14] A "crossroad of civilizations" is the most common euphemistic definition for the island's past, for there met the interests of the Greeks, the Carthaginians, the Romans, the Byzantines, the Arabs, the Normans, and the Spaniards, to mention just the most influential groups in chronological order. With the 1861 Unification, Sicily was finally annexed to the Kingdom of Italy, thus becoming the southernmost part of the newborn country. To some, time-wise Italy is only the most recent off-shore colonizing power to conquer the island, so much so that in the aftermath of WWII, almost 100 years after the Unification, Sicilian nationalists coded their dissent to the Italian state in the language of a postcolonial struggle.[15] In short, armed conquest, expropriation of land, extortion of tributes, unsuccessful negotiations, military occupation, and, most recently, *miseria* (or starvation), emigration, and high unemployment rates have played an almost uninterrupted role in the historical development of the region.

According to some, most notably Sciascia, the history of colonial suffering and exploitation, coupled with geographical insularity (read, isolation), has engendered a particular process of identity construction as well as recognizable cognitive and behavioral patterns in the population. In his 1970 *La Corda Pazza: Scrittori e Cose della Sicilia*,

Sciascia speculated on the perpetual insecurity of the Sicilian people, which, according to him, was the primary legacy of a history of colonization:

> One can safely say that insecurity is the primary component of Sicilian history, and it affects the behavior, the way of being, the take on life—fear, apprehension, distrust, closed passions, inability to establish relationships outside of the private sphere, violence, pessimism, fatalism—of both the collectivity and single individuals. [16] (13)

This "historical fear," Sciascia maintained, has readily turned into an "existential fear," which, sociologically, manifests itself in

> a tendency to isolation, separation of individuals, groups, and communities, and, finally, of the entire region. At one point, insecurity and fear reverted to the illusion that such insularity, with all the conditionings, qualms, and rules that originate from it, constitutes a privilege, as well as a source of strength, when, in truth, it engenders vulnerability and weakness. Hence a sort of alienation and madness, which, on the plane of psychology and customs, ignite attitudes of presumptuousness, haughtiness, and arrogance. [17] (14)

Borrowing the expression from Sicilian avant-garde poet and painter Crescenzio Cane who, in turn, took inspiration from Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor's concept of *négritude*, Sciascia baptized the sum of these attitudes *sicilitudine*.[18]

Sicilitudine is a controversial discourse, but it is certainly more than a form of self-exoticism with little conceptual merit. Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon's 1952 analysis of the "black men of the Antilles" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Sciascia too shifted his interest from the political and economic effects of colonialism in Sicily to a psychoanalytic study of its consequences on the population. In the light of Sicily's colonial past, Sciascia maintained, *sicilitudine* would be

more accurately interpreted as one articulation of the arsenal of complexes that Sicilians have been developing in a colonial environment. Thus, by creating the notion of *sicilitudine*, Sciascia was bringing to the political fore again, after Gramsci, the "Southern question," only this time from a Sicilian *and* postcolonial angle in essentialistic terms.

Sicilitudine as a postcolonial discourse heavily informs the literature of some Sicilian authors. Since 1861, the works of Giovanni Verga, Luigi Pirandello, Maria Messina, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Vitaliano Brancati, the aforementioned Sciascia, Vincenzo Consolo, Andrea Camilleri, and others, have all been dealing with questions of regional identity in different historical and social contexts. The contestatory potential of Sicilian regionalism lies in its refusal of the forced process of "Northernization"—read, homogenization according to northern-Italian standards—on a cultural and literary level. The above mentioned authors have managed to enter the Italian literary panorama without camouflaging, and, more often than not, by capitalizing on their distinctly regional voice. In the Introduction to the anthology *Narratori di Sicilia*, Sciascia and Salvatore Guglielmino thus lay out the effects that *sicilitudine* has had on Sicilian-born writers: "All have experienced dramatically, or with aching anxiety, the fact of being Sicilian, of belonging to a reality, to a manner of being, to a human condition which is distinct and unrepeatable." (Trans. by Joseph Farrell, *Leonardo Sciascia* 36)

According to the two critics, Sicily is, by choice, and more often necessity, the favorite topic of the literary production of Sicilian writers, who have engaged in a particular and recognizable process of construction of regional identity in literature.

