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edited by **Dorothy M. Figueira**

"Minor Minorities" and Multiculturalism

Italian American and Jewish American Literature


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Italia, Americhe e altri mondi

Collana del Centro Interdipartimentale di Studi ItaloAmericani (CISIA) dell'Università di Macerata
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In copertina: John F. Schweppe, *Crossing* (pastel and charcoal) – original drawing John F. Schweppe ©2022

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I dedicate this book to Immigrant Families across the United States of America.
Especially to my own family: my grandfather Nick Gentile from Calabria, my grandmother Carmela from Basilicata, my father Charles Figueira from British Guiana, my daughter Lila from Andhra Pradesh and my daughter Mira from Gujarat – immigrants all.

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Chapter 6

Valerio Massimo De Angelis

The Unfortunate Pilgrim: Mario Puzo's Deconstruction of the American Myths of Migration

In September 2015, the Italian Association for North American Studies (AISNA) held its biennial international conference in Naples. The title of the conference was *Harbors: Flows and Migrations of Peoples, Cultures, and Ideas. The USA in/and the World*. Its opening keynote lecture was given by Werner Sollors, who discussed a wide selection of representations, both visual (photos, paintings and drawings) and literary, of the first glimpses the immigrants from various parts of the world got of the Statue of Liberty when arriving on the shores of the New World. Almost invariably, these images of Lady Liberty were suffused in an atmosphere of hope, gratitude, and relief, totally consistent with the myth so perfectly conveyed by Emma Lazarus in "The New Colossus", the poem engraved on the pedestal of the statue: for migrants to the USA, arriving to the shores of New York City meant "birth, beginning, and promise, and the Statue of Liberty came to embody this cultural emphasis visually and textually, well into the twentieth century" (Sollors 2017, 20). But there were three notable exceptions.

One of them was taken from the Prologue to Henry Roth's 1934 novel *Call It Sleep*, and it provides one of the most famous examples of deconstruction of the standard perception and interpretation of the Statue's symbolic meaning. The other two exceptions were excerpts from the journals of two different immigrants from Italy (both from Molise). Roth's and the Italian immigrants' images all present a rather skewed vision of Lady

Liberty – cold, alien, and hostile. She is exactly the opposite of Lazarus's "mighty woman", the "Mother of Exiles" lifting her "lamp beside the golden door". Gabriel Iamurri, who arrived in America in 1895, "felt like one who is carried somewhere into the woods blindfolded knowing where he is but not knowing where he came from nor where to go to get out" (Serra 2007, 35). The Statue of Liberty "could not speak, she was mute, could not tell me where to go or what to do about it" (37). F. Michele Daniele, who came to New York City in 1905, even implied that the mostly negative impression the Statue made on him was shared by many other Italian immigrants:

> it only served to remind me of all that I had left behind – my family, my friends, my home. Perhaps if my background had been somewhat humbler […] I might have been more excited by that symbol of freedom. Yet I honestly doubt that even the poorest, lowliest paesano experienced any different sensation tha[n] I did […]. This, I fully appreciate, shatters one of the dearest stereotypes of romantic legend. (34)

The comparison between the Italian and the Jewish migrations to the USA is the very axis around which this book rotates, and these first impressions of America may already give an idea of the similarities between these two immigrant experiences, and of the peculiar features of the processes of cultural assimilation (and of the resistance to them) that they share. To give an example, David Riesman once pointed out that, as "the Italian immigrant has to go through a gastronomically bleached and bland period before he can publicly eat garlic and spaghetti, so the Jewish immigrant must also become Americanized before he can comfortably take pride in his ethnic cuisine, idiom, and gesture" (Riesman 1953, xv). Both Roth's *Call It Sleep* and Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* may well be taken as instances of the historical phase (the 1930s and the 1960s, respectively) when these two communities were more or less accepted in the mainstream of American culture, and could therefore start to retrieve and even celebrate in their literatures those markers of ethnicity they had been forced to disguise or hide or, better still, melt into the American pot.

