

ITALIAN AMERICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS 50 YEARS LATER
What Might We Do?*

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests that Italian Americans and African Americans can make an impactful change if the dialogue between the two groups were constructive. It demonstrates, in the end, that such a collaboration could never exist today with reactions to a re-examination of slavery by the likes of Florida governor Ron DeSantis and other Italian Americans who have made an attempt to rehabilitate slaveholders. History and the reading thereof provide the foundation toward a requisite remedy.

KEY WORDS

ethnicity, cultural studies, immigration, racism, violence, Italian American, College Board

INTRODUCTION

In the final chapter of my book, *A Semiotic of Ethnicity. In (Re)cognition of the Italian/American Writer*, I discussed the need for and suggested a template of what could be a four-prong discourse on Italian/American cultural studies (Tamburri 1998, 121-132). With *A Semiotic of Ethnicity* being only the third organic book-length study of Italian/American literature at that time,¹ it was clear that we were still dealing with an intellectual paucity of critical discourse on both the literary and cultural fronts, notwithstanding the vast body of Italian/American literature that has its origins in the late 19th century.²

Surely, there were essays that had appeared before the three books I mention here; and they were insightful studies that deeply examined the topics at hand. But the dominance of the book form, and dare I say, the seeming lack of interest by the vast population of Italian Americans, could

* I wish to thank Stephen Cerulli, Donna Chirico, and Fred Gardaphe for having read an earlier draft of this essay. Their comments are always helpful.

¹ The first two books were by Rose Basile Green and Fred Gardaphe. With regard to the notion of "cultural studies" within this timeframe, very few scholars of Italian America methodologically (read, also, theoretically) broached the subject matter. A first concerted effort we might see in the writings of the various authors in the special issue of *Differentia, review of italian thought* 6-7 (1994). In other areas, Donna Gabaccia in history and Joseph Sciorra in vernacular culture were transgressing their respective disciplines' methodological expectations.

Two other books of this period that do not qualify in my opinion are Tamburri (1991) and Mulas. The first book is only sixty pages long and a type of "white paper"; the second a collection of essays previously published but not tied together in any theoretical or methodological manner.

² 1885 is the year that scholars have usually marked as the beginning of Italian/American literature. But in 2000, a novel by Joseph Rocchietti, *Lorenzo and Oonalaska*, published in 1835, was discovered. It is now available in paperback as *Lorenzo and Oonalaska*, edited with an introduction by Leonardo Buonomo (New Fairfield, CT: Casa Lago Press).

only create an historical and cultural vacuum.³ Such a vacuum can only render us ignorant of both ours and the histories of other ethnic/racial groups, not to mention an overall competent knowledge of the history of the United States.

BACKDROP

So, what is this temporal reference in my title? It refers back to a paragraph I wrote in the above-mentioned chapter on Italian/American cultural studies. At that time, I wrote the following that led up to the pertinent paragraph below:

. . . Italian Americans must begin to speak in terms of us *and* them, not us *against* them. Ethnicity is a socio-political construct, and as such it differentiates only insofar as it points out the major characteristics of one group as compared to those of another. These differences, moreover, may also have corollaries and analogues in certain characteristics of other ethnic groups. Let us not forget that zoology is different from sociology, and that one’s cellular make-up—i.e., his/her race—does not necessarily override one’s long-term social and cultural experiences—her/his ethnicity.

Italian/American cultural interlocutors must therefore abandon the discourse of binary oppositions—the us *against* them—and adopt, instead, one that also takes into consideration the similarities—albeit of varying degrees and intensities—of experience that Italian Americans and all the other ethnic/racial/sexual groups—minority and majority—have and continue to encounter. We must learn, that is, not to speak in terms of racism or prejudice in the singular, “but of racisms [as also prejudices] in the plural.”

Or, put another way: “What is needed,” Patrick Gallo tells us as he ends his 1974 study, “is an alliance of whites and Blacks, white-collar and blue-collar workers, based on mutual need and interdependence and hence an alliance of political participation.” Namely, the us *and* them mentioned above. “But,” Gallo continues, “before this can realistically come to pass, a number of ethnic groups have to develop in-group organization, identity, and unity.” And here Viscusi’s notion of the “group narrative” comes to mind. Finally, Gallo concludes, “[t]he Italian-Americans may prove to be a vital ingredient in not only forging that alliance but in serving as the cement that will hold our urban centers together” (Gallo, 209).

(Tamburri, 131-132)

³ I have dealt with this most recently in Tamburri (2022).