Interestingly enough, the 1967 edition of *Narratori di Sicilia* featured, among others, Sicilian/American writer Jerre Mangione. Born in Rochester, New York, Mangione is the only "narrator of Sicily" in the anthology who was not born on the island, and whose piece—part of his 1943 memoir *Mount Allegro*—is originally in a language other than Italian, and therefore appears in translation. The editors must have obviously believed that Sicilian-ness as a "manner of

being" had shaped the identity of some Sicilian Americans too, and that even a second-generation American writer such as Mangione could not help but experience "with aching anxiety, the fact of being Sicilian [American], of belonging to a reality, to a manner of being, to a human condition which is distinct and unrepeatable." By including American-born writer of Sicilian descent Jerre Mangione in his anthology, Sciascia was validating the existence of a distinct Sicilian/American literary vein.

The definition of Sicilian/American literature is not an easy task. The first questions to be addressed are: what is Sicilian/American about Sicilian/American narratives? Also, must the writer be entirely of Sicilian descent, or is it sufficient that the characters be Sicilian/American for a text to be defined as Sicilian/American? Must the writer and/or the characters perform their Sicilian Americanness overtly and ostensibly? For the purpose of this essay, Sicilian/American literature is to be intended as the literature written by U.S. authors of Sicilian descent which explicitly deals with the Sicilian/American experience. These restrictive criteria find a raison d'être in the literary fortune that Sicily has enjoyed as a source of inspiration for writers in general, and especially Italian/American ones, as well as in the avowed intentions of this study. Were I, in fact, to include all Italian/American accounts of things Sicilian in the category of Sicilian/American literature, the Neapolitan/American Mario Puzo would have to be featured as one of the most prominent authors in terms of productivity. After the best-selling success of his 1969 novel *The Godfather*, in fact, Puzo devoted the rest of his literary career to the depiction of what he perceived as the "Sicilian way" through a more or less skilled use of much-exploited topoi about Sicily and its inhabitants in *The Sicilian* (1984), *The Last Don* (1996), and the posthumous *Omerta* (2000). Whether Puzo helped or did a disservice to Sicilians, Sicilian Americans, and the Italian/American community at large with his highly controversial novels is a question that has incessantly been debated since the appearance of *The Godfather* and Francis Ford Coppola's cinematographic trilogy of the same name. But this seemingly endless *querelle* transcends the scope of this study, for its

avowed purpose is, instead, to analyze the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity in Italian/American literature. Therefore, the project can only be carried out by focusing on the acts of representation and self-representation by Sicilian Americans.

As for the second criterion of inclusion, that which limits the content of my analysis to works that specifically deal with the Sicilian/American experience, as restrictive a condition as it appears, it is, once again, determined by the purpose of this study, which is more concerned with the deliberate articulation of ethnic literary regionalism. As not all ethnic writers engage in ethnic literature, not all Italian/American writers of Sicilian origins—or other regional origins, for that matter—have made their texts ideal contexts for the reading I suggest in this article. For example, chronologically speaking, Sicilian-born Francesca Vinciguerra was the first Italian/American woman writer to reach notoriety at the beginning of last century. Included in Olga Peragallo's 1949 literary survey *Italian American Authors and their Contribution to American Literature*, Helen Barolini tells us that Vinciguerra "went on to become a successful, prolific writer, not unaided by the anglicization of her name which, she has related, was a condition to the publication of her first book, *The Ardent Flame* (1927)." Not surprisingly, then, Francesca Vinciguerra/Frances Winwar sacrificed any trace of her ethnic heritage on the altar of the Anglo-based literary hegemony of the beginning of last century. In *Recollections of My Life as a Woman*, Diane Di Prima occasionally hints at her partly Sicilian background in the form of an interest for her "Arabic" self, [19] and by recalling the identity conflicts she experienced as a child when pressured by her Neapolitan relatives to distance herself from the Sicilian side of her family.[20] However, her literary career evolved following a passion for transgression and uncompromising freedom of individual expression that made her a representative of the Beat generation. Also, in the multidimensional aspects of her work, feminist critic and poet Sandra Mortola Gilbert too has left some of the most lyrically intense lines on Sicilian/American belonging, without engaging, though, in the regional identity politics that I have chosen to delineate in the present essay. While the general

survey I provided above in no way should be considered an exhaustive, let alone complete, inventory of Sicilian/American authors, I believe it nevertheless conveys a sense, by negation, of the criteria I have adopted in my project.