Call It Sleep starts with Genya and her son David's very first impression of the "Golden Land". Genya is a Jewish immigrant

from Poland who in 1907 is bringing her son David to reunite with her husband and his father, Albert, who came earlier to the United States, and hers are the very first words we heard from a character in the novel. By saying "And this is the Golden Land" (Roth 1977, 11), Genya ironically echoes the poetic lines (from an unknown, possibly non-existing source) of the epigraph "(I pray thee ask no questions / this is that Golden Land)" (9):

> And before them, rising on her high pedestal from the scaling swarmy brilliance of sunlit water to the west, Liberty. The spinning disk of the late afternoon sun slanted behind her, and to those on board who gazed, her features were charred with shadow, her depths exhausted, her masses ironed to one single plane. Against the luminous sky the rays of her halo were spikes of darkness roweling the air; shadow flattened the torch she bore to a black cross against flawless light – the blackened hilt of a broken sword. Liberty. The child and his mother stared again at the massive figure in wonder. (9)

The harsh, stern, iron-like features that the mother and son detect in the Statue are in striking opposition to any other perception from just arrived immigrants at the beginning of the twentieth century and seem to predict an equally rude attitude by the "natives" of the "Golden Land" towards the two newcomers. What the Prologue seems to be creating as a horizon of expectation for the reader is an unfriendly environment that the young David and his mother will have to face in order to survive in what initially looks more like a new wilderness than the heaven on earth the advertisements and travel guides that people contemplating migration to America could read at that time in many countries, including, and most pertinent to the context of this essay, Italy.

But when the reader starts wandering through the noisy streets first of Brownsville and then of the Lower East Side, s/he almost immediately starts to realize that the supposedly nightmarish urban hell into which the boy is catapulted is much more the result of his own biased and distorted perception, conditioned as it is by his very young age (David is two when he arrives to New York City and six in the subsequent plot) and by his conflicted relationship with a father he knows only as a

violently authoritarian "American"[1] (Albert came to America when David was not yet born), rather than the truthful picture of a world where dangers and temptations are ominipresent, as are (unexpected) help and opportunities. What the novel finally manages to create is a myth of America as the (not necessarily golden) land where immigrants from all over the world can finally find a place where they will not be melted together in some kind of homogenizing cauldron, but inharmoniously accommodated in a new heterogeneous space – a sort of *heterotopia*, that "fundamentally unreal" place which, according to Michel Foucault, is "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible" (Foucault 1986, 25)[2]. Inharmonious and even chaotic as it may be, this heterotopian space is also the place where the members of all the ethnic communities of the Lower East Side manage to overcome their differences and to understand each other (each in his or her different language), as when they all run to David's aid, when he faints after having put a metal bar on the electrified tracks of the trolley.

In Roth's novel, such a space is "fundamentally unreal" in the sense that it does not yet exist in real life, except in the specific occasion of David's stunt and outside David's vision of the whole world converging to save him. What *Call It Sleep* adumbrates as a child's fantasy is precisely this utopian/heterotopian possibility, projected onto a future still to be built but already predicted in the early decades of the twentieth century by people such as Horace Kallen, who in his 1915 essay "Democracy Versus the Melting Pot" saw America as a "symphony of civilization" which, through "the perfection of the cooperative harmonies of 'European civilization'", would lead to "a multiplicity in unity, an orchestration of mankind" (Kallen 1924, 116-117). The process of the immigrant's adjustment to the apparently hostile environment of the New World thus finally reverses the

[1] Albert is presented as someone who "had evidently spent some time in America" and is dressed in "the ordinary clothes the ordinary New Yorker wore in that period" (Roth 1977, 10).

[2] On the utopian/heterotopian multilingual dimension of *Call It Sleep*, see V.M. De Angelis 2009 and 2017.

image of the Prologue, or at least announces the possible reversal of that image, in some way (oblique and contradictory as it can be) realigning the novel to the mythology of hope embedded in Emma Lazarus's poem and in the journals and diaries of many Jewish immigrants to America.

Mario Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* follows a path that can be conceived as being totally opposite, and it confirms the ominous prediction of life-to-be in America that the Italian immigrants evoked by Sollors saw in the iron features of Lady Liberty. This view of America, which is negative from the very beginning, is not the overriding and ever-recurring feature of the Italian American myth(s) of migration, but it surfaces here and there to contest the dominant vision of the "American Dream" and is due more or less to a definite awareness that the differences between the New and the Old World are not so clear-cut as the rhetoric of the Dream programmatically declares[3]. Robert Viscusi stresses how

> Africans were transported to America as slaves; Anglo-Saxons remember coming in search of religious freedom. These experiences shape their founding myths […]. The founding myth for the Italians is this memory of how the rich expelled the poor into the world the great Cristoforo discovered and that the great Amerigo first recognized it for what it was.
>
> That is, this New World has turned out to replicate some of the less lovely features of the Old World. (Viscusi 2006, 146)

