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# Italian/Americans and the American Racial System: Contadini to Settler Colonists?

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ITALIAN/AMERICANS AND THE AMERICAN RACIAL  
SYSTEM: CONTADINI TO SETTLER COLONISTS?

by

Stephen J. Cerulli

A master's thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, The City University of New York

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Stephen J. Cerulli

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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## ABSTRACT

Italian/Americans and the American Racial System: Contadini to Settler  
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Stephen J. Cerulli

Advisor: George Fragopoulos

This thesis explores the relationship between ethnicity and race, “whiteness,” in the American racial system through the lens of Italian/Americans. Firstly, it overviews the current scholarship on Italian/Americans and whiteness. Secondly, it analyzes methodologies that are useful for understanding race in an American context. Thirdly, it presents a case study on the Columbus symbol and the battle over identity that arose out of, and continues over, this symbol. Finally, this thesis provides suggestions using the case study and methodologies to open up new ways of understanding Italian/Americans and the American racial system.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgments		iv
Introduction	<i>Lo schema: an introduction</i>	1
Chapter 1	<i>Lignaggio: what's already said</i>	5
Chapter 2	<i>Decostruzione e ricostruzione: means for a new understanding</i>	26
Chapter 3	<i>Riscoprire "la Scoperta": Columbus, an ethnic semiotic</i>	37
Chapter 4	<i>Ripensare: a tool box with a bow tie</i>	65
Bibliography		69

To the 17+ million

***Lo schema: an introduction***

*“The assumption that what currently exists must necessarily exist is the acid that corrodes all visionary thinking.” – Murray Bookchin*

Since the 1970's, a plethora of academics have investigated the Americanization of Italian/Americans and its correlation with race.<sup>1</sup> Richard Alba, in the late 1980s, declared that Italians had reached the “twilight” of ethnicity. Recently, Jennifer Guglielmo, on the other hand, has claimed that Italians were “white on arrival,” since they had access to America from the beginning due to the fact that only “free whites” were allowed to settle and become American citizens and property owners. This thesis aspires to join this discourse, and probe how Italian/Americans have navigated their identity through the American racial system. It investigates how that system evolved in response to the 4 million person, revolving door, of Italian's arriving on American shores between 1880-1924. In order to do this, this thesis is organized in 4 parts.

The first chapter is a historiography. This section is essentially a summation of the scholarly arguments and debates over Italian/American identity. The chapter starts with a debate between the sociologist, Richard Alba, mentioned above, and historian Rudolph Vecoli on the whitening of Italian/Americans Secondly; furthermore it explores Fred Gardaphé's arguments on what “whiteness” means in America. This is followed up by discussions of more recent studies. This includes Salvatore Salerno and Jennifer Guglielmo's collection *Are Italians White?: How Race is Made in America* , John Gennari's *Flavor and Soul: Italian America at Its African American Edge*, and Peter Vellon's *A Great Conspiracy against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in the Early 20th Century*. The chapter concludes by arguing that some of these methods and concepts are useful for future inquirers, and analyzes lacuna in the current scholarship. For example, this thesis will contest the value of Guglielmo's

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<sup>1</sup> For the uses of “Italian/American,” see Anthony J. Tamburri to *Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate: The Italian/American Writer: An Other American*. Tamburri uses the hyphen as a way for “abbreviating... the distance created by the hyphen” (11). In this context, it is used for historicizing of Italians in America.

“white on arrival” concept, while exploring Gennari’s grey areas and Vellon’s top down whitening in a wider context.

The second chapter is on methodology. I will examine methods that are useful for exploring these racial questions in an American context. This chapter seeks to fill the gaps in the scholarship and provide a fuller analysis of race in America. I draw from settler colonial theory, intersectional theory, meta-modernism (especially useful for a conclusion, that ties this project together), Black-anarchist critiques of race, class and hierarchy, and Reinhardt Koselleck’s multiple temporalities. Settler colonial theory frames the process of assimilation as Italians had arrived on genocided lands built on black labor. Intersectional theory explores how Italians race and class transformed with each other. Koselleck’s multiple temporalities will break the linearity of the assimilation story since it argues multiple historical times exist during historical moments. Using Black anarchist critiques, I will distinguish oppression from exploitation, and investigate how Italians were exploited and oppressed, and how this existed in multiple times and changed as many Italians assimilated. Meta-modernist theory is the bow that ties this together creating a new narrative that is flexible, pluralistic, and champions multiplicity. These methods are used in framing the history, and case study of this project.

The third chapter is a case study, and will serve as the bulk of primary research for this project. It will investigate the Columbus symbol and the meaning it has for some Italian Americans. Through it, we will investigate how Italian Americans have traveled from a position of exploitation to joining a white-settler myth entrenched in oppression. This will be done through primary source analysis of recent documents released by major Italian American organizations and groups. So far my research has uncovered that the major Italian American organizations have latched onto the Columbus symbol for multiple reasons. Firstly, to create a cohesive symbol that

is projected onto the entire Italian American community. Secondly, to create homogenized experience that is mainly a migration story. Thirdly, to uncover how Italian/American leaders wrote themselves into the American colonial project not as latecomers, but as participants from the start.

The fourth and final chapter of this project ties together the projects goals. It will synthesize the previous chapters and open the door for other scholars to think and inquire about new ways of exploring history and concepts of Italian/Americans and race in America. I want to uncover how assimilation became possible for Italian Americans with a focus on the part that race had played in it. I do not want to present a linear narrative, but instead illuminate the complexity of the assimilation process, and unleash it from the cosmic strings of inevitability, by demonstrating the historical fluidity and multiplicity of Italians and the America racial experience. In order to accomplish this, meta-modern theory is utilized. It takes the deconstructive methods of postmodernism, to reconstruct narratives and layer them in a holistic sense while drawing out themes from which activists and scholars can learn from.

***Lignaggio: what's already said***

*“History teaches, but it has no pupils.” – Antonio Gramsci*

It was sophomore year. Wright Tech was a vocational high school composed mostly of ethnic and racial minorities: 50% African American, 40% Hispanic, and 10% everything else. The whiter kids were picked on sometimes – as it goes with power and race. In high school, I never understood why I was not bullied. Everyone assumed I was Latino. My dark hair, eyes, and olive skin helped me pass. A Puerto Rican friend asked me, at a prep rally, “which country is your family from?” I replied, “We are Italian. I am white.” He then looks at me half-confused, “Italians ain’t white.” At 15, for the first time in my life, I had to grapple with what being Italian in America meant. At this point of my life, most Italian/Americans I knew lived in the nice parts of town, generally had, and did all the same things expected from white Americans.<sup>2</sup>

Fast-forward 8 years. An African American friend and I are sitting in my car, in front of his house, in a black neighborhood. We were reminiscing about Wright Tech, when all of a sudden a flash of red and blue lights went off. We were just sitting. Two white police officers approach us and authoritatively asked what we were doing. My African American friend went stiff and I confidently pull my ID out when they asked for it. As soon as they saw my last name, their authoritative demeanor changed. Now – I was white.

These two anecdotes, along with many others in the Italian/American ethnic experience, demonstrate that race and ethnicity are influx for many Italian/Americans. Even though Italian/Americans benefit from whiteness, they are not always coded that way. This chapter has multiple goals. First is to overview the scholarship on Italian/Americans and race. Secondly, by viewing the scholarship, we can ask why has race for Italian/Americans been so complicated? Race and ethnicity for Italian/American is complicated because race is socially constructed, the

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<sup>2</sup> These things include: nice vacations, big houses with garages and backyards, plans for college etc.

scholarship that defines these things is divided, and because concepts of race/ethnicity are constantly changing.

The scholarship on Italian/Americans relating to race and ethnicity has fluctuated. In the 1970s and 80s texts on assimilation were abundant. The pinnacle of this was presented in Richard Alba's 1985 essay, *The Twilight of Ethnicity*, where he argued that Italian/Americans have assimilated and their ethnicity would and was being shed off. Many scholars since then have argued against Alba's thesis. Starting from his text is a requirement when discussing Italian/Americans and race. One of Alba's fiercest critics was Rudolph Vecoli; he responded with *Are Italian Americans Just White Folk?* Vecoli challenged notions of whiteness and questioned the consequences of accepting an assimilation narrative. Fast forward, Fred Gardaphé built off Vecoli in several ways and argued that Italian/Americans may be white now but it was not always that way. In the mid-2000s, however, the Guglielmo siblings and others, in *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made In America*, reached a consensus that Italian/Americans are white and have always been – even if Italian/America's had not understood the consequences and benefits of whiteness. Finally, in the past few years, scholars Peter G Vellon has argued that Italian/Americans, at least historically, traversed in an “in-between” status.

In *The Twilight of Ethnicity*, Richard Alba argues that Italian/Americans have entered the “twilight of ethnicity” through a process of boundary changes. Alba argues that “the importance of boundary-shifting processes, as opposed to assimilation at the individual level only, and that these shifts require for their explanation the invocation of historical contingencies, rooted in structural changes external to the group.”<sup>3</sup> Essentially, it is important to understand what being

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<sup>3</sup> Alba, Richard. January 1985. "The Twilight of Ethnicity?" *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 135-158. 134

American, or in this case white, means through time and place and how this is informed by structural changes in society. He follows this up by maintaining, “it is assimilation accomplished through a change in ethnic boundaries, either through a weakening to reduce their salience or through a shift that removes a previously recognized distinction.”<sup>4</sup> Therefore, these boundary changes remove ethnic distinctions. He then wraps this concept up by arguing that: “boundary changes mean changes to ethnicity as well.”<sup>5</sup> A shift in a boundary change also means a shift in ethnicity. Think of the popular narrative of Italians rising from working class “ethnic other” to middle class “whites.” As Italians in America acquired more wealth and power in America, they became “un-othered” because the boundaries of what “white” and “ethnic other” have shifted. Alba explores this history further.

Alba contends that assimilation, at first, seemed improbable. He begins by pointing out that when arriving, in regards to assimilation, “the prospects for Italians seemed bleak... on the basis of American reactions to them. The Italian group arrived in a period when racial ideologies were widespread in the United States; and its arrival served to stimulate their further development.”<sup>6</sup> So assimilation seemed unlikely on arrival, and that the unlikelihood expanded as more Italians arrived. He elaborates further: “It would go much too far to say that Italians were viewed as non-whites, but their color position was problematic. This is evident in the common epithet for them, 'guinea,' which was derived from a term referring originally to slaves from the western coast of Africa.”<sup>7</sup> Here Alba enforces the white on arrival narrative, but highlights that the phenotype of Italians created some difficulties. However, this was superseded in the 1940s.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 135

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 136

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 139

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

Alba argues that World War II provided Italian/Americans the chance to assimilate. Alba maintains that: “A frequent response on the part of the ethnics was a push toward further assimilation. Ethnics had high rates of enlistment in the military, and there was massive adoption of American citizenship by the foreign-born... Movement toward acculturation is evident in the waning of the foreign language press that occurred during the war.”<sup>8</sup> According to Alba, this acculturation was twofold through rise of citizenship and loss of language. Alba contends that this lead to a more “fluid perception” of white ethnics. He concludes this era by arguing the following:

World War II stands as a watershed for European ethnics, partly because it lies at a fortuitous conjunction of forces - structural transformation of the labor force, demographic transition from the immigrant to the second generation among the ethnics of recent European origins, and a cultural relaxation of the attitudes towards ethnics - that served to fluidify the boundaries separating ethnics from old stock groups.<sup>9</sup>

Through a series of historical circumstances: 2<sup>nd</sup> generation born, adoption of English, rise of citizenship, the War, and cultural relaxation – Italian American were able to assimilate. This assimilation, along with a new marriage pattern, according to Alba, lead to the end of a distinct Italian identity.

Alba claims that Italians in America have reached the “twilight of ethnicity.” One of the factors he takes into consideration is marriage patterns. Alba writes:

Among those born before 1920, i.e., during the era of mass immigration, about 60 percent of this second generation chose spouses of wholly Italian percentage. But this strict endogamy falls off with each new cohort. Among men, a sharp drop occurs with the cohort born during the 1930s; for women, such a drop occurs with the cohort born in the next decade. This rapid change has, among men, closed the gap between the second and third generations.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 143

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 149

According to the stats of that era, as the generations continue, inter-marriage with other Europeans increased. This lead Alba to famously conclude that, “Italian Americans are on the verge of the twilight of their ethnicity. ‘Twilight’ appears an accurate metaphor for a stage when ethnic differences will remain visible, but only faintly so.”<sup>11</sup> Alba’s argument is that Italians are on the verge of no longer being a distinctly visible ethnicity. They fully assimilated, or are in the process of assimilation, and became, or are becoming, like any other European in America – white.<sup>12</sup>

Alba then concludes that contemporary Italians have reached a point of “symbolic ethnicity.”<sup>13</sup> He elaborates further, claiming that symbolic ethnicity “can range from a liking for pasta to a repudiation of criminal stereotypes - but the crucial point is that it is the individual who decides on the appropriate form. Such an ethnic identity is, in other words, a personal style, and not the manifestation of membership in an ethnic group.”<sup>14</sup> Essentially, if an Italian/American is a visible ethnic it is a personal choice, a performance; a white person performing their immigrant predecessor’s traditions. These conclusions drove Rudolf Vecoli to respond in opposition.