The articulation of a sense of ethnic regionalism proved to be the most distinctive trait and a crucial factor in Jerre Mangione's literary career. The author consistently and persistently portrayed himself as an American-born of Sicilian extraction, therefore capitalizing on his ethnic and regional identity. If, in fact, there exists a literature which is intimately tied to Sicilian/American identity, its history dates back to the '40s, and precisely to the publication of Mangione's *Mount Allegro*. Although, when it first appeared in 1943, it was labeled as fiction for marketing purposes, Mangione's debut book was meant as a non-fiction memoir, the autobiographical account of his youth in the multi-ethnic neighborhood of the same name in Rochester, New York.[21] Continuously in print since its launch and promoted by sociologist Herbert Gans in his "Introduction" to the 1989 edition to the rank of "classic of American ethnic literature," *Mount Allegro* is only the first of a number of books in which Mangione undertook to explain to an American readership what it means to be a Sicilian ethnic in the United States. Questions of ethnicity and identity construction are, in different ways, addressed in all of Mangione's four memoirs—namely, *Mount Allegro*, *Reunion in Sicily* (1950), *A Passion for Sicilians* (1968), and *An Ethnic at Large* (1978)—and also surface in significant ways in his two novels, *The Ship and the Flame* (1948), and *Night Search* (1965). With all his works, Mangione set the foundations of Sicilian/American literature both in chronological terms, and in terms of importance of a literary quest for his ethnic heritage, which earned him the honorary title of "dean of Sicilian American writers" (Gardaphé, "Re-inventing Sicily" 56).

Literature became one of the privileged sites for the construction of an ethnic regional identity for Ben Morreale. Arguably more than any other Sicilian/American writer, Morreale has used Sicilian literature for the creation of his Sicilian/American writings. While the influence of Leonardo Sciascia is too obvious to ignore,[22] more

generally, Morreale inscribes his own works in the regional literary tradition of the island. Through the use of a series of literary strategies, such as intertextual references and allusions as well as various themes and topoi, Morreale's Sicilian/American texts reveal their literary (af)filiation with Sicilian literature. Especially in his novels *The Seventh Saracen* (1958), *A Few Virtuous Men (Li Cornuti)* (1973), and *Monday, Tuesday . . . Never Come Sunday* (1977), Sicilian literature surfaces in the form of implicit and explicit meta-literary motifs. By turning Sicilian Americanness into part of a greater discourse on Sicilian-ness—or, in Sciascia's words, *sicilitudine*—enacted by Sicilian writers, Morreale's novels become an ideal bridge between the fields of Italian and Italian/American studies.

Any exploration of ethnic identity defined in regional terms becomes an even more difficult task for the critic when issues of regional self-ascription overlap with contestations of traditional gender roles, heterosexual scripts, as well as racial categorizations. Moving within the realm of post-Civil Rights and post-feminist discourses, in the early 1990s, Rose Romano used her Sicilian/American identity in order to question the patriarchal and sexist paradigm of the Italian/American community, the homophobic grain of American culture at large, and even the discriminatory practices of the lesbian publishing community towards her Sicilian "race."[23] In her two volumes of poetry, namely, *Vendetta* (1990) and *The Wop Factor* (1994) as well as in her essays, Romano's regional identity reflects not only an actual ethnic filiation, but, most importantly, it signifies a conscious act of self-politicization. "Like a stand-up comedian," Helen Barolini writes, "Romano stresses a blue-collar past and present, writes fast and smart, and presents herself defiantly vaunting all her differences" (48). These differences allegedly stem from a combination of her ethnic status, Sicilian heritage, and sexual preference. "I'm a Sicilian-Italian-American Lesbian, / the scum of the scum of the scum, / forgotten by those who scream / in protest because they are / forgotten, / and I am neither seen nor heard," she declares, thus portraying herself as an "outsider" to Italian Americans from the mainland, mainstream America, and the heterosexual world ("The Fly," *Vendetta* 40).