But what is even more interesting is the fact that Puzo's deconstruction of the American myths of migration develop within a plot that ultimately actualizes the dream of material success which is the very foundation of those myths, instead of denouncing its impracticability. This dream, that Roth carefully chooses not to address, is replaced by David's final "real" dream (we may call it sleep…) that fantasizes harmonizing the various hyphenated identities without making them lose their individual distinctiveness. The comparison between these two novels is justified by the fact that, as Daniela Gioseffi remarks in her forceful vindication of the novel's cultural role, "when *The*

[3] On the representation/deconstruction of the American Dream in Italian American literature in general, see Marazzi 2010.

Fortunate Pilgrim appeared in 1964, the author was called 'the Italian Bernard Malamud, the Henry Roth of Italian culture in America!'" (Gioseffi 2003, 122)[4].

The Fortunate Pilgrim is Mario Puzo's second novel after *The Dark Arena* (1955), a novel about the post-World War II occupation of Germany by the American army. Even if the critical reviews were mostly favorable, sometimes verging on enthusiastic, *The Fortunate Pilgrim* did not make a fortune for his author. Maybe telling the story of an average, lower-class immigrant Italian family was not yet the subject material upon which a writer could build a career. But four years later a very different family, headed not by a woman who is "sainted" (Lucia *Santa*), but by a man whose honorary title designates a surrogate of God himself, the Godfather, won Mario Puzo fame and financial success. What the hard-working Angeluzzi-Corbo family in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* could not do for Puzo, *the* Family, the Mafia, managed to achieve. As Fred Gardaphé states in *From Wiseguys to Wise Men*, "the mother-son paradigm employed by Puzo in *The Fortunate Pilgrim* is exchanged for the father-son paradigm in *The Godfather*" (Gardaphé 2006, 15)[5]. One can certainly interpret these characters' reversal of fortunes as an implicit indictment of the contradictions inherent in the American Dream, which abstractly celebrates individual commitment to the values of abnegation and self-sacrifice (in Lucia Santa's and Octavia's "female masculinities", to borrow Gardaphé's felicitous terminology)[6], but ultimately rewards the (male) exploiters

[4] For a comparative analysis of the migrant experiences of Italian Americans and Jewish Americans, see Thomas Kellner's classic *The Golden Door* (1977).

[5] Puzo himself recognized in the Preface he added to the 1996 reprinting of *The Fortunate Pilgrim* that the protagonist of *The Godfather* is Lucia Santa turned into a man: "Whenever the Godfather opened his mouth, in my own mind I heard the voice of my mother. I heard her wisdom, her ruthlessness, and her unconquerable love for her family and for life itself" (Puzo 2004, 9).

[6] As a matter of fact, Lucia Santa's (and also her daughter Octavia's) strength lies in a feature that is conventionally associated with male identity – the ability to rationally elaborate strategic plans for the future: "While the men talk, work, and sleep, Lucia Santa and her older daughter Octavia sit in the kitchen at night and plan. If the men seem too close to the transportation industry that they are almost absorbed into it, the women, who are confined to their homes, have the energy and detachment to set their families moving toward their final goal" (Dwyer 2003, 58-59).

of vice and crime[7]. Thomas J. Ferraro has noted that, if Puzo mythologizes "the de facto matriarchy of immigrant New York in *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, in *The Godfather*" he monumentalizes "illegitimate capitalism as the gloriously demonic triumph of an insidiously patriarchal family – at the expense, apparently, of women's presence, female knowing" (Ferraro 2000, p. 499)[8].

The Fortunate Pilgrim tells the story of the Angeluzzi-Corbo household from the 1920s to the early post-World War II period. At center stage we find the majestic figure of Lucia Santa, who early in the narrative marries Anthony Angeluzzi in order to escape from the confinements of a southern Italy described as a backward, almost primitive country. After his premature death, she weds Frank Corbo, in order to ensure the survival of her three children (Larry, Octavia, and Vincenzo); she would go on to have three more children from this union (Gino, Sal, and Lena). Even though Frank has a steady job on the railroad, the family can only afford to live in a small tenement on 10th Avenue, in Little Italy. Lucia Santa stoically faces all the various vicissitudes that she and her family encounter, from the growing madness (triggered first by an ill-fated conversion to fundamentalist evangelism and later by the alienating pressures

[7] Gardaphé also adds that early Italian-American writers "knew the power of the mother, and novelists like Puzo celebrated this in works like *The Fortunate Pilgrim* before they felt the pressure to create a patriarchal version of masculinity that was more expected and accepted in the United States, as Puzo did in *The Godfather*" (Gardaphé 2006, 200). Nonetheless, "Puzo developed female masculinity through the figures of Lucia Santa and her daughter Octavia in ways that suggest that the women are enacting masculine roles quite naturally to fill voids left by the men in their lives, who ultimately present masculinities that have failed to perform" (Gardaphé 2018, 559).