Rudolf Vecoli attacks the concept of whiteness and assimilation two-fold, firstly by addressing Alba’s argument. Vecoli points out that Alba “sought to resolve the contradiction... between high levels of ethnic identity with alleged low levels of actual ethnic involvement.”<sup>15</sup> Here he points out that Alba had an agenda to explain why Italians were ethnically active yet still white. Vecoli then retorts that, “It is Alba who condemned Italian Americans to the ‘twilight of

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 152

<sup>12</sup> Alba takes the white on arrival stance. As pointed to earlier he maintains that “It would go much too far to say that Italians were viewed as non-whites.” But he adds, on top of that, a loss of visible ethnicity. To summarize – a breakdown of his racial synopsis is: white on arrival, with the privileges that includes, but discriminated against; an assimilation (boundary change) during the War period followed by ethnic erasure and the becoming of a larger whiteness along with all other European Americans.

<sup>13</sup> Alba. 154

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 154

<sup>15</sup> Vecoli, Rudolph. Vol.13, No.2 (Summer 1995). "Are Italian Americans Just White Folk?" *Italian Americana* 149-161. 151

ethnicity.”<sup>16</sup> Vecoli is maintaining that the “twilight” is from Alba’s imagination, this relates partially to Vecoli’s thesis on how ethnicity is changing. Vecoli’s criticism of Alba relates to a deeper critique of the academy and its views on multiculturalism and race.<sup>17</sup>

Vecoli ferociously attacks elements of the academy for couching Italians, and other European Ethnics, in terms of whiteness. First, he claims that, “the neo-nationalists/assimilationists perceived European Americans ethnicity in general (and Italian American ethnicity in particular) as annoying distractions which did not need to be tolerated as did ethnicity among “people of color,” neo-Marxists dismissed “white ethnicity” as a smokescreen for racism.”<sup>18</sup> This is multifaceted. As Vecoli sees it, European ethnics are being dismissed two fold, as either annoying distractions or a cover up for racism, meanwhile non-European ethnics receive a tolerance that European ones do not. Secondly, he contends that “the American version of multiculturalism, certain ‘preferred minorities’ are to be nurtured by the benign rays (and funds) of multiculturalism while ‘others’ are condemned to the eternal night of non-groupness.”<sup>19</sup> Continuing from his earlier argument, other ethnics gain promotion and funds while European ethnics are pushed to: non-personhood.” This concept of “non-personhood” is a crux to much of his argument and will come up later. Finally, Vecoli sums up why there is an attack on European ethnics:

Drawing eclectically upon postmodern, semiotic, and feminist theories, American multiculturalism in its more extreme forms has as its agenda the radical transformation of the polity and curriculum of American universities and other institutions as well. Given their project of deconstructing patriarchy, racism, and capitalism, which are identified with European-American male domination, multiculturalists privilege (to use one of their favorite terms) the literatures, histories, and cultures of ‘people of color’ and of the Third World. Meanwhile, the

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> “The Academy,” as I use it, is the scholarship, the universities, and the intellectuals.

<sup>18</sup> Vecoli. 150

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. 152

ethnicities of European Americans are suspect as an ideological cover for racial and sexual exploitation.<sup>20</sup>

Vecoli blames certain methodologies and ideologies for literally whitewashing European ethnics. To add insult to injury, Vecoli claims that any mention of European ethnics' links to oppressive ideologies associated with The West. The academy is not the only source of power whitewashing Italian American's according to Vecoli.

Vecoli argues that the American government is also to blame for whitewashing Italian/American's. He points to a 1977 Federal law that regulated race to five groups: "White, not of Hispanic origin; Black, not of Hispanic origin; Hispanic, regardless of race; American Indian or Alaskan Native; and Asian or Pacific Islander."<sup>21</sup> Vecoli criticizes this because these categories do not have any historical or biological basis. Next, He contends that this act has "legitimated the five-part division of the American people."<sup>22</sup> This forcing, from the top down, has consequences for European ethnics.

Vecoli argues that the contemporary culture and law have pushed Italian/Americans to "shadowlands of peoplehood." He maintains that, "(the) 'white' option automatically excludes (him) from the multicultural umbrella with all its perks, but even more by the impudence of those who would deny me my history, my culture, my identity and relegate me to the realm of non-being."<sup>23</sup> Vecoli, as seen here, sees whiteness as a homogenizing force that erases ethnic history and culture. He is not looking at through a strict lens of privilege though. Vecoli understands that whites are higher in the American imposed racial hierarchy, so instead he laments over how it

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Note: Though this seems a reactionary, Vecoli was a Marxist and he was the first to introduce the concept of concept of *contadini* migration; working class, landless, Italians migrating for economic reasons.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 153

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. 153. Note: The Marxist in Vecoli criticizes the law for "totally ignoring class as a determinant of disadvantage."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 153; () mine

gobbles up the identity of European Americans; or as he argues: “finding myself (and my people) consigned to the shadowlands of peoplehood.”<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, his schema does not create a static ethnicity.

Vecoli argues that ethnicity is not static and chastises scholars for trying to compare contemporary Italian/Americans with those on arrival. He argues that, “what is essential now as it always has been is a subjective sense of peoplehood based in common memories, and manifested in symbols which evoke those memories (a flag, a ritual, a song, a fig tree).”<sup>25</sup> Ethnicity, in his perspective, is fluid, dynamic, and evolving. It changes over time but has some shared trans-generational semiotic; such the Italian flag or meatballs. Vecoli follows this up by arguing: “Suffice it to say, that to be an Italian American today obviously means something very different from what it meant fifty or seventy-five years ago.”<sup>26</sup> To counter Alba, it is not Italian/Americans who are changing and becoming white, but, instead what it means to be Italian/American has now changed. Vecoli is not the only person who sought to de-bleach Italian/Americans.

In a series of two essays, that are companions and in continuation with each other, Fred Gardaphé argues that Italians were not always white. Gardaphé points out that many scholars have taken a narrative of distancing Italian-American’s from their history with minorities. Gardaphé approaches this by analyzing the concept of “making it.”<sup>27</sup> Making it, in Italian American culture often means shifting from working class to middle class and moving from the cities to the suburbs. He argues that “making it” cost Italian/Americans dearly. Gardaphé contends:

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 154

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 158

<sup>27</sup> Gardaphé, Fred L. 2002. "We Weren't Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian/American Literature." *CUNY Academic Works*. [http://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc\\_pubs/198.3](http://academicworks.cuny.edu/qc_pubs/198.3)

“making it” in this country happens at the expense “unmaking” ethnic identity and allegiance to old world customs and behavior... “making it” means moving from working class, to middle, to upper class, sooner or later we must understand that upward mobility means ascribing to the cultural values that belong to each class and to the category of whiteness; ancestral traditions become ancillary side shows that we can foster only in our spare time. For Italian Americans, “making it” has come with a high price tag. It has cost them the language of their ancestors--the main means by which history is preserved and heritage passed on from one generation to the next. They’ve had to trade-in or hide any customs which have been depicted as quaint, but labeled as alien, in order to prove equality to those above them on the ladder of success.<sup>28</sup>

In Gardaphé’s schema, Italian/Americans became white as they shifted from working class to middle class. Gardaphé links class with ethnicity, and for European Americans, becoming white, and gaining all the advantages that comes with whiteness, means subscribing to a model, or behaviors, that has nothing to do with their heritage.<sup>29</sup> In other words, conform to the ways and customs of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant and gain all these systemic advantages. Gardaphé links this to Italian/Americans behaviors.

Gardaphé argues, however, that Italian/Americans have become a “different kind of white.” He argues that they are “whites on a leash.”<sup>30</sup> How this works is multifaceted. Gardaphé writes:

And as long as they [Italian/Americans] behave themselves (act white), as long as they accept the images of themselves as presented in the media (don't cry defamation) and as long as they stay within corporate and cultural boundaries (don't identify with other minorities) they will be allowed to remain white. This behavior has led to Italian Americans being left out of most discussions of multiculturalism.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid." 3-4

<sup>29</sup> Similar to Vecoli, we see Gardaphé highlighting and emphasizing a loss of culture heritage as part of enculturation.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. [] brackets mine. Vecoli also discusses how Italian/Americans are excluded from multiculturalism.

Essentially, as long as Italian/Americans do not complain about the way society, more specifically capitalist society, treats them they can remain in the club of whiteness. Gardaphé contends this has led to forms of discrimination against Italian/Americans because of how they are portrayed in media; for example, as mobsters or buffoonish street kids. Gardaphé then goes as far as to argue this media perception has “impoverished American minds” so much, that it has forced Italian/Americans to behave in certain ways (as whites) to distance themselves from these negative images.<sup>32</sup> Parallel to Vecoli, Gardaphé reasons that this has contributed to the erasure of an Italian/American identity.

In his follow up essay, *Invisible People: Shadows and Light in Italian American Culture*, Gardaphé claims that Italian/Americans are “invisible people.” He writes: “Italian Americans became invisible the moment they could pass themselves as white. And since then they have gone to great extremes to avoid being identified as anything but white.”<sup>33</sup> Corresponding to his “whites on the leash” argument, Gardaphé presents an image of Italian/Americans culturally flagellating themselves to become white. Gardaphé contends that this hasn’t always been the case and that Italian/Americans have a “hidden history.”

This “hidden history” is essential to Gardaphé’s argument. He goes as far to argue that Italian/Americans have a “history of being people of color.”<sup>34</sup> He summarizes and analyzes a history of labor discrimination, mass lynching, KKK attacks, political cartoons, and immigration laws to support his claim. He maintains that, “Italian Americans share much in common with other minority cultures, those commonalities have been hidden from the consciousness by selective

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 5. Gardaphé calls this process a “covert techniques of discrimination.”

<sup>33</sup> Gardaphé, Fred L. 2010. "Invisible People: Shadow and Light in Italian American Culture." *In Anti-Italianism: Essays on Prejudice*, by William J Connell and Fred L. Gardaphé, 1-10. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 1

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

portrayals of American history.”<sup>35</sup> Like Vecoli, in Gardaphé’s argument, we see that there has been a deliberate erasure of the Italian/American cultural experience in order for the group to collectively become white. In Vecoli’s case, it is top down and mostly from the state, whereas Gardaphé sees it coming from media and in personal behaviors. Gardaphé laments over the consequences of this cultural erasure.

This erasure, of an ethnic Italian/American identity, has had negative consequences according to Gardaphé. He argues that many Italian/Americans “have adopted the attitudes and stances of the dominant culture of racism, a culture that maintains control by dividing by differences and uniting on illusions of similarity.”<sup>36</sup> According to Gardaphé, since many Italian/Americans have adopted a white cultural model, they end up perpetuating the racist structures that suspend it as a model. However, he remains somewhat optimistic.

Gardaphé reasons that this hidden history presents some potential for anti-racist politics and because of their “insecure position of whiteness,” Italian/Americans can be at the forefront of challenging white supremacy. He argues that, “Italians have certainly complicated the notion of whiteness in America so that they are neither totally white, and it is this in-between status, that makes them likely candidates for assisting in the abolition of whiteness in the United States.”<sup>37</sup> To summarize, Gardaphé perceives whiteness as artificial and imposed – and that Italians are actually a people of color – if they were to learn their history and re-claim their ethnic identity, they could be at the forefront in smashing white supremacy from the European descent side. As the 2000’s rolled on, however, other scholars took up contrary positions.

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Gardaphé, “We Weren’t Always White: Race and Ethnicity in Italian/American Literature.” 21

With the release of *Are Italians White?*, the Guglielmo siblings, starting with Jennifer, argued that Italians were white on arrival. J. Guglielmo contends that Italians were unaware of the “color line” when first arriving to America.<sup>38</sup> However, she contends that Italians learned quickly that being white had advantages. These included “assured preferential access to citizenship, property, satisfying work, livable wages, decent housing, political power, social status, and a good education, among other privileges.”<sup>39</sup> J. Guglielmo further contends that white, “was both a category into which they were most often placed, and also a consciousness they both adopted and rejected.”<sup>40</sup> Not only were Italians, in most cases, white when they walked off their ships, but also that many adapted this identity because they saw the advantages of it. This is the crux of their argument. She does, however, add a final caveat. She claims that: “Italians were positioned as white in the most critical of ways immediately upon arrival in the United States, even while they endured racial prejudice.”<sup>41</sup> The nuance of this position is twofold. On arrival, Italians benefited from White Supremacy systemic structures, but faced an ethnic, or racial, prejudice because of their *Italianità*.<sup>42</sup> Thomas Guglielmo fleshes out these arguments.

Thomas Guglielmo firmly takes the position of Italian/Americans as white on arrival. The crux of his argument is as follows:

Italians’ many perceived racial inadequacies aside, they were still largely accepted as white by the widest variety of people and institutions.... This widespread acceptance was reflected most concretely in Italians’ ability to immigrate to the United States and become citizens, work certain jobs, live in certain neighborhoods (etc)... from the moment they arrived in the United States – and forever after –

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<sup>38</sup> Guglielmo, Jennifer. 2003. "White Lies, Dark Truths." In *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made In America*, by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, 1-16. New York: Routledge. (3)

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>42</sup> *Italianess*

Italians were consistently and unambiguously placed on the side of the former (white).<sup>43</sup>

Guglielmo's argument is systemic. Italians are white, since they systemically had access to things that non-whites did not have access to. On top of that, T. Guglielmo contends, "Italians were not white on arrival, not so much because how they viewed themselves, but because of the way others viewed and treated them."<sup>44</sup> Whiteness is not a feeling or choice for T. Guglielmo, but is instead the way systems of power perceive people. He also adds a caveat of racial inadequacies separate from whiteness.