Mangione, Morreale, and Romano are only a few reflections of the prismatic nature of the phenomenon of literary regionalism as it surfaces in Italian/American literature. The re-investment of the Sicilian cultural capital in the works of other Sicilian/American writers takes the most disparate forms, as it intertwines with the authors' all-too-personal aesthetic choices and ways of dealing with issues of regionalism, gender, class, sexual preference, political affiliation, religious sentiments, and the like. For instance, poet Vincenzo Ancona and story-teller Gioia Timpanelli both draw inspiration from Sicilian oral traditions, folklore, legends, and humor for their works. Ancona is the author of a collection of poems, the 1990 *Malidittu La Lingua: Damned Language*, published in Sicilian with English translations, while Timpanelli has dealt with Sicilian folktales most explicitly in her 1998 *Sometimes the Soul: Two Novellas of Sicily*. The paucity of their published production is consistent with the oral and performed nature of their works. Ancona and Timpanelli, in fact, imported in the US, respectively, the Sicilian tradition of the *poeta contadino*—or "poet-farmer," or "illiterate poet"—and that of the *cantastorie,* or the professional storyteller who, in the old days, roamed from town to town enchanting the crowds with his stories.

After a literary debut in the tradition of mainstream short stories, third-generation Sicilian/American Tony Ardizzone published in 1997 *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. In the narrative of *Papa Santuzzu*, Ardizzone weaves, in an original fashion, Sicilian folkloric tales with a recollection of immigration stories. The writer plays with his Sicilian heritage through a literary trip back in time and place to Sicily in the early 1900. That is the origin of a series of tales of immigration, displacement, and adjustment to the New World through which the Sicilian/American characters as well as the author, are able to inscribe their presence onto the American palimpsest.

Second-generation Nat Scammacca inverted the immigration trajectory of his parents by moving from the United States, where he was born, to Sicily, where he died in 2006. "I supply myself with ideological excuses for my choices and destiny," he confessed in a 1988 interview with Fred Gardaphé, "Like Odysseus, I had to return to

Sicily if life had any meaning at all" (*Dagoes Read* 201). In Sicily, Scammacca joined the *Antigruppo*, a populist movement which expressed its anti-establishment attitudes by bringing free public poetry readings to small towns' piazzas. In his numerous poems as well as his autobiographical works—such as the collection of short stories *Bye Bye America*, first published in Italian in 1972 with the subtitle *Ricordi di un Wop*, or "Memories of a Wop," the 1979 novel *Due Mondi*, and the 1989 *Sikano l'Amerikano!*—Scammacca took to writing about what it means to be a Sicilian American in Italian.

The questions and issues raised by Sicilian/American women writers reveal a problematization of patriarchal and sexist practices within the Italian/American family and community. In her 1988 novel *The Right Thing to Do*, Josephine Gattuso Hendin fictionalizes inter-regional, gender, and assimilation conflicts in the lives of a Sicilian man, his Neapolitan wife, and their rebellious American-born daughter. The emotional problems faced by a dysfunctional Sicilian/American family also inform Rachel Guido De Vries's 1986 novel *Tender Warriors*. The DeMarco brothers try to overcome their respective social "handicaps"—Rose is a lesbian, Lorraine an ex-junkie, while Sonny suffers from epileptic seizures—for the sake of recovering the sacredness of family unity. Together with Rose Romano and Rachel Guido De Vries, Dodici Azpadu contributed to the discussion about gender and sexual identity with her 1983 novel *Saturday Night in the Prime of Life*. The protagonist, Neddie Zingaro, is a Sicilian/American woman who is estranged by her family, and particularly by her mother, because of her sexual identity. Interestingly, Azpadu too, like Romano, portrays her Sicilian/American characters as racially defined. What especially connects Neddie to her mother Concetta, in fact, besides the fact that Neddie is the only child who can still speak Sicilian, is that they are both characterized by a markedly olive complexion. Despite these connections, the mother cannot accept Neddie's lesbian identity and, in one last desperate attempt to save their relationship, she breaks with her daughter for good. The above-mentioned women writers negotiate a Sicilian/American feminist subjecthood within and against the boundaries of both the

greater Italian and American national identities. Through their feminist and lesbian counter-narratives, these poets and writers are able to subvert a century-old passivity and acceptance of the normative role of women in traditional Sicilian culture, and thus re-write the larger social and sexual narratives of Italian/American identity.