[8] Mary Jo Bona proposes an alternative reading, by inverting the relationship through time of the two novels: Puzo's Mafia saga, instead of being a (commercially and also culturally successful) gender translation of (one of) the myth(s) of Italian American identity from female god-mother to male Godfather, would be the object of a sort of preemptive dismantling by the earlier novel, because, when juxtaposed to *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, "*The Godfather* can be deconstructed and the very mythology of Sicilian justice critiqued by its central character, Lucia Santa, whose resiliency and strength emerge from an impregnable understanding of honor and loyalty disconnected from masculine notions of power" (Bona 2015, 49). Besides, Larry, who "successfully" becomes a member of the Mafia, is finally dismissed by his mother, who by doing so also dismisses "an unofficial form of authority that she finds morally repugnant" (Bona 2010, 29).

of working in a cocoa factory) of her second husband, who will die (willingly if painfully abandoned by his wife) in a mental asylum, to the suicide of the shy and hypersensitive Vincenzo. For all these various male figures, who sooner or later fail her and the family, Lucia is not, as one critic has suggested, "a mental and moral slave" (Pardini 2017, 36), but rather the embodiment of that "secret tradition of Italian American women" consisting of "rebellion" (Ferraro 2005, 77), resistance, stubborn refusal to give up, and especially to allow the unity of the family to crumble and fade away[9]. According to Chiara Grilli, Lucia Santa even "evokes Carl Gustav Jung's archetype of the Great Mother", as incarnated in quite a number of female Italian American characters: "Strong, ready to fight for their children, and at the same time cursing them aggressively, these women are the perfect embodiment of the good mother and of the terrible mother, a representation hinting less at the Christian and more at the pagan tradition of the Southern Italian custom" (Grilli 2018, 153-154).

In one of the many sudden and unexpected detours from the general realism of the novel, the narrator shares Lucia Santa's hallucinatory vision of the superhuman power of old Italian women. This phantasmagoric show of a primordial and timeless energy, as clichéd and stereotyped as it may be, effectively symbolizes the refusal to surrender to the de-humanizing and ultimately lethal logic of the modern, urban, individualistic culture of American capitalism:

> Their eyes flashed fire; energy and power radiated from their black-clad, lumpy bodies. They devoured everything that happened on the Avenue as they spoke. They hurled curses like thunderbolts at children headed for mischief. They sucked greedily on ridged paper cups of chilling lemon ice and took great bites of smoking hot pizzas, dipping brown invincible teeth deep into the lava of hot tomato sauce and running rivers of cheese to the hidden yeasty dough. Ready to murder anyone who stood in the way of

[9] Commenting on Samuele Pardini's book, Donatella Izzo stresses how Lucia Santa is the "historically and socially specific, material embodiment of a way to live in the world inspired by communal sharing, reciprocity and relatedness, inclusion and non-partitioning" (Izzo 2017, 19; my translation), as opposed to the individualistic ideology of capitalism.

so much as a crust of bread for themselves or their children, implacable enemies of death. They were alive. The stones of the city, steel and glass, the blue-slate sidewalks, the cobblestoned streets, would all turn to dust and they would be alive. (Puzo 2004, 246)

Even the Great Depression cannot defeat Lucia and her family. The subsequent economic boom caused by the war socially and economically raises their standard of living:

While the war raged over the world, the Italians living along the western wall of the city finally grasped the American dream in their calloused hands. Money rolled over the tenements like a flood. Men worked overtime and doubletime in the railroad, and those whose sons had died or been wounded worked harder than all the rest, knowing grief would not endure as long as poverty. (253)