How race is composed in America, is important to T. Guglielmo, and he breaks it down into multiple parts. He argues that "Race was not (and is not) completely about ideas, ideology, ideologies, and identity. It is also about location in a social system and its consequences."<sup>45</sup> Here he further cements that race is primarily systemic. On top of that, T. Guglielmo claims that there is a disparity between races: Mediterranean, Celtic, Hebrew, etc. – and color:

For Italians they had North or South Italian as a race and white as a color... the race/color distinction was crystal clear throughout the United States when it came to resources and rewards... while Italians suffered for their supposed racial undesirability as Italians, South Italians, and so forth they still benefited in countless ways from their privileged color status as whites.<sup>46</sup>

In his schema, Italians, especially Italians from the south, have room for, and did, suffer from racial discrimination – but they benefited from the structures that reward whiteness the color. T. Guglielmo then breaks down why Italians were considered white.

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<sup>43</sup> Guglielmo, Thomas. 2003. "No Color Barrier." In *Are Italians White?: How Race Is Made In America*, by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, 29-43. New York: Routledge. 30

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 30

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 31

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 32-33

In T. Guglielmo's observations, Italians were white for three reasons. Firstly, "Scientists, for as long as long as they had attempted to construct racial/color taxonomies, placed Italians firmly within the white category."<sup>47</sup> Even if the early racial theorists put Mediterranean – for example, below Nordic racially – they were still part of a broader racial conception of "white" since the world, and its racial groups, were split into color categories: white, yellow, red, black. Secondly, he contends that, "the history of the Italian peninsula – particularly that of the Roman Empire and Renaissance – also supported the classifications of Italians as white."<sup>48</sup> So the rich and long history of the peoples of the Italian peninsula and its peripheries places it in the white group. Finally, he maintains that: "Italians were able to acquire American citizenship when other groups could not."<sup>49</sup> For T. Guglielmo, it comes down to the systemic advantages Italians benefited from. In addition, to him, it is clear that Italians in America benefited from systemic whiteness. Since the work of the Guglielmo – critical race studies for Italian/Americans has exploded with Peter Vellon producing some of its best literature.

In his book, *A Great Conspiracy Against Our Race*, Vellon counters T. Guglielmo's thesis and re-racializes Italian/Americans. Firstly, Vellon parrots part of Guglielmo's opinion by arguing that Italians were, "white enough to enter the country and naturalize as American citizens, consistent alarm over their suitability to become full members of American republic included concerns regarding race and whiteness."<sup>50</sup> Complementary to the Guglielmos, Vellon agrees that Italians had access to systemic advantages. However, as a group, he argues that Italian/Americans traversed in an "in-between" status.<sup>51</sup> Vellon directly challenges T. Guglielmo's color and race

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 40

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 41

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Vellon, Peter G. 2014. *A Great Conspiracy against Our Race: Italian Immigrant Newspapers and the Construction of Whiteness in the Early 20th Century*. New York: New York University. 5

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

dichotomy when he argues: “Although southern Italians enjoyed privileges based upon legal definitions as white, their consistent depiction as swarthy and frequent comparisons to African Americans, as well as the Italian language press’s own correlation of race, civilization, and color, complicate the notion that race and color can be so easily divorced.”<sup>52</sup> Therefore, yes, Italians reap the benefits of white privilege in many ways; however, because of their “in-between” status they still suffered some oppression. However, Vellon investigates how a mass perception of whiteness came about in Italian American culture.

The gist of Vellon’s thesis is that whiteness was projected and constructed, from the top-down, onto Italian/Americans from the community’s mainstream press. These newspapers were owned by *prominenti*.<sup>53</sup> This group consisted of the prominent members of Italian/American society and is best described as the Italian/American bourgeoisie. Vellon claims that the mainstreams press functioned as an institution bent on “defending the race.”<sup>54</sup> The crux of his thesis is that “mainstream, or prominenti-owned newspapers, constructed an identity as Italian American and white.”<sup>55</sup> Vellon claims that the mainstream press was originally sympathetic to African-Americans as victims of white-racism, but that changed over time.<sup>56</sup> He then explains how this unfolded.

Vellon reasons that this ascent into whiteness came in several stages. First during World War 1 when the *prominenti* advocated a class based Italian identity seeped in the *Risorgimento* and that was followed up with arguments for full inclusion of Italians as Americans, “based on an

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>53</sup> Prominents

<sup>54</sup> Vellon. 3

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 3

imagined ‘Italian’ heritage of civilization and whiteness.”<sup>57</sup> Second, was a reaction to the migration of African Americans northward.<sup>58</sup> There was now a darker group nearby. Thirdly, Vellon maintains that in order to justify Italian worthiness: “Newspapers highlighted community events, defended Italians from Americans nativism, and sponsored campaigns to erect monuments to figures such as Christopher Columbus and Giovanni da Verranzano in the process contributed significantly to an emerging racial identity as Italian that had never existed in the old country.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, with *prominenti* newspapers like *Il Progresso* supporting Mussolini, “the Fascist regime in Italy... colonial expansionism, and impact on Fascism on Italian American community emboldened Italian American assertions of whiteness.”<sup>60</sup> In all, Vellon perceives the ascent into whiteness as a top down project implemented through a bourgeois press. He expands upon this in later work.

In “Italian Americans and Race During The Era of Mass Immigration,” Vellon analyses what he calls “a temporary scar ‘as in-between’ immigrants.”<sup>61</sup> He argues, “what set southern and eastern Europeans apart from those Europeans who had preceded them had to do with biological traits.”<sup>62</sup> Therefore, discrimination was based on genotype. He does concede, however, that Italians were given the status of “free white persons,” but contends, on the other hand, “southern Italian immigrants often occupied an in-between racial position during this period. Racially set apart, and deemed inferior, from northern and western European immigrants.”<sup>63</sup> Vellon notes that Italians were considered a “threat to American society specifically due to their questionable race

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 12-13

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 129

<sup>61</sup> Vellon, Peter G. 2017. "Italian Americans and Race During the Era of Mass Immigration." In *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, by William J. Connell and Stanislao G. Pugliese, 212-222. New York: Routledge. 217

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 217

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 214

and color, and more broadly, because of their ascribed in-between status.”<sup>64</sup> He also points to the in-time frequent comparisons between Italian/Americans and African Americans, which was, “meant to stigmatize southern Italians.”<sup>65</sup> Vellon does not seek to prove whether Italian/Americans are white or not, but instead illuminates upon the discrimination, not systemic racism, that Italians faced when migrating to America as “in-between” immigrants. This degree of nuance is shared in the latest white ethnic theory.

In “White Ethnicity,” Yiorgos Anagnostou calls for a “critical rethinking of white ethnicity.”<sup>66</sup> Anagnostou argues, “white-ethnicity discourse routinely deploys ‘white’ as a blanket identity in reference to Americans of European origin.”<sup>67</sup> In vein of Vecoli, Anagnostou questions the validity of homogenous category of “white.” He argues that the:

two narratives—critical studies of whiteness and symbolic ethnicity—work dialectically to construe a single narrative of white ethnicity as a site of privilege. In this function, they diminish the range and significance of ethnic identities and produce a monolithic construction of white ethnics as ahistorical and anti-people of color.<sup>68</sup>

This is a critique of both Alba’s model of ethnic performance and Guglielmo’s white essentialist argument. Anagnostou, again, falls into the Vecoli camp of questioning a homogenous whiteness and challenging the thinking of the academy. He also points out how both these theories work in tandem towards historical inaccuracy, and a predestined position towards white supremacy. His article does not venture to answer the question of what it means to be white, but instead probes to better understand white ethnicity. What does he suggest then?

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 215

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 217; he does however note that Italians did not suffer from systemic racism.

<sup>66</sup> Anagnostou, Yiorgos. Summer 2013. “White Ethnicity.” *Italian American Review* 3.2 99-128. 101

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 100; He even mentions that most white ethnics do not call themselves white ethnics – therefore questioning the usefulness of white ethnics as a group and word.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 101-102

Anagnostou's goal is to "reclaim complexity for ethnicity."<sup>69</sup> To do this, he looks at some of the different approaches scholars have taken in ethnic studies. He lists a few:

Some scholars may privilege diaspora cultural connections; others may look into cultural expressivity at a local level; still others may adopt a transnational perspective connecting issues of culture and race. Others would continue centering on whiteness or working on macro trends associated with demographics and large-scale patterns.<sup>70</sup>

Anagnostou argues that this interdisciplinary approach is beneficiary. He maintains that this "plurality decenters white ethnicity as a bounded category."<sup>71</sup> In itself, this dismantles the metanarrative theories championed by Alba and the Guglielmos. He then concludes by arguing that: "This decentering and the ensuing fragmentation pose the challenge for the practitioners to speak to each other across paradigms and disciplines, to establish a dialog across area, ethnic, diaspora, and global studies."<sup>72</sup> The complexity of approaches provides a complexity for ethnicity in Anagnostou's proposal. Do demographics match the theory?

An aspect that these scholars have overlooked is how Italian/Americans have changed the way they have identified racially and ethnically over the past 30 years. Using the data collected by Vincenzo Milione, Itala Pelizzoli, and Carmine Pizzirusso – a different picture of an evolving ethnic and racial identity is presented. Firstly, "The net growth of the Italian-American population since 1980 has been 43% with Italian Americans of mixed ancestry growth doubling to 98%. The single ancestry had no net growth." This increase of Italians in America not from a large influx of Italians coming in, but is instead a result of more Americans choosing to identify as Italian.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 123

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

Secondly, that means more people of mixed heritage are identifying as Italian/American. The numbers, in regards to “minority” mixing, have doubled in most cases:

Younger Italian Americans are twice as likely to have mixed ancestry with Central and South American ethnicities (7.9%) than the older Italian Americans (4.4%)... The same is the case of Asian ancestry with overall ancestry proportion of 3.4%. Younger Italian-American mixed ancestry population has nearly tripled the portion of the older Italian Americans with Asian ethnicities (1.5%)... Similarly, Italian Americans with the African ancestry with an overall ancestry proportion of 2.0%. Younger Italian-American mixed ancestry population has nearly tripled the portion of Italian Americans with African ethnicities (2.8%) than the older Italian Americans (1.1%).<sup>73</sup>

What does this tell us? First, that Italians are mixing with minorities in larger number, secondly that these Italians of mixed heritage identify with their Italian heritage, and thirdly that what it means to be Italian American is changing from a monolithic single place of ancestry – mostly based in Europe. If anything, does this not say that Italianess is cultural rather than racial? Or, alternatively, that race and ethnicity are not static and change over time?

There are some points of contention that need consideration when going forward on this subject. First is an intersectional understanding of prejudice, discrimination, and racism. Prejudice is personal and internal. Discrimination is acting on prejudice. Racism, on the other hand, is a systemization of discrimination. On top of that, another question to ask is: does systemic racism have degrees with in it? Have Italian/Americans been victims of systemic racism to various degrees in the past? They most certainly are not now; and if anything they are currently the beneficiaries, and in many cases vocal advocates, of white supremacy; although that does not make them immune to either discrimination of prejudice. We also need to ask who has the power to define what race is and how does race, itself, change over time? Some methodologies that may be

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 19-21

helpful for answering these questions include critical realism – which separates and intertwines the real, the actual, and experience – and meta-modernism, which can provide the deconstructionism/anti-hegemony of post-modernism while maintaining the value of culture narratives that shape and inform ethnicity in dialectally.

To conclude, the discourse, and all its polemics, provides insights on how Italians in America are viewed racially. Alba, though antiquated makes us think about the consequences of leaving the city, to the suburbs, for European Americans – and to what degree is ethnicity is performative. Vecoli, on the other hand, has us rethink multiculturalism and the cost of whiteness with its hegemonic and homogeneous effects on ethnic identity. Gardaphé asks how can Italian/Americans use their history of racial ambiguity to dismantle white supremacy. The Guglielmos remind us how whiteness works systemically – and how it makes or breaks certain groups. Vellon provides insights into how whiteness as a concept that is socially constructed, especially from the top down. Anagnostou argues us that we should be interdisciplinary when approaching race and that this diversity, in itself, can prevent a hegemony. Moreover, finally, looking at the recent numbers, what being Italian/American means is changing racially/ethnically. Race and ethnicity for Italian/American is complicated because race is socially constructed, the scholarship that defines these things is divided, and because concepts of race/ethnicity are constantly changing.

***Decostruzione e ricostruzione: means for a new understanding***

*“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.” – Audre Lorde*

The renaissance luminaire, Leonardo Da Vinci, is often credited for stating, “he who loves practice without theory is like the sailor who boards ship without a rudder and compass and never knows where he may cast.”<sup>74</sup> Theory is not everything, and at times secondary, especially when dealing with structures like white supremacy. However, it provides useful framing and language when making a coherent argument.

Some of the theories and methods that are proposed here are not commonly associated with each other. Individually, each is inadequate as well. The best way to think of them, as they are used here, is as a tool box. One cannot construct or de-construct a house with only a hammer. However, with a hammer, nails, drills, etc. one can build a more stable house. This chapter explores settler colonial theory, intersectional theory, critical realism, meta-modernism Black-anarchist critiques of race, class and hierarchy, and Reinhart Koselleck’s multiple temporalities. Settler colonial theory frames the process of assimilation, as Italians arrived on genocided lands built on black labor. Intersectional theory explores how Italian’s race and class transformed with each other. Koselleck’s multiple temporalities breaks the linearity of the assimilation story, since it argues that multiple historical times exist during historical moments. Black anarchist critiques distinguish oppression from exploitation, and helps investigate how Italians were exploited and oppressed, and how this existed in multiple times and changed as many Italians assimilated. Meta-modern theory ties these methods together creating a new narrative that flexible, plural, and champions multiplicity.

Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin is a former Black Panther who converted to anarchism while imprisoned. His long essay, *Anarchism and The Black Revolution*, was ground breaking when it

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<sup>74</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/leonardo\\_da\\_vinci\\_140595](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/leonardo_da_vinci_140595)

was first published in the 1990s because it brought an explicitly racial lens to anarchist theory. He also helped revive a proletariat perspective to a period where leftist politics took on a post-modern standpoint. In this work, Komboa'Ervin, explains how race in America functions and how it emerged not separate from capitalist class system but in conjunction with it.<sup>75</sup>

During the early colonial period, the American colonies had an indentured servitude system and it is here where Komboa'Ervin, traces the origins of American white supremacy. Since indentured contracts did not see color, since race was not yet formalized, Europeans and Africans toiled together. Seeing the potential, soon to be racial, solidarity among toiling classes the white elites freed European servants and granted them “a special status as ‘whites’ and thus a stake in the system of oppression.”<sup>76</sup> This concept evolves over time and that status of white, or how being white, changes over time. It works in conjunction with the slave system since it granted social mobility “on the backs of the African slaves, who were super-exploited.”<sup>77</sup> By super exploited Komboa'Ervin, means African Americans are not only exploited as workers, but also because of their race. According to Komboa'Ervin, this correspondingly created a “dual-tier form of labor, which exploited the African, but also trapped white labor.”<sup>78</sup> This breaking of the soon to be working class entrapped whites into wage labor. This deal with the devil is where the American conception of white emerged. What are the benefits for the elites then?

Komboa'Ervin explains why the nation's elite would conceive such a system and explores the consequences of this. He argues that the, “Capitalist class is able to use racism to drive down

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<sup>75</sup> “Komboa'Ervin, Lorenzo. 2016. "Anarchism and the Black Revolution." In *Black Anarchism*, by Black Rose Anarchist Federation, 10-71. E-Book: Black Rose Anarchist Federation. The fate of the white working class has always been bound with the condition of Black workers.” 10

<sup>76</sup> 10

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

the wages of individual segments of the working class by inciting racial antagonism and forcing a fight for jobs and services. This division is a development that ultimately undercuts the living standards of all workers.”<sup>79</sup> Essentially, the working classes cannot cohesively challenge the emerging capitalist system if they have antagonism amongst each other. What does this mean for African Americans?

Though Komboa’Ervin argues that the white working classes are exploited under American capitalism, he also maintains that there is a uniqueness to the non-white form of exploitation and oppression. He argues that “this nation has developed with the exploitation of African labour and the maintenance of an internal colony, Blacks and other non-white peoples are oppressed both as members of the working class and as a racial nationality. As Africans in America, they are a distinct people, hounded and segregated in U.S. society.”<sup>80</sup> This is linked with Komboa’Ervin’s concept that people of color are under “dual forms of oppression,” because they experience class and racial tensions. As he notes, “whites are not being herded into ghetto housing; removed from or prohibited from entering professions; deprived of decent education; forced into malnutrition and early death; subjected to racial violence and police repression, forced to suffer disproportionate levels of unemployment, and other forms of racial oppression.”<sup>81</sup> Komboa’Ervin’s word choice is important and warrants some attention. Here he is distinguishing from exploitation, which has to do with labor, and introduces the concept of oppression, which is explicitly racial. As he notes, “for Blacks the oppression starts with birth and childhood... It is the systematic, all pervasive reality today!”<sup>82</sup> What is this system then?

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 13

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

White supremacy is the system that makes these dual forms of oppression and racialization of nonwhites possible. Komboa'Ervin contends that “white skin privilege is a form of domination by Capital over white labor as well as oppressed nationality labor, not just providing material incentives to ‘buy off’ white workers and set them against Black and other oppressed workers. This explains the obedience of white labor to Capitalism and the State.”<sup>83</sup> According to him, at its essence white supremacy is linked to capitalism and used by capitalist elites to buy off white workers. Komboa'Ervin continues, “After centuries of political and social indoctrination, they feel their privileged position is just and proper, and what is more has been ‘earned.’”<sup>84</sup> This sense of “earning,” according to Komboa'Ervin, has been used by capitalist elites to encourage whites to stand against civil rights, continue “super-exploitation,” and maintain imperialism. Whiteness, in America, is usually associated with Anglo-Saxons. Does Komboa'Ervin comment on white ethnics, the core of this project?

According to Komboa'Ervin, white ethnics have been designated a “super-nationality.” For example, instead of identifying with their various ethnicities – Italian, Irish, Greek, Welsh, etc. – they go by “white.” What is the point of this? Komboa'Ervin argues that “super-nationality (was) designed to inflate the social importance of European ethnics and to enlist them as tools in the Capitalist system of exploitation.”<sup>85</sup> In essence, white Americans shed off their ethnicity in order to receive the social and economic benefits that white supremacy offers under the current capitalist system. In order to liberate themselves, and people of color, from class exploitation, whites must dismantle this super nationality. Do other thinkers explore the origins of this concept, and its historic consequences to a greater extent?

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 17-8

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. brackets mine

*Settlers: The Mythology of the White the White Proletariat*, by J. Sakai, explores the origins of settler colonialism. It is considered a standard par read for most Americans who are interested in decolonizing movements. As a complete package, the book has issues. It is deterministic and pessimistic to great lengths. Never-the-less, there are some useful concepts that can be drawn from it.

What is settler colonialism then? Sakai argues that, “It is the absolute characteristic of settler society to be parasitic, dependent upon the super exploitation of oppressed peoples for its style of life.”<sup>86</sup> By parasitic, Sakai mean’s the robbery of indigenous land and the exploitation of mostly black and brown labor to cultivate it. The people who have benefited from this structure, according to him, are “whites.”

Seeing how “whites” benefit from a settler colony, how does this effect whiteness?

According to Sakai:

the very lowest layer of white society was lifted out of the proletariat by the privileges of belonging to the oppressor nation. Once these poor whites were raised off the fields and given the chance to help boss and police captive Afrikans, their rebellious days were over. The importance of this experience is that it shows the material basis for the lack of class consciousness by early Euro-American workers, and how their political consciousness was directly related to how much they shared in the privileges of the larger settler society. Further, the capitalists proved to their satisfaction that dissent and rebelliousness within the settler ranks could be quelled by increasing the colonial exploitation of other nations and peoples.<sup>87</sup>

So in exchange to being obedient to capitalism, “whites” joined into a racist system. Similar to Komboa’Ervin’s argument, capitalism plays a role in the construction of whiteness. In his schema, oppressed people built the foundations for America. For instance, African slaves in the East Coast,

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<sup>86</sup> Sakai, J. 2014. *Settlers: The Mythology of the White Proletariat*, From The Mayflower to Modern. Oakland: PM Press. 86

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. 25-26

Chinese labor in the west; “whites,” he argues, immigrated only after the foundations were laid down and only to gobble up the wealth. It is after land is cleared of inhabitants, and then cultivated on oppressed labor, is settler colonialism possible. How did this evolve over time?

Sakai argues that capitalism, via America expansion, needed “reinforcements” for its settler colonial project. He argues that:

Capitalism needed giant armies of settlers, waves and waves of new Europeans shock-troops to help conquer and hold new territory, to develop it for the bourgeoisie, and garrison it against the oppressed... Only the weight of masses of oppressors could provide the Euro-American bourgeoisie with the Empire they desired. This was fundamental element in the antagonistic, but symbolic, relationship of white masses to their rule.<sup>88</sup>

So the role of the white masses, in part, was to maintain this project for the ruling elite. He contends that the great migration of Europeans, to the American continent, “furnished the final element in hardening the settler class structures.”<sup>89</sup> Was this inevitable?

Though Sakai’s language and style seep with determinism, he notes that the structures of whiteness are not innate – and even though settler colonialism did happen, based on this “white” ideology – eastern and southern Europeans almost broke the system. With the rise of industrial unionism, Italian and eastern European labor began to challenge Capital. Sakai argues that it was as this historical juncture the capitalist elite decided “to ‘Americanize’ the new laboring masses, to tame them by absorbing them into settler Amerika, to remake them into citizens of Empire”<sup>90</sup> Sakai continues, “The ‘Hunky and ‘Dago’ could become ‘white’ (though barely) through Americanization if they pledged their loyalty to the U.S. Empire.”<sup>91</sup> In conclusion, whiteness is

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid. 55

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. 57

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 148

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. 173

not innate to Sakai. It was granted a historical moment in order to continue a capitalist project, which used settler colonialism as means to do this.

In the realm of activist politics, intersectional theory also plays an important role. The theory arose out of the grievances of the Combahee River Collective, who saw that feminism was mainly white and not addressing the issues of women of color. As the 80s unfolded, the term “intersectionality” was coined Kimberlé Crenshaw a professor of law. For the sake of brevity, this chapter will draw from YWBoston’s, an activist organization, summary of intersectionality because it captures the theory’s essence in simple and brief language.

What is intersectionality? According to YWBoston:

Intersectionality is a framework for conceptualizing a person, group of people, or social problem as affected by a number of discriminations and disadvantages. It takes into account people’s overlapping identities and experiences in order to understand the complexity of prejudices they face... Intersectionality recognizes that identity markers (e.g. “female” and “black”) do not exist independently of each other, and that each informs the others, often creating a complex convergence of oppression”

First and foremost, it breathes language into some of the concepts stated above explain levels of oppression in layers that intersect. Secondly it looks at how different identities shape and form each other, and their relationship to oppressive system; a layering of identity and its relationship with systems of oppression. Stick to the theme of layers, Reinhardt Koselleck theory of multiple temporalities complicates history, in a similar vein to the way intersectionality complicated feminism.

Reinhardt Koselleck was one of those historians who could not be placed in a theoretical box. Though steeped in continental philosophy, and contemporary to the poststructuralist types, he was not quite post-modern. According to historian John Zammito, whose essay on Koselleck this

chapter will draw from, Koselleck was interested in the “study of the conditions of possible histories.”<sup>92</sup> It opens up the future of possible histories since it moves away from teleology, such as Marxism, and also historicizes history. Koselleck’s theory has been called multiple temporalities.

What does multiple temporalities mean? Zammito define it as “a theory of the possibility of history as a discipline (that) depends upon a transcendental inquiry into the possibility of historical time—or rather, times.”<sup>93</sup> According to Koselleck, “History contains numerous differentiable layers which each undergo change sometimes faster sometimes slower, but always with varying rates of change.”<sup>94</sup> So history is layered. Zammito notes that, “Historical times consist of several layers that refer to each other reciprocally without being entirely dependent on one another”<sup>95</sup> Again, the purpose of this is to break away linear narratives into a history that has multiple possibilities unfolding into a future. What does Koselleck, mean by time?

Koselleck understanding of historical time is not that of numbers on the clock. This is not time, in the naturalist sense, such as the changing of the seasons. Historical time means where people are in a “space of experience” and have “horizon of expectation.”<sup>96</sup> Essentially, history has a human element where people are not only experiencing things, but they also have expectations what is further out. Where does this take place? According Koselleck, “The present notoriously can collapse to a vanishing point between an onrushing past and an unending future, but just as plausibly it can stand as the only actuality, in which past and future are simply modes of

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<sup>92</sup> Zammito, John. February 2004. "KOSELLECK'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORICAL TIME(S) AND THE PRACTICE OF HISTORY." *History and Theory* 43 124-135. 125

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.* 126. Brackets mine.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.* 129

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.* 129

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.* 128

possibility.”<sup>97</sup> It happens at each present, and at multiple layers. On top of that, since there is no linear direction in history, the future is open for possibility. Bringing this chapter to a close, meta-modernism will take this meta theory to a new conclusion.

What is meta-modernism? According to the anarchist cultural critic, Connor Owens, meta-modernism is, “the tradition of new sincerity and the focus on ‘reconstruction,’ as opposed to deconstruction... aiming to take onboard deconstructive and poststructuralist critiques, while still searching for what was good about the past and striving to reconstruct it in a new context... in it is a cautious hopefulness and a renewed sense of sincerity.”<sup>98</sup> This chapter will draw on the works of Hanzi Freinacht who is considered one of the leading theorists of meta-modernism outside of art.<sup>99</sup>

Freinacht provides a simple summary of what Meta-modernism in his essay, “The Difference Between Post- and Meta-modernism.” He describes it as “a synthesis of modernism and post-modernism – or rather, a protosynthesis, (a ‘proto’-synthesis because it acknowledges that whatever story we tell ourselves, it must be inconsistent and temporary). As Vermeulen and van der Akker writes, meta-modernism ‘oscillates’ between modernism and postmodernism.”<sup>100</sup> So it has the deconstruction of post-modernism, but also says that grand narratives are okay as long as we are aware that there are universal mechanisms pushing history along. Freinacht complements this in another piece when he states that meta-modernism is a “philosophy; a coherent but ultimately open-ended stance towards life, science, reality, spirituality, art, society

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Owens, Connor 2017. "Postmodernism in a Time of Monsters." Solarpunk Anarchist. <https://solarpunkanarchists.com/2018/02/01/whats-postmodernism-post-and-whats-post-postmodernism/>.