Although a sense of literary regionalism is not a constant in their works, other American authors of Sicilian descent, such as poet/critic Sandra Mortola Gilbert and Beat poet Diane Di Prima, novelist and short-story writer Rita Ciresi, poet Maria Luisa Famà, Susan Caperna Lloyd, and others have, in different ways, dealt with their Sicilian/American identity. These and other writers have contributed in characteristic, yet original ways to the construction of Italian/American literature. None of the authors I have mentioned in this brief survey is truly representative of Sicilian Americanness, but each suggests a way to cope with issues of identity construction, and regional allegiances in literature. Most of these authors do not feel completely at ease in mainstream America, and their works explore the conflicts due to the continuous negotiations between traditional Sicilian and modern American ways. Generally, they all seem to believe, just like their Sicilian colleagues, that being a Sicilian in the United States is a "special" occurrence. Sicilian/American writers too, just like Sicilian writers, have come to see their "distinctiveness" not as an obstacle to literary development, but rather as a source of inspiration for the growth of a distinct literary tradition.

An analysis of Sicilian regionalism as it surfaces in Italian/American literature should not be perceived as a further fragmentation of US national literature, let alone a balkanization of the field of Italian/American Studies. Its goal, in fact, is not that of further dividing up categories into smaller units. Rather, my suggestion for a regional reading is better understood as a work parallel to that of scholars who look for intersections of ethnic, class, gender, and sexual identities in literature. In other words, central to this essay is the tenet that, in the case of Italian/American literature, issues of ethnic, class, gender, sexual identity, *and* regionalism are all interrelated. Differently put, as the Italian/American works marked by feminist or working-class

concerns are still Italian/American works within the domain of American literature, what I have, at times, defined as Sicilian/American literature is the literary manifestation of a specific process of identity construction which is part and parcel of Italian/American identity and literature as well as multicultural Americana at large.

On a final note, and at the risk of sounding defensive, I respond to those who might think that the valorization of regionalism in literature is comparable to a provincializing endeavor. To some, in fact, the "universal" dimension of a work would be overshadowed by a myopic focus on local specificities, and that the representational possibilities of a text would be severely reduced were it relegated to the role of regional account. A study of the construction of a Sicilian ethnic identity in some Italian/American texts is not an attempt to provincialize the field; rather, I believe an analysis of this sort allows for a more accurate characterization of Italian/American literature at large, while at the same time opening a space for new literary conversations on what it means to be Italian on both sides of the ocean.

NOTES

[1] "Cinquant'anni di vita unitaria sono stati in gran parte dedicati dai nostri uomini politici a creare l'apparenza di una uniformità italiana: le regioni avrebbero dovuto sparire dalla nazione, i dialetti nella lingua letteraria. La Sicilia è la regione che ha più attivamente resistito a questa manomissione della storia e della libertà. La Sicilia ha dimostrato in numerose occasioni di vivere una vita a carattere nazionale proprio, più che regionale. . . . La verità è che la Sicilia conserva una sua indipendenza spirituale. . . ." All translations, unless otherwise noted, are mine.

[2] "Certo è, comunque, che la cultura siciliana ha avuto sempre come materia e come oggetto la Sicilia: non senza particolarismo e grettezza, qualche volta; ma più spesso studiando e rappresentando la realtà siciliana e la 'sicilianità' (la 'sicilitudine' dice uno scrittore siciliano d'avanguardia) con una forza, un vigore, una compiutezza che arrivano all'intelligenza e al destino dell'umanità tutta."