The physical embodiment of this upward mobility is their move to Long Island, more than once invoked as the ultimate object of desire, as the fabulous place where owning a house meant for Italian immigrants that the American Dream had in fact come true (Dwyer 2009, 61)[10]. They had finally ascended the city upon a hill, as in the very last paragraph of the novel, where Lucia and her sons and daughters really go *up* towards their new life, crossing the bridge that will separate them from their past:

Then they were ascending the slope of Queensborough Bridge, running through the slanted, flashing shadows of suspended cables. The children stood up to see the slate-gray water below, but in just a few moments they were off the bridge and rolling down a wide, tree-lined boulevard. The children began to shriek, and Lucia Santa told them, yes, now they were on Long Island. (Puzo 2004, 258)

This dream-like and mythical dimension is apparent from the very beginning, even in the title of the novel, which invokes the founding myth of (Anglo-)American culture – and in so doing once again connects to literary representations of the hopes and

10 The passage of the Angeluzzi-Corbo family from the inner city tenement to the suburban Long Island private house is paradoxically symbolic of the movement of the Italian American community from margin to center. On this historical transformation, see La Gumina 1988; on its representation in Italian American culture, see Gardaphé 2004.

desires of the Jewish American migrants, who also identified with the predicament of the Pilgrim Fathers (as in Anzia Yezierska's autobiographical short story "America and I")[11] and actually reversed, in a play of mirrors, the original self-identification of the American Puritans with the Hebrews of the Bible.

In the very first scene of *The Fortunate Pilgrim*, another central myth of American identity is evoked, that of the cowboy and the pioneer, of the Frontier, and of the inner migration from East to West. Puzo displaces this movement and its myth, one of the most iconic situations codified in Westerns, usually set in the barren wilderness of the Great Plains, to the East, re-enacting it in the urban environment of New York City. The novel opens with Larry Angeluzzi riding "his jet-black horse proudly through a canyon formed by two great walls of tenements", perfectly projecting onto the landscape of modernity an image from the past that in fact *is part* of that modernity, thanks to the movie industry[12]:

> In 1928 the New York Central Railroad used the streets of the city to shuttle trains north and south, sending scouts on horseback to warn traffic. In a few more years this would end, an overhead pass built. But Larry Angeluzzi, not knowing he was the last of the "dummy boys", that he would soon be a tiny scrap of urban history, rode as straight and arrogantly as any western cowboy. His spurs were white, heavy sneakers, his sombrero a peaked cap studded with union buttons. His blue dungarees were fastened at the ankle with shiny, plated bicycle clips. (12)

[11] In "America and I", first published in the collection *Children of Loneliness* (1923), Yezierska tells her migrant experience as a working woman in search of a job that may allow her to make use of her creativity, and when she seems to be failing she happens to read the story of the Pilgrim Fathers, and understands that America is not a finished product, but a "work in progress" that can give her the possibility to contribute to the American project without renouncing her ethnic roots.

[12] In his ride, Larry even passes through a sort of cinema arena, showing the same ghostly mythical image he is imitating in real life: "At 27th Street the wall on Larry Angeluzzi's right fell away for a whole block. In the cleared space was Chelsea Park placed with dark squatting shapes, kids sitting on the ground to watch the free outdoor movies shown by Hudson Guild Settlement House. On the distant giant white screen, Larry Angeluzzi saw a monstrous horse and rider, bathed in false sunlight, thundering down upon him, felt his own horse rise in alarm as its tossing head caught sight of those great ghosts; and then they were past the intersection of 28th Street, and the wall had sprung up again" (Puzo 2004, 13).

The scene prepares the reader for the novel's depiction of the Italian migrants "as fearless and courageous as those European settlers who earlier cleared the wilderness and tamed the West" (Oliver 1987, 17). It is followed by an even clearer comparison: "They were pioneers, though they never walked an American plain and never felt real soil beneath their feet. They moved in a sadder wilderness, where the language was strange, where their children became members of a different race. It was a price that must be paid" (Puzo 2004, 16). In order to become a legitimate part of such a mythical landscape, the Italian migrants must sacrifice their ethnic identity.