<sup>99</sup> See his 377 page book, *The Listening Society: A Metamodern Guide to Politics, Book One (Metamodern Guides) (Volume 1)*

<sup>100</sup> Freinacht, Hanzi. 2017. "The Difference Between Post- and Meta-modernism." *Metamoderna*. August 13.

and the human being.”<sup>101</sup> Like Koselleck, meta-modernism is opening up the future. Koselleck unchained the past and meta-modernism unchains the now.

In conclusion, each of these theories are potentially useful for expanding our understanding of race in Italian/American studies. Komboa’Ervin provides a bottom up look at what white supremacy has created. His concept of “super nationally” is useful for understanding the benefits Euro-Americans gained for shedding their ethnicity. His notion of dual-oppression is also useful. As we see with the Guglielmos, the scholarship has avoided talking about the exploitation of Italian/Americans during early arrival. With Komboa’Ervin we can separate the uniqueness oppressions, one that is enacted unto people of color, and exploitation, which is a position of labor experienced by “whites”. Through Sakai, we understand capitalism has encouraged whiteness via a settler colonial system, and that the privileges that come along with this was granted exclusively to European groups.<sup>102</sup> Intersectionality breathes life into understanding how various identities not only interact with each other internally, but also by the systems in which. Koselleck’s theory shows us that history is not moving in as singular direction and that multiple possibilities are given at any moment, and that at times one event might play out over another. Koselleck’s theory may open up the future of possibility, but Meta-modernism is what guides us into it. In the final chapter, we will see how.

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<sup>101</sup> Freinacht, Hanzl. 2017. "Metamodernism: The Conquest of a Term." *Metamoderna*. July 30. <http://metamoderna.org/metamodernism-the-conquest-of-a-term?lang=en>.

<sup>102</sup> I would add that the state is what provides legitimacy to capitalism, the way that capitalism provides legitimacy to settler colonialism. Politics is layered, too!

***Riscoprire “la Scoperta”*: Columbus, an ethnic semiotic**

*"Se vogliamo che tutto rimanga come è, bisogna che tutto cambi."* - Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa in *Il Gattopardo*<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> “If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”

A few years ago, while attending the San Genaro Feast, with my family, a small elderly Italian/American woman approached me. She asked me to sign a petition to “save Columbus day” as part of “Italian heritage.” I thought to myself, what does this person, living in 21<sup>st</sup> century Manhattan, have to do with a Genovese renaissance explorer who sailed and conquered in the name of Spain? With the hindsight of a few years, I realized, to her and many other Italian/Americans, Columbus is an ethnic semiotic.

The celebration of Christopher Columbus Day and the stewardship of Columbus statues has become a hot topic since the early 90s. This catalyzed in 1992 with the celebration of the landing on its five-hundredth anniversary. Many have also accredited this battle of Columbus to the rise of an identity politics that sought to emphasize the voices of historically marginalized people. Is this something new? Was the making of Columbus, as an ethnic semiotic, identity politics in its self? New organizations like the *Columbus Heritage Foundation* seek to “protect” their heritage by championing the day and statues. On the other hand, groups like *Italian Americans for Social and Racial Justice* have sought to place themselves in “solidarity” with indigenous groups over struggles such as Columbus Statues and Columbus Day. This essay will explore the internal discourses within the Italian/American community in regards to its relationship with Columbus. That is not say others, especially indigenous, opinions are not valid on the subject. The aim of this project, however, is to analyze what Italian/Americans are claiming and battling over.

This chapter is split into four parts. First, the goal is to understand why some, if not many, Italian/Americans so vehemently hold unto to the image of Columbus. In order to do that, one must explore how Columbus became to be associated with Italian/Americans through events such as Columbus Day and material objects like the Columbus statues. The second purpose is examining

the arguments made by cotemporaries who champion the day and draw out what it says about their identity. Thirdly, analyzing how Italian/Americans who oppose, or want to transcend, Columbus use their identity to propose alternatives or critiques to the Columbus debate. Finally, we will try to tease out potentialities for future discourses of Italian/American identity. Ultimately, what this thesis seeks to uncover is why do Italian/Americans latch onto Columbus? By contextualizing the history and contemporary discourse what is unearthed, within Italian/America, is that Christopher Columbus evolved into a seminal ethnic semiotic to the Italian/Americans.

In order to understand why Columbus is an ethnic semiotic, we must first explore how Columbus became associated with Italian/Americans. There are two sources which do an excellent job explaining this. The first is Timothy Kubal's 2009 monograph, *Cultural Movements and Collective Memory: Christopher Columbus and the Rewriting of the National Origin Myth*. This book explores how the myth of Columbus came to be through several lenses and perspectives. Secondly is Laura Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra's, *Recontextualizing the Ocean Blue: Italian Americans and the Commemoration of Columbus*. This article not only elucidates how Italian/American's began to commemorate Columbus, but also enters the discourse over commemoration as a whole.

Kubal's monograph presents concept that are useful tools for scholars studying public memory. He starts this work by arguing that, "memory is pliant to power."<sup>104</sup> Those with power can shape public memory. This follows that, "collective memories are partisan interpretations of the past that have been wildly shared across historical time and institutional spaces."<sup>105</sup> Memory is shaped by specific political powers, to various degrees, and the act remembering collectively is

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<sup>104</sup> Kubal, Timothy. 2009. *Cultural Movements and Collective Memory: Christopher Columbus and the Rewriting of the National Origin Myth*. New York: PalgraveMacMillan. xii

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

malleable and formed by that power. He then expands this farther by contending that, “the power of myth is its multivocality.”<sup>106</sup> Not only are collective memories changeable through perspectives, but the myths that form their core could be interpreted in multiple ways. Kubal also takes a presentist perspective and argues that, “the past is not passed, but a product of the present.”<sup>107</sup> Therefore, history, or how we understand history is changeable in the historical moment of its creation. This framing of memory is important to him. How memory becomes institutionalized is also a major theme in the work. How is this applied to Columbus then?

Kubal raises several other points that are worth exploring. He argues that: “the political appropriation of the Columbus symbol, is a story about the strategic struggles to appropriate commemorations of America’s origin story.”<sup>108</sup> The Columbus symbol is used for and as a rewriting of America’s origin myth. Kubal claims that there are four movements, which contain layers and factions within themselves, which have shaped the Columbus symbol. These factions are: “patriotic, religious, ethnic, and anticolonial.”<sup>109</sup> He maintains that these groups have, “successfully transformed their partisan, localized memories of Columbus into collective memories that were shared across time and space.”<sup>110</sup> This connects to his analytical framework in regards to the “pliability” of Columbus. For the purpose of this paper, we will explore Kubal’s history on the ethnic, Italian, shaping of Columbus.

According to Kubal, a major faction in how Columbus became associated with Italian/Americans, so strongly, is a product of the symbol of Columbus institutionalization by Italian/Americans. He contends that the lasting success of Columbus associations with

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 2

<sup>107</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. xiii

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. xiv

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

Italian/Americans is a result of how they institutionalized him: “Italian American activists chose tactics with relatively permeant consequences – the erecting of statues and establishment of state holidays.”<sup>111</sup> Holidays are hard to change and statues have a long lasting material presence. Who, within the Italian/American community, championed this?

Specific members in the Italian/American community championed the Columbus symbol. *Prominenti* such as Carlo Barsotti and Angelo Noce are examples of this, since they were major players in associating Columbus with Italian/Americans.<sup>112</sup> Kubal argues that the the *prominenti*, like the two mentioned above, which are used in his case study, helped finance and push the image of Columbus unto the Italian/American community. *Prominenti* are, and were, the Italian/American bourgeoisie. Typically, they are large business owners, white collar professionals, who often have political power, and frequently take on the mantle of community leadership. Part of the narrative of how Columbus became associated with Italian/Americans is a story of top down construction. Finally, we must ask how did these Italian/American elites succeed in getting holidays and statues erected?

Kubal contends that it was a five-step process, which led to the creation of the Italian/American Columbus myth. Firstly, Kubal argues, “migration and oppression altered political opportunities for ethnic movements.”<sup>113</sup> One factor was the mass amount of immigrants in concentrated areas and their oppression made them which made them vulnerable for molding. Secondly Kubal claims that the, “Italian American movement organizations took advantage of this

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid. 103; It is common knowledge that Irish-Americans and the Knights of Columbus were major players in the creation of a Columbus holiday. However, that is not the concern of this paper. What this chapter seeks to explore is Columbus within the realm of an Italian/American understanding.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. 104-105, 132

receptive environment and flourished between 1890 and 1920.”<sup>114</sup> The conditions of the historical moment made it ripe for the Columbus myth. Thirdly, Kubal argues that, “these movements succeeded by securing public space for Columbus statues.”<sup>115</sup> They were able to find space in the material world to place Columbus statues. Fourthly, Kubal maintains that, “specific Italian American campaigns established Columbus Day statutes and Columbus holiday statues in Pennsylvania, California, Colorado, and New York.”<sup>116</sup> The specificity of these campaigns, and their success had lasting impact. Finally, Kubal points out “the statutes and statues were maintained in New York and Colorado.”<sup>117</sup> Therefore, the preservation of the statues is a major component in their lasting impact. Kubal concludes this five-part process by arguing that, “connecting these five points produces a vivid picture: through a political process, Italian American activists helped transform the national origin myth into an ethnic collective memory.”<sup>118</sup> Kubal provides a useful insight into the grand construction of the Columbus myth in Italian/American memory. Ruberto and Sciorra complement this well from the bottom up.

In this piece, Ruberto and Sciorra seek to accomplish two things. First is to separate the Columbus statues from the contemporary debate over Confederate monuments. Secondly is to analyze the erection of Columbus statues from the bottom up. The gist of their argument is as follows:

The proliferation of Columbus representations to a large degree occurred in a different context; namely, the arrival and fraught assimilation of more than four million Italian immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. The dynamics of symbol-building around Columbus for a once marginalized and attacked immigrant

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. 107-115, 132

<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 132

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid. Note that on the day that this was written, 12/06/2018, Gov. Andrew Cuomo, of New York, added the Columbus statue – located at Columbus Circle New York, NY – to the National Register of Historic Places. Indeed, a historical Irony.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. 132

community—whose descendants are now firmly planted in corporate boardrooms, the highest echelons of political power, and white suburbia—necessitate a nuanced discussion about class and race in the United States.<sup>119</sup>

They argue that context and conditions in which the Columbus myths were created is separate from the goal of dominating African-Americans, in which confederate statues were established. The Columbus statues were part of an assimilation process. The authors continue: “the monuments were a means to gain entrance into a racist society under the cover of whiteness. There was no doubt a troubling, but all-too-common, approach to assimilation.”<sup>120</sup> Not only is this assimilation into a nation, but also assimilation into a racial hierarchy. The authors explore how this happened.

Complementary to Kubal, Ruberto and Sciorra analyze how the *prominenti* latched onto the “hagiography” of Columbus. The authors note that the *prominenti*, “were ethnic leaders who served as intermediaries between WASP elites and the working poor and who supported an upper-class notion of Italian national identity.”<sup>121</sup> The concept of a constructed identity reappears. This emerged during this historical time due to the recent creation of the Italian nation, and from the consequences of the diaspora’s mosaic of Italian dialects and cultures in a new nation. They argue,

By perpetuating ideas of a united Italian community based on racial hierarchies and a grand history of an assumed, singular Italian civilization, the *prominenti* imposed elitist notions of a unified Italian American community that was removed from working-class understandings of history and social formations, and that relied on Italians aligning themselves with a white majority.<sup>122</sup>

The authors paint a picture of the *prominenti* conducting on a civilizing mission on their community. Ruberto and Sciorra contend that, “Early-twentieth-century ethnic leaders ingratiated

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<sup>119</sup> Ruberto, Laura E., and Joseph Sciorra. 2017. "Recontextualizing the Ocean Blue: Italian Americans and the Commemoration of Columbus." *Process: a blog for american history*. October 4. <http://www.processhistory.org/recontextualizing-the-ocean-blue/>.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

themselves with the Anglo-Saxon ruling class, profited from the working poor, spoke out against unions, and aligned themselves at times with Fascists. Over the years, the labor and civil rights of working-class Italian Americans were ferociously suppressed.” Not only did the *prominenti* construct a national Italian and Italian/American identity onto the Italian/American populous, they also exploited them concurrently. What does this say about the holiday?

To expand their analysis, Sciorra and Ruberto explore the specifics of the Columbus Day holiday. They note that, “in 1971, politicians and business people, many of them Italian American, succeeded in making Columbus Day a federal holiday. This legal holiday... importantly, has never been officially named as a day for Italian Americans.”<sup>123</sup> Even though the day is, and has been associated with Italian/Americans, it is not technically an Italian/American holiday. This is a fact, that we will see later, which is forgotten by many champions of the Columbus symbol. They also point out that this fashioned in the context of a “white ethnic revival” which decentered WASP culture for a larger pan-European Ellis Island white identity.<sup>124</sup> Another question that is worth exploring, was the embrace of Columbus ever opposed?