[3] I am borrowing the use of the slash instead of the hyphen from Anthony Tamburri's *To Hyphenate or not to Hyphenate.* Recognizing that the hyphen is an "ideologically charged marker," the critic suggests to incline it by forty-five degrees, so that a phrase such as Italian-American would rather be written as Italian/American. Tamburri's slash signifies an awareness of the historical roots and sociological consequences of the physical distance between mainstream and minority cultures at the level of the sentence, and a willingness to challenge it.

[4] In 2004, this literary phenomenon materialized itself in the form of an anthology edited by Venera Fazio and Delia De Santis, entitled *Sweet Lemons: Writing with a Sicilian Accent*, which features selected literary pieces by Sicilian, Sicilian/American and Sicilian/Canadian authors. If anything, the editors' wide-ranging selection testifies to the unifying role that Sicilian-ness plays for Sicilians of the diaspora.

[5] The debate around the numbers of immigration from different regions of Italy is still open. The figures are controversial, and vary according to different sources, which in their turn, take or fail to take into consideration important factors such as the quality of immigration—i.e., temporary vs. permanent—and the role that illegal immigration plays in the figures, just to mention a few that could alter the numbers sensibly. As for the regions that contributed the greatest numbers to the Italian diaspora, suffice it to keep in mind historian Piero Bevilacqua's definition of the emigration from Campania, Sicily, and Calabria in terms of a "demographic earthquake" (*Breve Storia dell'Italia Meridionale* 37).

[6] "Alcuni Temi sulla Questione Meridionale" is an incomplete writing which would be better described as a series of scattered thoughts around the "Southern Question" that Gramsci articulated in 1926. The text was published for the first time in its incomplete form in 1930 in the communist journal "Stato Operaio."

[7] Known especially for his anti-Nazi zeal and recipient of a Nobel Peace Prize in 1971, Willy Brandt was for a long time the chairman of the Social Democratic Party of Germany. In the late 1970s, he was appointed Chairman of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, also known as the "North-South Commission." In 1980, a report was issued on the relationships between industrialized and developing countries—the so-called

Brandt-Report-, which demanded from the "North" of the world to bring about changes so as to favor the economic development of the world's "South."

[8] The punch-line of the sentence is the verbal pun that plays on the Italian adjective "Southerner." Loosely translated, Prampolini's expression would sound more or less like this: "Italy is divided between Northerners and Filthy-Ones."

[9] For a good selection of the most influent theses of the Italian Positivistic School on the inferiority of Southerners vis-à-vis Northerners, see Vito Teti's 1993 anthology *La Razza Maledetta: Origini del Pregiudizio Antimeridionale*.

[10] Among those who most vehemently criticized the school of Social Positivism, a special mention deserves Napoleone Colajanni who, in his 1906 "Latini e Anglosassoni. Razze Inferiori e Razze Superiori," dubbed the racial assumptions as an "anthropological novel." Rather than improbable genetic reasons, Colajanni looked at political economy in order to explain the poverty of the South. See Teti's *La Razza Maledetta*.

[11] What must be emphasized is that, despite the provisional title given to his incomplete article, Gramsci never thought of the "Southern Question" as a problem circumscribed to a given geographical area for which that area only was responsible. Rather, he read it as the ineludible effect, on a national level, of the economic inequalities generated by the capitalistic system. Indeed, the solution proposed by Gramsci to the "Southern Question" was of national importance, accomplished through the constitution of a *Comintern*, or a "governo operaio e contadino" made up of Northern proletarian and Southern peasant masses in an anti-capitalistic perspective. But the "revolutionary bloc" theorized by Gramsci to counter the "historic bloc" made up by southern agrarian elites and northern industrialists never attained in Italy the much-hoped political weight. The proletarian revolution never took place, and the "Southern Question" is still awaiting an answer.