Losing their connection to their "race" is, however, only *one* of the prices the immigrants pay in the New World in exchange for the possibility of assimilation. The alternative entails more or less fully embracing one of the most negative clichés of *italianità*, that of the Italian as *mafioso*, because Italian organized crime is, as a matter of fact, integral to American political corruption[13]. If *The Fortunate Pilgrim* "examines the myth of the American dream and the real possibility that the *outsider* might succeed in realizing it" (Tamburri 1998, 17), this "real possibility" is achieved through what Lucia Santa has always tried to resist, and that her sad pragmatism has finally forced her to accept – the involvement of a representative of the corruption of *italianità*, a Mafia *padrino*. Larry, whom she by now considers as "lost" to the family because he had chosen to become a member of the *Famiglia*, manages "to acquire a 'godfather' and with that aid" is able "to free his mother and children from the bondage of New York City's West Side, then lead them into the Canaan

[13] Anthony Tamburri suggests that "Puzo's use of a sometimes sleazy, Italian/American character – especially those involved in the stereotypical organized crime associations – may figure as an indictment of the social dynamism of a dominant culture which refuses access to the *outsider*" (Tamburri 1991, 40) – or better still, in my view, of a social and economic system which grants that access only to those who either relinquish any ambition to preserve some ethnic marker and to resist the logic of competitive individualism, or, on the contrary, accept to be classified and therefore controlled by stereotypical representations of their supposedly "authentic" ethnicity. The integration of the *mafioso* inside the mainstream social and cultural system is confirmed by the first description of a member of the *Famiglia*, Zi' Pasquale, "definitely Italian but dressed American, with no trace of the greenhorn; hair trimmed close, tie skinny and plain and solid-colored" (Puzo 2004, 177).

of Long Island" (Viscusi 2006, 49), so thoroughly complying – on the surface – with the basic tenets of the myth of America as the new Promised Land for those "fortunate pilgrims".

In the last scene of the novel, echoing a number of analogous commentaries by both the narrator and various characters throughout the text, Lucia Santa meditates on the fate of her family, laying bare what for her is the ultimate deception of the American Dream, the fact that it creates a perverted series of self-generating desires never to be satisfied by their actual fulfillment:

> America, America, blasphemous dream. Giving so much, why could it not give everything? Lucia Santa wept for the inevitable crimes she had committed against those she loved. In her world, as a child, the wildest dream had been to escape the fear of hunger, sickness and the force of nature. The dream was to stay alive. No one dreamed further. But in America wilder dreams were possible, and she had never known of their existence. Bread and shelter were not enough. (Puzo 2004, 256-257)

Giving so much, compared to the few opportunities offered by the Old World, America is expected to give everything and give it freely. But what America concedes with such apparent generosity is only money, and turning upside down the ordinary relationship between money and value it requires the immigrant to *pay* for the money s/he receives by renouncing some of those same dreams it has awakened, as in the case of Octavia, who has to give up her project of becoming a schoolteacher to meet the most immediate needs of the family. In order to raise money, one has to sell what money should buy – a future[14]. Puzo actually "kills Lucia's dominance by moving her away from her power base, the ethnic community, where her native language could still be used to further her causes, where her friendships could aid in providing for and protecting her family" (Gardaphé

[14] But the novel could also imply that Octavia's renunciation is what gives her the possibility of replacing her mother, in the future, as the head of the family – even if in a different way. Mary Jo Bona states that Mario Puzo might suggest (something really uncommon for a male Italian American author before the end of the 20th century) Octavia's growing (if not totally acquired) independence and power "in having her choose not to bear children", in an era when "such decisions were not made easily, especially for a woman of Octavia's generation" (Bona 2018a, 388).

2006, 31). The "bottom line for the immigrant is 'Americanize or go crazy'" (30). The American Dream is bought by relinquishing cultural authority and any discursive claims to an ethnic identity. It means accepting to be "melted" away[15], as it is still now the case if, like Peter Carravetta reminds us, Italian Americans always have, "at some point – say, when you pay your taxes or apply for a visa or are sent to war", to "deny the adjective", and so "are constitutively threatened to relinquish one part of their selves when certain contingencies arise" (Carravetta 2015, 115-116) – even when they look as positive ones. And Lucia's final dirge about the betrayal of hope paradoxically brought about by the American Dream turned into reality also sounds like the recognition that she has to settle back into the ordinary, subordinate role usually assigned to women, and thus disappear from the social and cultural foreground (to melt into the shadows, one could say…).