The Columbus symbol was not embraced by all Italian/Americans and those who rejected it in the past is, in many ways, reflect those who reject it in the present. Italian/American anarchists were opposed to Columbus early on. Kenyon Zimmer argues that it was viewed by these anarchists as “doubly objectionable” because it had “nationalist” and “imperialist” roots.<sup>125</sup> In 1892 the Italian anarchist newspaper, *Il Grido degli Oppressi*, argued that Columbus was “a pirate and

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> Zimmer, Kenyon. 2015. *Immigrants Against The State: Yiddish and Italian Anarchism in America*. Urbana: University of Illinois. 74

adventure” who ignited “racial prejudices and hatred” against indigenous Americans.<sup>126</sup> As we will see in the third section of this paper, this solidaric outlook is vital to today’s anti-Columbus Italian/Americans. Anarchists were not the only group of Italian/Americans to push against the Columbus agenda.

The antifascist and socialist group that gravitated around the newspaper, *Il Nuovo Mondo*, and its editor Giorlamo Valenti, were famous for opposing the Columbus symbol, and had some famous clashes over it. They associated Columbus with fascism and argued that was a reason for opposing the symbol. In 1935, Valenti led a group of 2,000 protestors against a wreath laying ceremony at the Columbus statue in NY chanting, "Down with Mussolini!"<sup>127</sup> This broke out into a fight. Two years later, in 1936, Valenti, now chair of The Italian Antifascist Committee, opposed Columbus Day celebrations because it was “fascist.” Valenti accused the events sponsors, the Order Sons of Italy and *prominenti* leader Generoso Pope, of being fascists. He argued, in a telegram to Governor Herbert Lehman, that celebrating Columbus Day “only serves to advance the fascist cause” and that “Columbus Day had become a fascist, anti-democratic and un-American holiday.”<sup>128</sup> Clearly, the making and battle over Italian/American identity is not new.

The second part of this paper will explore contemporary champions of the Columbus symbol. It will overview who they are, then analyze their language and rhetoric as they hail Columbus. This group contains the big three. The largest, wealthiest, and arguably most significant Italian/American Organizations: The Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America, UNICO National, and The National Italian American Foundation. OSIA, which arguably is the most

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Kubal. 119

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

important, takes an extremely zealous position were as NIAF attempts a more nuanced approach to the Columbus symbol. These groups function like the historical *prominenti*.

The Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America emerged as the Order Sons of Italy, in 1905, by well-intentioned *prominento* Vincenzo Sellaro, in Manhattan's Little Italy, near Mulberry Street. It was originally a mutual aid society, geared to helping Italian/Americans. OSIA is significant because it was the first attempt to gather all "Italian Americans into one large fraternal organization."<sup>129</sup> Before OSIA foundation, mutual aid societies were region or town based. OSIA's website claims that: "OSIA has hundreds of thousands of family members located in all fifty states and the District of Columbia, making it the leading service and advocacy organization for the nation's estimated 26 million people of Italian descent."<sup>130</sup> What is worth pointing out is that OSIA takes their "advocacy" a step further and claims to be "a national organization of men and women who represent the estimated 26 million Americans of Italian heritage, dedicated to promoting our culture, our traditions, our language, the legacy of our ancestors, and our contributions to the U.S. and the worlds."<sup>131</sup> Who elected, or agreed to allowing, OSIA to represent roughly 26 million Italian/Americans? What qualifies them as the authorities of Italian/American traditions and cultures? OSIA also adds an American element: "we are proud and patriotic Americans of Italian heritage. We exemplify the very best of what it is to be Italian American."<sup>132</sup> OSIA sees itself as the representative of Italian/American culture, the promoter of Italian/American culture, and as patriotic Americans. How will this seep through their defense of Columbus?

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<sup>129</sup> "OSIA Founder Vincenzo Sellaro, M.D. (1868-1932)." *The Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*. <https://www.osia.org/about/history/founder-vincenzo-sellaro/>.

<sup>130</sup> "Who We Are." *Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*. <https://www.osia.org/about/who-we-are/>.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

On OSIA's website, in the section under the tab for Commission for Social Justice, there is an entire page dedicated to saving Columbus Day. A petition the Commission made is located on the website along with a packet on Columbus called, *Fact versus Fiction*, and a link to "save Columbus" merchandise.<sup>133</sup> Why does OSIA place the defense of Columbus under its Social Justice Commission? Typically, commissions like this are geared towards anti-defamation. According to the Commission's about page, its foundation in 1979 was to "fight the stereotyping of Italian Americans by the entertainment, advertising and media industries."<sup>134</sup> Why defend Columbus here? Does OSIA see an attack on Columbus as an attack on Italian/Americans? What does it mean that OSIA is firmly trying to tie Columbus to Italian/Americans making a defamation of Columbus a defamation of Italian/America? How do they act on this?

One of the ways in which OSIA has defended Columbus is through a petition. This petition, which is platformed, by change.org, is a far cry from the 26 million Italian/Americans which OSIA claims to represent. As of December 2018, two years after its launch, it only has 5,376 signatures.<sup>135</sup> The language of the petition is worth investigating.

OSIA firmly links Columbus to Italian/Americans and their heritage. They appeal to the White House for the, "recognition and endorsement of Columbus Day and the contributions of the 25 million Americans of Italian descent."<sup>136</sup> It is a demand that claims 25 million Italian/Americans have accepted Columbus as representative of them. Who consented to this? The petition then states that "the holiday and... our community" are under attack. Enough proof can

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<sup>133</sup> "Save Columbus Day." *Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*. <https://www.osia.org/commission-for-social-justice/columbus-day/>

<sup>134</sup> Commission for Social Justice." *The Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*. <https://www.osia.org/commission-for-social-justice/>.

<sup>135</sup> "Save Columbus Day." *change.org*. <https://www.change.org/p/order-sons-of-italy-in-america-s-commission-for-social-justice-save-columbus-day>.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid*.

be found for an attack on the holiday, but does this equate to an attack on the Italian/American community? OSIA takes it a step further and requests of “the President to host an official yearly signing ceremony in celebration of Columbus Day, the Italian American community and the importance of the immigrant experience in the making of our great nation.”<sup>137</sup> Not only does this petition call for the protection of the holiday, which they link to all Italian/Americans, but they also demand that the Oval Office reaffirm the day every year. The two caveats they add at the end are of note. They claim that the holiday celebrates Italian/Americans and it reflects the immigrant experience in the making of America. This last part of this claim is perhaps the most interesting facet. In what ways does Columbus represent the immigrant experience in its totality? Secondly, by claiming this, they create and homogenize a narrative of the immigrant experience with their perceived notion of the Italian/American experience, projected unto all American immigrants. What other means does OSIA use to champion Columbus?

The Commission’s packet, *Columbus: Fact versus Fiction*, is one of the richest sources in its defense of Columbus. This is not due to it having great depth, but because of how it written, a simplistic history loaded with “what aboutisms.” Who made this text is of note: Robert Royal, Ph.D., president of the Faith and Reason Institute; Joseph Scafetta, Jr. and David Curfman, M.D., president of the National Columbus Celebration Association in Washington, and Dona De Sanctis, Ph.D., OSIA Deputy Executive Director. Two academics helped compile this work. The packet is rifled with 19<sup>th</sup> century tropes ranging from Columbus brought “culture” to the America to the Natives were “bad guys too”. The packet is a goldmine for Columbus scholars interested in examining the ideology behind the holiday.

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

The opening letter of the packet is clear in its intents of linking Columbus to Italian/Americans and America as whole. One of their first points is that, “Columbus Day is one of America’s oldest patriotic holidays.”<sup>138</sup> In many ways, this creates of paradox of Columbus being patriotic and ethnic congruently. On this note, the day was not an official Federal holiday until 1971, so it is important to point out that they chose to project previous local celebrations of Columbus nationwide. They do, however, acknowledge that Columbus did commit atrocities, but that he should not be judged by today’s standards. OSIA admits there is a controversy and despite this, they assert:

Italian Americans continue to hold Columbus in high regard both for his historic achievements and also because Columbus Day is the only day our nation recognizes the heritage of an estimated 16 to 26 million Americans of Italian descent, who are relentlessly stereotyped by the entertainment, news and advertising industries the other 364 days of the year.<sup>139</sup>

The language in this contends that Italian/Americans, in totality, hold Columbus in a high regard. On whose consensus? OSIA is also claiming that the holiday recognizes the heritage of Italian/Americans, even though, as Ruberto and Sciorra have pointed out, Columbus Day is not officially an Italian/American holiday. It is curious how they added in that Italian Americans are “relentlessly” stereotyped at the end. By framing it this way, they position their argument to that criticizing the Columbus symbol is an attack on Italian/Americans. The factual nature of this is easily disputed, but it is a clever way to discourage critics of Columbus. The packet is rich in language and material, but some essays are more direct in their linking of Columbus to Italian/America than others.

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<sup>138</sup> "Columbus: Fact vs Fiction." *Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America*. October. [https://www.osia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Columbus05\\_factvsfiction.pdf](https://www.osia.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Columbus05_factvsfiction.pdf).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

A section of the packet titled, *Why Columbus Matters*, by Dona DeSanctis, is the most upfront in its connections between the Italian/American experience and Columbus. She notes that the holiday is more than a celebration of the man, Columbus, but that it also celebrates, “the success of the millions of immigrants from all over the world, including Europe, who followed him, seeking religious freedom, political stability and the chance to give their children a better tomorrow.”<sup>140</sup> As Kubal, Ruberto and Sciorra point out, the erection of statues was part of the Americanization process for Italian immigrants, and, again we see this narrative of Italian/American experience projected unto all American immigrants. DeSanctis then explains why Italian/Americas celebrate Columbus day:

His holiday commemorates the arrival on these shores of more than 5 million of their ancestors more than a century ago. Today, their children and grandchildren constitute the nation’s fifth largest ethnic group, but despite their numbers and sterling record of achievement, Italian Americans are routinely stereotyped in this nation as goons and/or buffoons.<sup>141</sup>

DeSanctis links Columbus’ renaissance voyage with a turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century migrations. How are these the same? She then notes that now Italians contribute greatly to America. This is re-emergence of this paradox of patriotism and ethnicity. Finally, like the introduction page of this packet, DeSanctis brings up the defamation of Italian/Americans. This reframes the narrative to an attack on Columbus is an attack on Italian/Americans. For what other reasons does this come up? This is why the Social Justice Committee is taking charge of this on OSIA’s behalf. DeSanctis also states: “Columbus Day is the only holiday on which the nation officially recognizes the presence if not the contributions of an estimated 16 to 26 million Italian Americans.”<sup>142</sup> To

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<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. Note that this is poor history. Of the 5 million, 4 million arrived during “the great migration,” and of that roughly 51% went back. *The Review of Italian American Studies*, edited by Frank M. Sorrentino and Jerome Krase was out during this time, and covers this subject. For more recent scholarship on the subject, consult, *The Routledge History of Italian Americans*, edited by William J. Connell and Stanislaw G. Pugliese.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

reiterate, Ruberto and Sciorra note that Columbus Day is not an official Italian/American holiday. For OSIA and its associates to make these kind of statements is not only dishonest, but it erases history. Neo-liberalism's version of identity politics, that is one of a marketable and performative identity, has seeped its way into OSIA's defense of Columbus.

OSIA has established an e-shop, selling t-shirts and accessories to "save Columbus Day" and the language that they use merits an investigation.<sup>143</sup> The first product shown is a black t-shirt with the slogan, "Celebrate Italian pride, celebrate Columbus Day."<sup>144</sup> OSIA is firmly saying Columbus is Italian pride. What does Italian pride even mean? Can you have Italian pride while also distancing yourself from Columbus? OISA's framing is clever, and this again positions Columbus skeptics away because, to not champion Columbus, means not to be a proud Italian. Their second slogan is similar: "Save Columbus Day: Protect and Preserve our Past."<sup>145</sup> As noted earlier in this paper, not all Italian/Americans were on board with Columbus. Whose past are they preserving then? Here Kubal's presentist argument emerges in terms of a changeable past that is a product of the present. The final one is the most disturbing, its titled "deep thoughts" and its slogan says: "If he never discovered it, YOU wouldn't be here; let that sink in for a minute. Save Columbus Day."<sup>146</sup> This puts all non-native Americans into a situation that you owe Columbus. It also erases Native Americans since, technically, they arrived on this continent first. This also projects their narrative into all of America. Of the big three, The Order Sons and Daughter of Italy in America are the most zealous in their defense of Columbus.

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<sup>143</sup> "Save Columbus Day." *cafepress*. <https://www.cafepress.com/osia/15474287>. The proceeds from this shop goes to funding the Commission for Social Justice.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*

UNICO is a major Italian/American organization dedicated to civic service. Their website states: “It was Dr. Vastola's (their founders) dream to create an Italian American service organization to engage in charitable works, support higher education, and perform patriotic deeds.”<sup>147</sup> Like OSIA, UNICO was founded by a well-intentioned *prominente*. They also emphasize: “Our founders wanted to insure that everyone understood that Italian Americans loved their adopted country and held no allegiance to their native land save traditions and culture.”<sup>148</sup> There is a narrative in UNICO, which is to uphold patriotism, while also being Italian in America through the maintenance of traditions. Similar to OSIA, UNICO mission is, “to unite all Italian Americans and motivate them to become more civic minded.”<sup>149</sup> Parallel to OSIA, UNICO seeks to unify Italian/Americans under its mantle. Analogous to Order, UNICO also released a package on Columbus.