[12] Gabaccia's article appears in *The American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno: Essays in Comparative History*, a volume edited by Enrico Dal Lago, and Rick Halpern, which hosts the proceedings from the 1999 Commonwealth Fund Conference in American History on a comparison between the two Souths of the title. In it, Peter Kolchin's essay "The American South in Comparative Perspective" makes the point about the general

commonalities between the two Souths as follows: "One of the most obvious bases on which to compare the two Souths is that of regional backwardness, together with a host of concomitant cultural characteristics. Both the American South and the Italian Mezzogiorno have been perceived—by contemporaries and subsequent scholars—as suffering from underdevelopment, poverty and an absence of 'modernization' in comparison with the two 'Norths.' Less urbanized, less industrialized, and less educated, they were supposedly marked by 'traditional' or 'pre-modern' values, seigneurialism, a hierarchical social structure, conservatism, a propensity for violence, an exaltation of honour; and also by poverty, poor health, intellectual isolation and massive emigration. Of course, such generalization require (and have received) qualifications in terms of specific time and place, but in both Italy and the USA, the two Souths appeared as laggards which even in the second half of the twentieth century were desperately trying to 'catch up' to national norms" (45).

[13]Less than two miles divide Sicily from mainland Italy, and therefore Europe, while the north-easternmost point of Africa is about one hundred miles away from the island's south-west coast.

[14]Incidentally, Sicily continues to play this role in different forms. The website of the Sigonella NATO base, in the province of Catania, thus greets its visitors: "Welcome to U.S. Naval Air Station Sigonella, the logistical 'Hub of the Med!' Due to its crucial and strategic location in the center of the Mediterranean, NASSIG plays a vital role in supporting joint and combined operations in the European theater, and provides the shortest logistics route from CONUS to Southwest Asia and the Indian Ocean. The importance of the base is reflected in our mission: to provide logistics and fleet support to U.S. military and NATO forces throughout the Mediterranean and Middle East. . . ." (http://www.sicily.navy.mil/nassig/welcome.htm).

[15]From 1943 till 1946, the traditional autonomist aspirations in Sicily found a spokesperson in Andrea Finocchiaro Aprile, leader of the MIS (Movement for the Independence of Sicily), a movement which reclaimed the separation of the island from Italy and the constitution of an autonomous republican government. Finocchiaro-Aprile's nationalist project survives today in the anachronistic and provincial claims of some scattered movements in Sicily of non-significant political weight.

[16]"Si può dunque dire che l'insicurezza è la componente primaria della

storia siciliana; e condiziona il comportamento, il modo di essere, la visione della vita--paura, apprensione, diffidenza, chiuse passioni, incapacità di stabilire rapporti al di fuori degli affetti, violenza, pessimismo, fatalismo—della collettività e dei singoli."

[17] "Una tendenza all'isolamento, alla separazione, degli individui, dei gruppi, delle comunità—e dell'intera regione. E ad un certo punto l'insicurezza, la paura, si rovesciano nell'illusione che una siffatta insularità, con tutti i condizionamenti, le remore e le regole che ne discendono, costituisca privilegio e forza là dove negli effetti, nella esperienza, è condizione di vulnerabilità e debolezza: e ne sorge una specie di alienazione, di follia, che sul piano della psicologia e del costume produce atteggiamenti di presunzione, di fierezza, di arroganza."

[18] On a linguistic note, the expression was a rather felicitous choice since in Italian it rhymes with "solitudine"—or solitude—which hints to the isolation of the island.

[19] In her autobiography, the quest for her Arab roots takes the form of a dream that Di Prima claims to have experienced in 1987: "I am in an ancient church in Sicily. In the dream I think that it is 'like a mosque'—it is actually bare stone, hung with incredibly rich cloths: deep colors of red, gold, and green—satins and brocades. . . . My uncle Joe has died. . . . The funeral service is going on, and it is mainly music, incredibly beautiful vocal music, Arabic in its modulations, but polyphonic, with one voice joining another. In the dream, it is very important for me to understand how 'Arabic' my people are (the Sicilian side of my family). It will help me to understand my life" (15-16).