As a matter of fact, in his elegy of a female figure that acquires a majestic dimension, almost larger than life, Mario Puzo avoids a widespread tendency in (male, and not only Italian American) migrant fictions at least up to the 1970s, that of downplaying, when not totally ignoring, what Irene Gedalof calls the "embodied work of mothering, such as childcare and childbirth, and the work of reproducing cultures and structures of belonging, such as transmitting culturally specific histories and traditions regarding food, dress, family and other inter-personal relationships" (Gedalof 2009, 82). Most Italian American communities up to the mid-twentieth century differed from dominant WASP culture because they still largely adhered to traditions that gave

15 Some early interpretations of the novel see its ending in a much more positive way, as a celebration of that "typically" Italian-American will to survive that bends the American Dream, even deforms it, but finally makes it "real", thus confirming and reinforcing the dream itself and the myths of migration that are interconnected with it. According to Rose Basile Green, for example, Lucia Santa's ultimate revelation allows her to see that the truth of a dream "is that no achievement is perfect. Puzo then concludes that preservation is not enough. […] bread and shelter are not enough for happiness", and that "America holds the opportunity for further possibilities […]. Puzo's theme of survival, therefore, transcends necessity and its incriminatory operations, and looks to a future of a humanity made more expansive in a better environment" (Green 1974, 348).

priority to "the family over all institutions and the individual, [to] the matricentric family versus the patriarchal family, and [to] a culture of interdependence versus independence" (Tardi 2010, 97). Lucia Santa's triumph is based precisely on her ability to reproduce that system of traditions and to exploit at the same time the occasion provided by the "fundamental changes to family relations, especially between the sexes and the generations" (Gabaccia 2000, 100), required by the new environment. After the gradual severing of the connections with the homeland, the reproduction of traditions firmly establishes itself in the diaspora (see Bona 2018b, 16). Being in charge of a vast family amid the harsh realities of immigrant life in the nightmarishly alien landscape of New York City, Lucia Santa gradually becomes aware of social possibilities she could never attain nor even dream of in Italy. Although "Lucia Santa, completely absorbed in raising and running her family in her own way, shows very little the concern for assimilation or acculturation", America truly becomes for her "the land of opportunity and of all those things she could not have as a young woman back home" (Mulas 1995, 53).

In this regard, the protagonist of *A Fortunate Pilgrim* seems to perfectly embody the pattern described in a recent survey of the historiography of "Little Italies":

> A Sicilian woman in the tenements, for example, might help her husband in the morning to set up shop, then meet her *comari* (her fellow godmothers, or, by extension, women from the same ancestral village) in the afternoon to do the needlework that was hired out to them by a female acquaintance who picked it up from a nearby clothing factory, then have coffee with a neighbor who lived on the floor below while looking after her own children and the children of the other families, and then have dinner with her family and its boarders. A woman who had previously been isolated in an agricultural village in Sicily thus found herself at the center of a new network of social and economic relations. If it was true that the Italian immigrants maintained certain Sicilian traditions, it was also true that they adapted them to the new environment that, in turn, partly determined their development. (Garroni 2018, 172)

Being "different than before, as their children are now different from their parents, all of whom now constitute a group that is no longer the Italian of the old world nor, for that matter, the

complete American of the new world", Lucia Santa and Octavia come to "inhabit an interstitial space" (Tamburri 2014, 49) where the mother can rule the family with an unprecedented authority and the daughter "not only marries outside her ethnicity but transgresses the religious boundary as well; she is to marry a 'Jew'" (47) – and she also wears "business suits" (Puzo 2004, 191) that are more customarily worn by men[16]. If Octavia can have the possibility of trespassing ethnic, religious and even gender borders, it is because of Lucia Santa's "protection". She is delighted to see her daughter marrying a Jew and not an Italian, because those "guinea tyrants, those despotic greenhorns" are incapable of showing "mercy to womankind" and only want to exert their "masculine tyranny" (193).

But the transplantation (and adaptation, and deep revision) of Italian social and interpersonal relationships in the Little Italies cannot last forever. As Robert Viscusi recalls, "Little Italy meant a captive market of external exiles, who could neither enter the order of English America nor return to Italy. Little Italy was not only little by definition, but it was always getting smaller. In literary history, Little Italy has had two favorite themes: its own nostalgia, and its own death" (Viscusi 1990, 64-65).

Lucia's predicament seems at first precisely that of being entrapped between an America where she does not understand how to fit in, and an Italy that looms like a nightmare to which she does not want to return. But then, she slowly manages to exploit her role as preserver of the past in the land of the future[17]. Her downfall is caused by the fulfillment of the project of Americanization – losing her power of mediation between her Italian

[16] Rose De Angelis points out that Octavia's "verbal prowess and her extensive reading subvert the traditional association of mind/intellect with the male and public life; Ottavia [*sic*] transcends the limitations of her situation and journeys out of the private sphere of the home" (R. De Angelis 1995, 40). On Octavia's radical choices that define her as an independent woman, see also Ahearn 1985, 129-132. On the ambiguities of Octavia's supposed independence, see below.