I wrote these three paragraphs in 1998, a quarter of a century ago. Patrick Gallo wrote his comments a quarter of a century before I had written mine, just about 50 years ago today. In the meantime, Robert Viscusi had proposed his narrative of inclusion, and Helen Barolini had published her anthology *The Dream Book*, with a lengthy introduction that was also a call to action. An added anecdote to all of this refers to a 2004 event at a northeastern university on Italian American studies. Toward the end of that event, there was a panel of community leaders, for the most part but not exclusively Italian Americans. Among these individuals was a local representative of the NAACP. What was striking, was her opening statement. Having been introduced, she began her talk with the following: "Where have you been? We've been waiting for you!"

The ethnic interaction to which this person's question spoke remains, I would submit, one of the essential collaborations for which all ethnic groups should strive. Only in numbers can we make an impact on the national collective consciousness that is still steeped in a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant thought process. And only through inter-ethnic partnership vis-à-vis the dominant culture can non-WASP communities make progress in establishing an indelible foothold. Social policies have surely had their impact. But such regulations can sometimes divide, especially among those who see their own group's challenges through the lens of victimization. It leads to the *us against them* attitude as opposed to the *us and them* outlook.

Such inter-ethnic collaboration has its own responsibilities and challenges. First, we must be informed of our own history. One cannot complain about any negative historical event without knowing the true origins of said event. The exaggerated extrapolations and resultant false narratives that have originated from such uninformed historical prestidigitation leaves us with egg on our face. Second, we need to acknowledge the expertise of those who are in the know. Of course, here I am alluding to a certain anti-intellectualism among some self-proclaimed Italian/American leaders. Over the past decade especially, some of these self-appointed chairs, directors, and presidents of numerous associations have shunned any collaboration with members of the scholarly community, even when such assistance was offered and, to boot, necessary.

DISCUSSION

This brings me to the most recent event that has pushed me to put some thoughts to paper, yet once more, about all of this. And it speaks as well to our own responsibility as individuals and associations of Italian America. And so here it is: In the recently developed *Florida's State Academic Stand-*

ards, one reads: “Instruction includes how slaves developed skills, which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.” Now, before proceeding, allow me to unpack ever so briefly — thus not completely — this sentence. It begins with “slaves” and ends with “benefit.” These two terms that frame this concept are fundamentally incompatible, full stop. A “slave” is “a person who is forced to work for and obey another and is considered to be their property” (*Oxford Dictionary* s.v.); “forced to work for” and “considered to be their property” cancel out all forms of benefit and any possible notion of liberty. “To benefit,” in turn, speaks to “re-*ceiv[ing]* an advantage; profit” (*Oxford Dictionary* s.v.). Here, too, persons “considered to be ... property” cannot by virtue of their status of slave receive any “advantage; profit”; they can only obey.

This white supremacist thought process that has now infiltrated the academic standards of the state of Florida are the results of Governor Ron DeSantis’s war on diversity, equality, and inclusion (DEI, as the policy is known; but, surely, the general notion of equality for the diverse is the target, with or without the capital letters) within the Florida educational system K-16. While it was already egregiously overbearing — indeed, authoritarian — that state colleges and universities in Florida had to account for the percentage of their budget spent on DEI, they were soon asked to send their respective syllabi on DEI to the state’s capital.⁴ One of the many syllabi sent was on Italian-American culture, which the university felt compelled to do because it was considered locally an ethnic studies course, which, obviously, it is.

This brings us to the issue at hand. The fundamental point of essence is not whether we should negotiate and/or collaborate with other ethnic groups, especially African Americans. The little bit we have seen in these few pages suggests, to me, that we must, as above-mentioned Patrick Gallo underscored in 1974.⁵ The intrinsic nature of the inquiry at hand is: What do we, as Italian Americans, do when our co-ethnics — those in positions of influence and, especially, elected officials — espouse notions of prejudice, racism, and white supremacy? Both anti-Black and anti-Semitic behavior is what first comes to mind as we pose such a question in mid-year 2023. It is, at this juncture in our history I would submit, an indisputable fact that our country was born and developed to a significant degree on the

⁴ In a longer version of an essay of this sort, we would underscore the importance of DeSantis’s opposition to Critical Race Theory (CRT), which was a pretext for what we can only assume was his desire not to have to teach the history of African Americans. CRT originates within the conceptual world of law and public policy. Further still, as Stephen Sawchuk tells us, CRT “puts an emphasis on outcomes, not merely on individuals’ own beliefs, and it calls on these outcomes to be examined and rectified” (Sawchuk).