UNICO has an official statement at the start of their packet, which is worth deconstructing. Their linking Italian/Americans to Columbus is linear: “Christopher Columbus represents the accomplishments Italians and Italian Americans have made to make our country what it is today.”<sup>150</sup> What they are doing here is explicitly linking the feats of Columbus to Italian/Americans as a representative of Italian/Americans. Who elected Columbus to represent Italian/Americans? Note the American emphasis as well. They concluded by stating that: “UNICO National strongly supports other groups that wish to honor their ancestors and history, but not at the expense of Columbus Day.”<sup>151</sup> OSIA’s packet launches some vicious accusations at Natives, UNICO more

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<sup>147</sup> About UNICO." *UNICO National*. <https://www.unico.org/about-unico> (brackets are mine).

<sup>148</sup> Ibid.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> "In Defense of Christopher Columbus." *UNICO National*. October 17. [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a3db96\\_551adc794e58486f89b4700dabeb9522.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a3db96_551adc794e58486f89b4700dabeb9522.pdf).

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

calmly distances themselves from that, and focuses purely on defending Columbus.<sup>152</sup> First and arguably most important essay does align with OSIA's framing though.

The first part of UNICO's packet is titled, *In Defense of Christopher Columbus* – by Rick Menzel – and like with OSIA, anti-defamation plays a role. The essay opens up with as simple line: “Christopher Columbus had two strikes against him: he was Italian and Catholic.”<sup>153</sup> This is to subtly imply that criticism of Columbus is anti-Italian and anti-Catholic. This then goes into a victimhood and vindication, “It's a truism that winners write history. For much of American history, the winners have been WASPs... Columbus broke the mold.”<sup>154</sup> There is a truism in here, because some Italian/Americans did use Columbus for assimilation. But do those conditions mater today? Is WASPdom the status quo? Or have Symbols, such as Columbus, usher in as new understanding of American whiteness? On top of that, who defines a winner in history? This essays framing is clever because it pits anti-Columbus as anti-Italian and anti-Catholicism and tells a feel good story of victims to vindication. The National Italian American Foundation have a nuanced approach.

Similar to their approach with Columbus, NIAF has a subtle method when explaining its relationship to Italian/Americans. NIAF's mission “is to serve as a resource for the Italian

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<sup>152</sup> OISA's packet has a section on indigenous people titled: *Columbus and the Indians: Friend or Foe?* Just look at this nugget: “Today, Indian activists portray the New World as an earthly paradise. If so, this was a “paradise” where the natives practiced cannibalism, ritual human sacrifice and slavery and suffered from syphilis, hepatitis, addictive cocaine use and cancer, caused by smoking. Despite some of his own questionable deeds, which as we have seen, have been greatly exaggerated, the New World was better off thanks to Columbus. After him came millions of Europeans who brought medical science, mechanical inventions and democratic government to a continent that knew none of these benefits before 1492.” Apparently all Native Americans are the same, and all these diseases etc. listed merit a value judgement. This is a white wash of history were Europeans made the American content better just because.

<sup>153</sup> "In Defense of Christopher Columbus." *UNICO National*. October 17. [https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a3db96\\_551adc794e58486f89b4700dabeb9522.pdf](https://docs.wixstatic.com/ugd/a3db96_551adc794e58486f89b4700dabeb9522.pdf) .

<sup>154</sup> Ibid. He also mentions:

American Community.”<sup>155</sup> Instead of acting as an unelected representative of Italian/American’s, NIAF instead serves as a resource. However, NIAF also seeks, “to preserve... Italian American heritage and culture; to promote and inspire a positive image and legacy of Italian Americans; and to strengthen and empower ties between the United States and Italy.”<sup>156</sup> Even though NIAF does not seek to represent all Italian/Americans, however, the organization still makes a claim to arbitrate of Italian/American culture. How does the influence their position on Columbus then?

NIAF supports Columbus Day by linking it to the Italian/American experience. They state: “As an organization devoted to the promotion and preservation of Italian American heritage, we support unequivocally keeping Columbus Day as a federal holiday.” A reoccurring trend in these organizations is the constant framing of Columbus Day as an Italian/American holiday. Which, again, it is not officially recognized as such. Another reoccurring theme appears when NIAF contends that: “Columbus’s courageous voyage was the catalyst that initiated over 500 years of immigration to the Americas by people from every corner of the earth who were seeking a better life for their families.”<sup>157</sup> We see a white washing of history where these organizations project a story of Italian/American immigration as a story for all American immigrants. Their response to the vandalizing of Columbus statues has nuance though.

In the last few years, there has been a recent spree of vandalization of Columbus statues, and NIAF’s response to this demonstrates a sophistication that the other major Italian/American organizations lack. They argue: “as citizens, we should not attempt to deny America’s history, nor

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<sup>155</sup> "About NIAF." *The National Italian American Foundation*. <http://www.niaf.org/about-the-niaf/>. Full disclosure, NIAF awarded the author a fellowship in the summer of 2016.

<sup>156</sup> "NIAF Statement on Christopher Columbus Holiday." *The National Italian American Foundation*. <https://www.niaf.org/culture/niaf-statement-on-christopher-columbus-holiday/>.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

should we try to erase it.”<sup>158</sup> NIAF is stretching the attacks on Columbus statues not as an affront to Italian/Americans but as an insult to history as whole. The validity of this argument is subjective. The organization then maintains that: “NIAF does not blindly uphold any single figure as the representative of all things Italian American, since all individuals are flawed, and all monuments represent just a snapshot of our history.”<sup>159</sup> What is refreshing about this statement is that it moves away from Columbus as symbol of Italian/Americans as a whole, and instead understands Columbus as a fragment of Italian/American history. NIAF continues: “For large numbers of individuals in the Italian American community, Columbus, and Columbus Day, represent an opportunity to celebrate our collective contributions to this country.”<sup>160</sup> Perhaps it is a reflection of the younger age of the organization and stronger ties to Italy, but the language of this statement moves away from Columbus as a symbol of all Italian/Americans and moves into a greyer realm of “some” Italian/Americans. NIAF maintains that the holiday is an “opportunity” for Italian/Americans to celebrate their culture and heritage. This still straddles on the realm of dishonesty, since the holidays is not officially recognized as an Italian/American day, however it can be suspect to a more liberal reading since it is not directly claiming Columbus Day is an Italian/American day. Unfortunately, this nuance is lost to a coalition they decided to join.

In 2017, The Columbus Heritage Coalition emerged out of the debate over keeping the Columbus statute, located at Columbus Circle, in New York erected. They boldly claim that the monument “is about Italian American ancestors, history and culture. The story behind the statue is the story of the Italian American immigrant experience.”<sup>161</sup> Again, there is the emergences of a

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid. Note NIAF’s position towards Indigenous People’s Day: “Despite the advent of Indigenous People’s Day, NIAF is not opposed to the establishment of such a holiday. Native Americans, like Italian Americans, should have the right to celebrate and educate others about their history and culture.”

<sup>161</sup> *Columbus Heritage Coalition*. Accessed November 28, 2018. <https://columbuseritagecoalition.com/>.

grand narrative of Columbus representing all Italian/Americans and Columbus as the story of immigration. The Coalition also utilizes a victimization narrative: “Italians were discriminated against, they were given jobs that no one else would take and deemed racially inferior. Italians in America did not have it easy.”<sup>162</sup> Why do they bring this up? Arguably, it frames the conversation in two directions. First is, “we had it hard so let us keep this statue.” The second molds the conversation in a direction that removal of the statue is also a form of discrimination. As we will see with the anti-Columbus groups, they take this history of prejudice into a different direction.

The groups – because they are not organizations like the big 3 – that oppose Columbus day utilize, or understand their Italian heritage from more radical perspectives. The Italian-American Political Solidarity Club, NoColmbusDay, and Italian Americans for Social and Racial Justice Mission all evoke images of Italian/America’s radical past. A class similarity between today’s and yesterday’s battle over Columbus is also present; with the *prominenti* big 3 supporting the Columbus symbol, and the more radical groups opposing or transcending it. Who are these groups then?

The Italian-American Political Solidarity Club is for all intents and purposes an arts and poetry group. Its ranks include luminaires such as Diane di Prima, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, Maria Lisella, Gil Fagiani, and Michael Parenti. The back of their collection states that “for years” the group would meet up and read poetry on Columbus Day.<sup>163</sup> The purpose of their collection, *Avanti Popolo: Italian-American Writers Sail Beyond Columbus*, is “to encourage our paesans to break with the legacy of Christopher Columbus and embrace a future based in human solidarity, not

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<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Italian-American Political Solidarity Club. 2008. *Avanti Popolo: Italian-American Writers Sail Beyond Columbus*. San Francisco: Manic D Press.

conquest, domination and war.”<sup>164</sup> This says two things. First, it looks forward to a new future of Italian/Americans, and secondly approaches Columbus from the perspective of his historical consequences. They continue: “Instead of conquest, we celebrate those who have stood up for justice... we honor... teaches, laborers, union organizers and free speech advocates.”<sup>165</sup> The Club wants to remember Italian/Americans of a radical persuasion. They have multiple reasons for opposing Columbus.

The Club opposes Columbus as a historical figure and seek to delink Columbus from Italian/Americans. They do acknowledge that, “historically, Italian Americans adopted Columbus as their hero for an obvious reason: We needed to feel validated in a land where we were not accepted.”<sup>166</sup> Though they recognize that Columbus symbol was used to Americanize Italians, they argue that it is time to sail past this image. The Club, then lists several reasons not to support Columbus, this includes: slavery and brutality, he didn't "discover" anything, genocide, and Racism.<sup>167</sup> The gist of their argument is the historical consequences of Columbus and the historical figure of Columbus are monstrous and need to be transcended as an ethnic semiotic. Their rhetoric involved of what this departure from Columbus means demonstrates how the Club understand being Italian/American.

The Club sees sailing past Columbus not as a rejection of their Italian heritage, but instead as an embracing of it. They argue that, “breaking with the Columbus myth, we honor-not dishonor-our heritage.”<sup>168</sup> An interesting twist on language, since The Columbus Heritage Coalition, for example, views defending Columbus as honoring Italian heritage. The Club goes on:

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<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid. 7

<sup>167</sup> Ibid. 9-10

<sup>168</sup> Ibid. 9

There may be some who will accuse us of hating our own people for raising our voices in support of those under the boot of oppression today. We consider it to be the highest form of love, not just for our own people, but for all of humanity... we need to lift our collective voices for social and economic justice for all once again.<sup>169</sup>

This passage demands a new image for Italian/Americans, and draws out new mode of being Italian/Americans; those modes, however, are steeped in a radical tradition, the same tradition that opposed Columbus in the past. Do other anti-Columbus groups harness this revolutionary past?

Like the Italian American Political Solidarity Club, NoColumbusDay is a group of Italian/American's who want to leave Columbus in the dustbin of history. They define themselves as: "a group of Italian Americans, or scholars of Italian and Italian American culture and history who have attempted collectively and carefully to examine this question from several different perspectives."<sup>170</sup> What they seek to do is evaluate the Columbus symbol from multiple perspectives. They conclude with a bold mission: "We advocate new practices of memory for the Italian American community including the abolition (and/or replacement) of Columbus Day as a Federal Holiday."<sup>171</sup> They are leaving the door open for new ways to think about Italian/American memory, and even permit space for a replacement of the day. However, they are also open the "abolition" of the day, a step further from the Club, who just to de-link Italian/Americans from the Symbol. What is of interesting, is the emphasis is on the holiday and not Columbus statues.

Taking notes from Ruberto and Sciorra, who are signatories of the website petition NoColumbusDay, investigates how the holiday became associated with Italian/Americans. They point out that: "Congress has never decreed Columbus Day as an official day for Italian

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid. 8; the section this is from was penned by Tommi Avicolti Mecca.

<sup>170</sup> "NoColumbusDay"*NoColumbusDay*. September 14. <https://nocolumbusday.wordpress.com/> .

<sup>171</sup> Ibid. Note that the website sent a petition to Congress for abolition or replacement of the holiday. It is interesting to note how the pro and against Columbus Day crowds use petitions as a source of protest.

Americans... Nevertheless, over time and through much politicking, an association between Italian Americans and Columbus has been passed off as ‘real’ and the holiday has long come to be celebrated as a day honoring Italian Americans alone”<sup>172</sup> This statement suggests a few things. It challenges the legitimacy from organizations that claim Columbus Day is an Italian/American holiday. It also claims that there was a manufacturing campaign to link the holiday to Italian/Americans. They also dive into the origins of how this became a political possibility.

NoColumbusDay investigates how the holiday became associated with Italian/Americans and what is the meaning behind this association. They argue that, “acceptance occurred in great part because of the success of *prominenti*, self-defined community leaders.”<sup>173</sup> The tale of *prominenti* re-emerges, and the history of a top down Columbus project is brought forward, this is mentioned deliberately to explain that the embracing of Columbus was a top down project. They then contend that, “the connection between Columbus Day and white European identity was key to Italians in the United States, precisely because their status as ‘whites’ was challenged.”<sup>174</sup> Two things are drawn from this. First, that the embrace of the Columbus symbol was a whitening project. Second, the insecurity of lack of whiteness is a factor for a large amount of Italian/Americans attaching themselves to Columbus. How does this matter today?