[20] Di Prima's father, Dick, was of Sicilian descent, while her mother, Emma Mallozzi, was Neapolitan. This is how the beatnik poet dramatizes the inter-regional conflicts between the two sides of her family: "The Mallozzis, I was given to understand, were everything desirable. (These matters were discussed only by my mother and her sisters, and usually in Neapolitan.) Mallozzis were smarter, thinner, more ambitious. 'Upwardly mobile' we might say but there wasn't that term then. All the Mallozzi women had gone to college. The one male Mallozzi sibling had rebelled and refused: but of course, that is different from not being able to, because of lack of money or of brains. Each of the kids in the family was often under discussion: was s/he a Mallozzi or a Di Prima?. . . . I felt it as a moral imperative. Mallozzi or bust. They were more

"northern", too, the Italian snobbery. . . . *Oh built-in Manicheanism, very stuff of the Tao! Of Yin and Yang, though I can't say which was which. All dichotomies in the world were laid out for me, and before my birth. Mallozzis and Di Primas. Cosmology*. . . . Everyone knew Sicilians were outré" (46-47).

[21] In *An Ethnic at Large* first, and later in a footnote of the Finale added to the 1981 edition of Mount Allegro, Mangione explained that the publishers decided at the last moment to present the book as fiction instead of memoir for reasons of marketing. As a consequence of this editorial maneuver, the Mangiones became the Amoroso family, while the writer simply kept his real name in Italian, i.e., Gerlando (*An Ethnic* 298-99). Finally, in the 1981 edition by Columbia University Press, the author could clarify the nature of his book by adding the subtitle "A Memoir of Italian American Life."

[22] In his 2000 memoir *Sicily: the Hallowed Land*, Morreale recalls Sciascia first as the kid who was two years ahead of him at school in Racalmuto, and, later on, as the now-famous writer whom he "often interviewed informally while walking in the *chiazza*" (13). From a literary perspective, Morreale's novels are closer to Sciascia's early works—such as *Le Parrocchie di Regalpetra*, *Gli Zii di Sicilia*, and *Il Giorno della Civetta*—which are populated by farmers, sulphur miners, and workers, than to his later works, whose protagonists are mostly middle-class doctors, attorneys, teachers and the like. Sciascia makes a cameo appearance in *The Seventh Saracen*, and features as one of the main characters of *A Few Virtuous Men* under the guise of writer Nardu Pantaleone.

[23] To Romano, Italian as a label is a misnomer when referring to Southerners in general, and particularly Sicilians, not only in the discussion of what is commonly referred to as ethnicity—loosely defined as the sum of shared values, beliefs, customs, food, and, generally, of cultural matters that account for human variation. According to the poet, in fact, Sicilians are a "racially" defined group as they do not belong to the Aryan stock of Northern Italians. Claiming to fit uncomfortably into the generally accepted White vs. "of Color" racial bipolarization in the US, Romano attempts to add one more nuance to the palette, namely Olive.

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國文學中的族裔地域主義：西西里/美國作家的案例

摘 要

1900 年以來，一種獨特的西西里性 (Sicilian-ness) 在一群義大利作家—瓦爾嘉 (Giovanni Verga)、皮蘭德羅 (Luigi Pirandello)、夏夏 (Leonardo Sciascia)、康索羅 (Vincenzo Consolo)、卡米雷力 (Andrea Camilleri)—的作品中展現。耐人尋味的是，一種並行的現象似乎也在美國出現。許多西西里美國作家企圖重新定義美國性的概念，擴大美國文學的典範，讓美國文學接受族裔認同的發聲，另一方面這些作家也將作品轉向族裔地域主義的顯現。

我試圖在本文中回答下列問題：為什麼許多西西里及西西里美國作家從事文學地域主義？他們以何種方式進行？西西里性如何在美國開展，如何轉為西西里美國性，也就是我所謂的 sicilianamericanità？曼奇歐尼 (Jerre Mangione) 的族裔美國書寫如何具體展現上述現象？

歸根結柢，我提議，美國文學中的地域族裔認同建構的作用是一種論述，旨在質疑將某一人群的複雜結構化約為同質的國家認同，不管那一群人是「美國人」或「義大利人」。由此觀點視之，對西西里美國性的研究看來似乎是地方中心主義的 (particularistic)，卻能在國家認同與國家文學的文化建構意義上提供文學研究的學者可貴的見解。

關鍵字：文學，地域主義，族裔，認同，義大利美國人，西西里美國人，義大利人，西西里人，曼奇歐尼，西西里美國性