⁵ This is a topic I have addressed over the years in various writings that now coalesce to some degree in Tamburri (2022),

backs of the African slave; and concomitantly, alas, antisemitic behavior has also risen its ugly head since its 18th-century inception, as we saw during the 2017 tragedy in Charlottesville, Virginia and the approbation from our nation’s capital of some among the tiki-lamp carrying anti-Semites, as they chanted the old Nazi rant, “Jews will not replace us!”⁶

These are the overwhelmingly inhuman notions of separatism that have and continue to befall Blacks and Jews since our nation’s founding. In an analogous manner — though by no means of an equally dehumanizing nature — Italian immigrants in this country suffered grave prejudices of anti-Italianism during the second half of the nineteenth century and up to and throughout the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷ It is a history readily available to the inquisitive reader, given the existence of a good number of general histories, scholarly and not, written on the subject and that touch on the matter to varying degrees.⁸

If we know our history, the good and the bad, if we are cognizant of its relationship to the histories of other ethnic groups, and if we have made a concerted effort to contextualize our ancestors’ experiences with those of other ethnic/racial groups, then we can better avoid the missteps that we have witnessed over time. It may very well be that my use of the term “missteps” is, indeed, too generous of a characterization.⁹

As we revisit the recent brouhaha over the new academic standards in Florida — that require middle schools to teach that slaves “developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit” — a few things stand out about Ron DeSantis’s behavior. First, his entire anti-Black campaign was a push back to the College Board’s proposed Advanced Placement Course on African American Studies. In condemning all involved, he gave birth to his “anti-Woke” movement. It did not matter that those behind the new AP exam were scholars and teachers; for him they were “woke,” or better, he did not like the history they had unearthed. Second, when, finally, the new Florida State Academic Standards were announced — I reiterate here the statement cited earlier here:

⁶ Books and essays abound on the history of slavery in this country; one might begin with Nikole Hannah-Jones, and, as well, Cornell West. Likewise, for the history of anti-Semitic behavior in the United States, one might start with Howard M. Sachar and Leonard Dinnerstein. For a first look at the impact of Charlottesville, see Mykal McEldowney. Regarding approbation of such behavior, one need only recall President Trump’s infamous characterization that there were “very fine people on both sides.”

⁷ Were one to delve deeper in the issue, two titles that come to mind as starting points are: Salvatore LaGumina and Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, and William J. Connell and Fred Gardaphe.

⁸ Some of the general histories — some scholarly, some not — that one might consult together with the three volumes cited in footnote 11 Alexander DeConde, Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale, and William Connell and Stanislao Pugliese.

⁹ I have been slightly admonished by some friends and colleagues that my use of the term “misstep” is erroneous. They contend that it is not an error in judgement due to their ignorance on the matter, as I have stated in the past. For them, these individuals, past and present, are simply racists and white supremacists who are very much aware of the violence of their rhetoric.

“How slaves developed skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit.” — DeSantis backed away from any responsibility.¹⁰ He first stated: “I wasn’t involved in it [developing the standards].” Indeed, as he continued: “I think that they’re probably going to show... Some of the folks that eventually parlayed, you know, being a blacksmith into doing things later in life.”

What is striking in all of this is the combination of DeSantis’s behavior and language. He waged for months his anti-CRT campaign that led to the cancellation of the originally developed AP course on African American history. As he moved forward in his rhetorical campaign, it was left to others to engage in the actual construction and de-construction of programming throughout the Florida state teaching communities. It wasn’t until the matter fell directly in his lap, which is clearly marked by the pushback from Vice President Harris’s recent visit to Florida,¹¹ that DeSantis had to take — or deny, as the case may be — some responsibility. Hence the statement that he “wasn’t involved in” developing the academic standard, that there were scholars involved. Rhetorically, in turn, DeSantis could not have been clumsier; indeed, some might say revealing his true thoughts when he stated that some “of the folks ... eventually parlayed, you know, being a blacksmith into doing things later in life.” While speaking about slavery, which speaks to discussing the history of Africans and their descendants, DeSantis might have chosen a different example of “profession”; the first half of the term “blacksmith” only echoes the fundamental crux of the situation at hand: the historical representation of the Blacks in the USA that harks back to the first period of European colonization of the Caribbean and, ultimately, North America. As former U.S. representative Will Hurd, a staunch Republican, stated in response to DeSantis, “Slavery wasn’t a jobs program that taught beneficial skills. It was literally dehumanizing and subjugated people as property because they lacked any rights or freedoms.”¹²

It is truly inscrutable that in 2023 we have arrived at this type of social discourse regarding slavery. For reasons we could debate *ad nauseam*, during the past decade, especially, people have grown increasingly bold in their desire to articulate their prejudicial and racist notions. As Representative Hurd stated, slavery was “literally dehumanizing and subjugated people as property”; as such, it exposed Blacks to psychological cruelty, phys-

¹⁰ See Chris Christie on this issue in Concepcion.

¹¹ Excerpts from her speech can be found in the following video: https://www.google.com/search?q=Kamal+Harris+in+Florida&oeq=Kamal+Harris+in+Florida+&aqs=chrome..69i57.4884j0j4&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:46cee668,vid:-L_al5BnHkY.