Quite boldly, NoColumbusDay challenges the validity and necessity of the Columbus symbol today and raises larger question for Italian/America. Where the Columbus Heritage Coalition uses the past mistreatment of Italian/Americans as a reason to uphold the Columbus symbol today, NoColumbusDay challenges and transcends this argument:

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

Today, in 2017, the social and economic position of Italian Americans is markedly changed. Do Italian Americans still suffer from the sting of white-on-white racism, as they did in the past? Do they still need a federally-mandated holiday in order to celebrate their contributions to the success of America? But, most importantly, as a community, do Italian Americans wish to remain attached to a holiday and a historical figure so clearly linked to genocide, colonialism, and white-washed memory?<sup>175</sup>

These are haunting questions for a multitude of reasons. Firstly, it claims that Italian/Americans are no longer suspect to the same prejudices that were present during the embracing period of Columbus, this is a far cry, for example, from the Order Sons and Daughters of Italy in America's linking critics of Columbus to Italian/American defamation. Secondly, it questions if Italian/Americans are victims to other whites presently, a departure from UNICO's vindication over WASPdom's historical domination. This statement also questions the validity of Italian/Americans needing a holiday. Finally, they ask Italian/American's a moral question; do you want to be associated with a historical monstrosity? Do they offer alternatives though?

Though NoColumbusDay seems to suggest the Italian/American community does not need a holiday, they do understand there was a whitewashing in Italian/America's narrative and are open to alternatives. The group claims that: "Over four million Italian(s)... immigrated to the United States during the period of mass migration. The experiences, labor, and culture of these immigrants and their descendants have frequently been disparaged or simply ignored in larger historical narratives and by consumer culture."<sup>176</sup> This argument is crucial for the anti-Columbus crowd for several reasons. It sees the narrative of Columbus erasing Italian/American history, and that history and experience was partially working class. The comment on consumer culture also implies a cooption by capitalism. They go on: "We believe these peoples' histories and their evolving culture might be better remembered, understood and commemorated through means other

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

than Columbus Day.”<sup>177</sup> This statement leaves room for alternatives. It also argues that Italian/American culture is evolving and is not static. This allows even more space for alternatives to grow. They argue that Los Angeles’ “Italian Heritage Day” is a possible model. Are other groups more suggestive in this space of opportunity?

A group whose suggestions and language can fill that void is Italian Americans for Social and Racial Justice, which is abbreviated to IASRJ for the rest of this chapter.<sup>178</sup> The goals of IASRJ are two folded. First, they seek, “to create an oasis of humanity in the desert of Italian American complacency.”<sup>179</sup> Therefore, they call Italian/Americans to action for social justice. Secondly, they call on, “co-ethnics who share our beliefs to know that they are not alone. In our shared space, we will form radical friendships that we hope will become building blocks for wider solidarity.”<sup>180</sup> The group aims to create a space were liberal minded Italian/Americans can get acquaint with each other, and organize politically. What does that entail then? How does that relate to Columbus?

IASRJ propose several symbols of Italian/America and advises how to do this. This is seen in their “aim to build a better future and to educate our (Italian/American) communities about our radical past and present. Italians and diasporic Italians have noble traditions of radical struggle that we not only cherish but wish to build upon.” By not attaching themselves to Columbus, and by embracing a labor history, they are discreetly taking a position against the Columbus symbol.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> For disclosure, the author is a member and founder of this group. The author is also one of the writers of the mission statement that is cited in this paper.

<sup>179</sup> "Italian Americans for Social and Racial Justice Mission Statement." *Facebook*.  
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/italian-americans-for-social-and-racial-justice/italian-americans-for-social-and-racial-justice-mission-statement/304931066725086/>.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid; I was there at the founding meeting where we agreed to be anti-Columbus. However, we wanted the language in our statement to be subtle on this. We felt that suggesting radicals, as symbols of Italian/Americans, was anti-Columbus in itself, and that this presented the possibilities of new Italian/American histories outside the Columbus symbol.

The mission statement suggests championing radicals of the past such as Angela Bambace, Arturo Giovanitti, Virgilia d'Andrea, Vito Marcantonio, and Carlo Tresca; renewed and reclaimed symbols of Italian/America. IASRJ goes on, "If we are to counter reactionary politics among Italian Americans, education and activism are a must."<sup>182</sup> They are arguing it is their responsibility as Italian/Americans to educate their community on these lost symbols and they view these as a fight against reactionary forces in the Italian/Americans community. This is a reemergence of the making and battle of Italian/American identity. What will be the new ethnic semiotics? In what other ways can new symbols of Italian/America come about?

In October 2017, I published an article titled, *Down with Columbus! Then What?* In it, I assume transcending past the Columbus symbol and investigate new ways of being Italian/American, while also emphasizing the necessity of having a communal myth. In it I argue that, "All myths are artificial creations of the human imagination. But, they serve a purpose, and we should, together, construct a meta-mythology of Italiana/Americana."<sup>183</sup> This is a call for active engagement in the community itself to reconstruct our history from the bottom up. I draw from Joseph Campbell's four functions of myth – mystical, cosmological, sociological, and pedagogical – and how this translates to being Italian/American – "I am Italian/American," "this means something in the world," "how do I perform this in the world?" and "what do I learn from this?" – to re-tool Italian/Americans to think about our myths.<sup>184</sup> What method will be used for this?

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<sup>182</sup> "Italian Americans for Social and Racial Justice Mission Statement." *Facebook*.  
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/italian-americans-for-social-and-racial-justice/italian-americans-for-social-and-racial-justice-mission-statement/304931066725086/>.

<sup>183</sup> Cerulli, Stephen J. 2017. "Down with Columbus! Then What?" *La Voce di New York*. October 12.  
<https://www.lavocedinyork.com/en/new-york/2017/10/12/down-with-columbus-then-what/>.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid*.

I propose encasing this in meta-modernism. Meta-modernism is, “a dialectical synthesis, oscillating between, and composed of – modernism and postmodernism... a yin-and-yang, the grand scheme of modernism and its positivity, but also of the postmodern cynical comprehension of artificialness.”<sup>185</sup> OSIA, for instance, takes on Columbus from a modernist perspective insisting that the symbol is an absolute truth of Italian/American identity and that it provides a cohesiveness for the community. A post-modern perspective, on the other hand, would argue that these ethnic symbols are social constructions. Meta-modernism agrees that these myths are social constructions, but by leaving it there we create a void, so it purposes to conscientiously construct ethnic symbols to provide cohesiveness for the community. However, these symbols need to be fluid to meet the needs of the community in question.<sup>186</sup> How would this be implemented?

I argue that we should borrow Antonio Gramsci’s idea of the “organic intellectual” and Errico Malatesta’s “vanguard” as methods for igniting and implementing this new meta-myth. This means the agents of change should be in the community itself, the “organic intellectuals,” and it is their responsibility to spread the new myth, the “vanguards,” while also not slipping into a self-declared leadership role. The goal is for Italian/Americans to embrace the myths themselves, and not have it placed on them from the top down. The future is always open for possibilities.

Comparing and contrasting the pro and against Columbus arguments raises some noteworthy contentions. There is a major difference on both sides usages of heritage, with the pro as a shield of defense – and the against a tool for re-creation. The pro-Columbus arguments tie Italian/American heritage, and the language of heritage, to Columbus; cementing and centering him as an ethnic semiotic. The anti-Columbus groups uses of heritage, and its language, more

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> If that void is not filled, something worse than Columbus could become a new ethnic semiotic.

fluidly as ways of rethinking the past. Their class views warrants attention. The pro mention working class Italian/Americans supporting and embracing Columbus symbols, in the past, probably as a means of legitimacy, and leave it at that. The against Columbus groups explore working class history further and either embrace it, or uncover why and how working class Italian/Americans came to support Columbus in the first place. How both sides understand the mistreatment of Italians in America, especially in the past, also merits investigation. The pro-Columbus comprehend it as a hump to overcome, but that it somehow paradoxically still exists today because Italians are portrayed “poorly” and because the Columbus symbol is under fire. The pro deliberately links criticisms of Columbus as attacks on Italian/Americans. Perhaps a symptom of their victim mindset? The anti-Columbus crowd argues that this prejudice was historical and that is no longer an issue. They contend that the experiences of it should be used as lessons for other Italian/American projects. How both judge the historical deeds of Columbus, though slightly of topic, is also of note. The pro-Columbus organizations admit that Christopher Columbus committed atrocities, but argue that it was in the past, and that its foolish to judge these action with 21<sup>st</sup> century morality. But is it? Moreover, do the consequences of Columbus still affect us today? The pro support Columbus as an ethnic semiotic despite the mounting evidence of Columbus authoritarian activities. The against cite the historical actions and consequences as reasons to sail past the symbol.

As the NIAF statement noted, Columbus is only a fragment of Italian/American history. As Ruberto and Sciorra point out, the embrace of the Columbus symbol was part of an Americanization process. It was a product of a historical moment where freshly arrived people found a way to adapt to a new land. What is this process of Americanization? What are its implications? Does it imply buying into a narrative of white-supremacy? Is embracing Columbus,

as an ethnic semiotic, a step into joining a settler colonial project? These questions move beyond the narrative of the may of committed atrocities, and the rhetoric of “but that was in the past.” It opens new doors of understanding. This is a perception that views the embrace of the Columbus symbol as more than just the story of the man. The symbol includes, but of course is not exclusively, a tale of an Italian/American people navigating the America’s racial landscape. But it is a fragment of that story, not a totality. Consciously, a new ethnic semiotic, based on reconstructed myths could pose alternatives. They should not be from the top down, or be so rigid, during this phase they could range from celebration of local Italian/American histories, to the story of the immigration itself. This, however, is the job of the communities to decide.

As it is, left in modern *prominenti* hands, the Columbus symbol has evolved into a Columbus dilemma. The self-appointed leaders have framed the conversation into a situation where it is Italian/Americans versus Indigenous Americans. However, this time around, the cultural turn is not on the side of the *prominenti*. Their refusal to sail past Columbus is reminiscent of a scene from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa *Il Gattopardo*. As Giuseppe Garibaldi’s Red Shirts invade the Kingdom of Sicily, a young noble turns to the Prince of Salina, and utters, “unless we ourselves take a hand now, they’ll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.”<sup>187</sup> If Italian/Americans want to have a holiday, they will have to change that holiday. The making and battle over Italian/American identity continues.

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<sup>187</sup> Tomasi di Lampedusa, Giuseppe. 1961. *The Leopard*. New York: Pantheon Books. 29

***Ripensare: a tool box with a bow tie***

*“In tutte le epoche vi sono sempre stati degli uomini che hanno lottato contro i costumi, le leggi, le morali, i vincoli, le relazioni sociali del loro tempo.”*<sup>188</sup> – Virgilia D'Andrea

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<sup>188</sup> From “Chi siamo e cosa vogliamo. Patria e religion.” My translation: “In all ages there have always been men who have fought against customs, laws, morals, bonds, the social relations of their time.”

This final chapter ties together this project's goals. The first chapter of this work explored how race and Italian/Americans has been studied so far. In conclusion, the Columbus case study is analyzed from the various lenses that are offered in the theory chapter. Think of all these theories as a tool box in which scholars and activist can draw from when exploring whiteness and the origins of white supremacy.

As noted, when the *prominenti* decided to embrace Columbus there were multiple push backs by the radical elements of the Italian/American community. This fits neatly within Koselleck's framework. It is not a linear story of the slow embrace of Columbus by Italian/Americans, but is instead a battle over the symbol of Columbus. It is a layered history that is continuing presently. By acknowledging the contentious contentions, the layers over the embrace of the Columbus symbol, Italian/American can unchain themselves from symbol. What does this say about their identity though?

Traditionally speaking, intersectional theory looks at how race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. influence each other and relate to their oppression by various systems. Why not expand this to include ethnicity? The Columbus battle is a battle where ethnicity and class intersect and collide. As demonstrated in the past, and in the current struggle over Columbus the Italians of wealth, the *prominenti*, have championed the symbol. Italians of working class backgrounds, on the other hand, and those who identify with Italian/America's working class history have been contend the attachment to the symbol. Which type of identity does the embracing of this symbol create?

The embrace of Columbus, by some Italian/Americans, correlates with Komboa'Ervin's concept of a "super nationality." It writes the ethnicity into a broader European ethnic group, and as seen with the type of language used, OSIA has homogenized this into a larger grand story of all

migration. What is also of note is how the groups mentioned above emphasize their American patriotism when discussing Columbus. Why is this so?

As Sakai notes, Italian/Americans were invited into settler colonialism late, and only in response to the labor movement organizing against Capital. As Sakai argues that these late comers were “barely white” and the emphasized Americanism can be an over compensation, on the part of these prominent organization, and/or the lingering effects of “Americanization” that was offered to them early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. To take it a step further, one can conclude that the embrace of Columbus has been used by the *prominenti* to write Italian/American into the settler colonial project from its origins. This is a further emphasis on whiteness. So, what is to be done?

The openness, and fluidity of Meta-modernism, allows us to use each of the above theories as a tool box in the process of deconstructing not only the Columbus myth, but also white supremacy. This does not mean that we should give ourselves over to unfettered relativism. As noted, through meta-modernism Italian/Americans can construct a new myth as means to tie the community together. It does not have to be one that embraces a settler colonial past, but instead can be inclusive and diverse. Why not look at the African American edges that Gennari notes? Why not embrace, and expand upon, the struggles the *sovversivi* championed? But as Komboa’Ervin and Sakai note, there is a capitalist system that uses white supremacy as a means to enacting and maintaining its power. A holistic re-thinking of Italian/American identity, one that not only rejects settler colonialism ideologically, but materially, will also require a re-thinking – or better yet a dismantling – of the capitalist structure that makes this settler project, in Koselleck words, “a possibility” to begin with. *Avanti!*

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