¹² Some of what I describe here is available on video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JtSUrjhW6Hs>.

ical onslaught, sexual violence, and, overall, physical confinement and restraint.¹³

What, then, are we to do about it? What should those of us who occupy positions of influence in some manner do? Speak up? Well, to cite once more Representative Hurd, “slavery is not a jobs program.” It ‘was really about,” as Senator Tim Scott stated, the “separating families, about mutilating humans and even raping their wives. It was just devastating....” The first thing we must do, I thus contend, is recognize that any reaction to DeSantis’s white supremacist rhetoric is not a partisan issue; it is one of humanity and all that it pertains. The very fact that both Hurd and Scott, staunch Black Republicans, have come out against DeSantis underscores the magnitude of DeSantis’s misstep. Further still, as we saw above, Chris Christie, an Italian American himself and candidate for the Republican party’s primaries, has lashed out against DeSantis on this issue.¹⁴

Indeed, DeSantis simply cannot seem to monitor himself. During his campaign in early August 2023 about the alleged Democratic weaponizing of the justice system in its many facets, he vowed to go after the “deep state,” whatever that may be. “We’re going to have all of these deep state people, you know, we are going to start slitting throats on day one,” DeSantis stated. Both ludicrous and horrifying at the same time, he wants to clean house by getting rid of federal agencies as well — something gut-splittingly farcical. In so doing, he wishes to exact vengeance by engaging in lethal violence — “slitting throats” — a most opprobrious act of violence to be sure. Yet, more contemptuous his rhetoric, he promises to impose an act of expiation that reminds us, alas, of those dreadful acts of violence — i.e., the beheadings — that the militant group ISIS enjoined on both citizens of various Middle Eastern states (e.g., Syria, Lebanon) as well as their Western captives. In all, there were approximately 332 beheadings by ISIS, beginning in 2014.¹⁵

Thus, transcending partisanship in horrific situations of such dehumanizing rhetoric and action as we have seen above, we must confront the

¹³ For more on the long-term legacy of slavery, see the following: Moamen Gouda and Anouk S. Rigterink and Aaron Gottlieb and Kalen Flynn.

Noteworthy is that Ron DeSantis is not alone as an Italian American who engages in such white supremacist discourse. During the 2010 New York state gubernatorial election, Carl Paladino was the Republican candidate running against the incumbent Andrew Cuomo. (I first dealt with this situation at the time of the elections in Tamburri (2010). It had already been discovered that Paladino had, and to some degree continued, to engage in racist tropes. His xenophobic discourses continued throughout the second decade, engaging at times in antisemitic commentary as well. See, for examples of his later racism and antisemitism. See Campbell and Blumenthal, and Nicholson.

¹⁴ See his interview on *Face the Nation*: <https://www.google.com/search?q=CHRISTIE+AGAINST+DESANTIS&oeq=CHRISTIE+AGAINST+DESANTIS&aqs=chrome..69i57j4283j0j9&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8#fpstate=ive&vld=cid:36efd59b,vid:zBPM8KPZKf0>.

¹⁵ A short-cut history of the beheadings by ISIS can be found in Wikipedia, “Islamic State beheading incidents.”

so-called elephant in the room. We must address head-on the puerile and offensive rhetoric that someone might articulate even with no evil intent and in the spirit of “joking around.” Namely, we might take the moment at hand to decide what are the duties and/or responsibilities of someone involved in Italian Americana? Must we take on that Gramscian role of “organic intellectual,” or can we just go about our business as the individuals we are and ignore the juvenile behavior? In the end, how do we create an Italian/American state of mind?

CONCLUSION

This is one of the most important issues that impacts our community, deserving of greater attention as required by our individual and most important, collective sense of *amor proprio*. We must, for sure, ponder the issue of the group versus the individual, especially that person like any famous Italian American who has the ability (read, cultural currency) to further the group’s cause. This is an age-old question that we need to tackle once and for all, since we can now readily say that we have — literally and metaphorically — arrived. After all, Ron DeSantis is running for the Republican party’s candidate for president for 2024.¹⁶

In closing, then, I end with what I hope is not too random a series of thoughts on the question of prejudices, the most heinous being the racial, the religious, and the gender based. As Dean of an institute dedicated to the history and culture of Italians in the United States, and as an individual who has been involved in various types of cultural activities and scholarly research, I can only, and so strongly, condemn with great dismay and disappointment Governor Ron DeSantis’s comments on slavery and his desired mode of revenge.

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¹⁶ For those wondering about DeSantis’s family’s immigrant history, see Megan Smolenyak, “Meet Your Great-Great-Grandmother, Ron DeSantis.” *Political Genealogy*. 31 July 2018. <https://smolenyak.medium.com/meet-your-great-great-grandmother-ron-desantis-e440780753f8>.

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