[17] On Lucia Santa as "transmigrant mother", see Bisutti 2017, where she is described as the embodiment of the archetype of "the loving and at the same time terrible mother, who makes moving possible and watches over it, who pays the price of the American dream and does not hesitate when necessary to make also her dear ones pay for it" (111, my translation).

heritage and American modernity, she must exit the stage, sadly aware that her family will never again be what it once was, as exemplified by Gino, who volunteers for the war without even telling his mother: "With terrible clarity she knew Gino would never come home after the war. That he hated her as she had hated her father. That he would become a pilgrim and search for strange Americas in his dreams" (Puzo 2004, 257).

But Gino's dreamy search for something better looks very much like the umpteenth reiteration of a myth which the novel has throughout systematically undermined. Earlier in the plot, the father of Gino's best friend, Joey Bianco, loses all the money he has put in the bank. The narrator gives voice to the desperate hope Joey's father, Pasquale, still nourishes:

> America, America, what dreams are dreamed in your name? What sacrilegious thoughts of happiness do you give birth to? There is a price to be paid, yet one dreams that happiness can come without the terrible payments. Here there was hope, in Italy none. They would start again, he was only a man of forty-eight. He still had twenty years of work in his body. For each human body is a gold mine. The ore of labor yields mountains of food, shelter from the cold, wedding feasts, and funeral wreaths to hang on the tenement door. That comical little gnarled body in long winter underwear and gray mustaches still held a treasure to yield up, and with a woman's practical sense Mrs. Bianco was worried more about her husband than about the money they had lost. (146)

But Mrs. Bianco's shift of her preoccupations from the loss of money to the dangers the quest of the Dream entails for the health and life of her husband reveals that rather than on a Covenant with God the American Dream might be founded on a pact with the Devil. The metaphor that translates not only Pasquale's, but everyone's body into a source of material wealth, a "gold mine", an "ore of labor", literally reduces the human to the economic which is the cornerstone of capitalist social organization, and the ideology that capitalism has built in order to transform the nightmare into a dream. It extracts value ("a treasure") out of an apparently valueless "comical little gnarled body".

Another and even more radical reversal of the American Dream can be seen in Gino's attitude towards his friend Joey,

who has also lost all the money he meticulously hoarded by denying his natural drive to indulge in earthly pleasures, such as ice creams and hot dogs – a perfect reenactment of Robinson Crusoe's inauguration of the myth of the *homo economicus*, based on the deferral of gratification in order to build up the original accumulation of capital. Gino is fascinated by Joey's almost puritanical virtue in obeying the imperatives of the capitalist Super-Ego. But instead of imitating Joey, he not only satisfies his own desires but also shares the little earthly pleasures he can buy with his friend who is much "richer" than himself, and all the poorer for it: "Gino had always respected him and given him at least one bite of hot dog, one taste of pizza, one lick of lemon ice to help him past temptation"; Gino even feels a total empathy with Joey's sense of loss, after he realizes "the extent and finality of his tragedy", because what his friend has lost is, "in some way", "his money", too (142). With a further, paradoxical twist, Gino feels luckier than his friend precisely because he is poorer than him, having therefore much less, almost nothing, to lose.

If failing can be a success, succeeding in America can also turn, for Italian immigrants, into a failure, as is perfectly testified by Lucia Santa's daughter, Octavia, who is so clever in selling sewing machines to Italian immigrant women that they buy them even when they do not need to – and she refuses to cheat those women, thus losing her most lucrative job. For all of her independent spirit, her ability in providing financial support to her family through her sewing expertise (she immediately finds another job after having being fired), and her mastery of the English tongue (a counterpoint to the smooth Italian she uses to lure her would-be clients), that allows her to dialectically beat the relief investigator who cuts his share from the subsidy he has illegally granted to Lucia Santa, Octavia cannot achieve a full-fledged autonomy, even if she somehow also epitomizes the image of self-empowerment through sewing so recurrent in Italian American literature, and that Mary Jo Bona has already thoroughly investigated (see Bona 2014).

The American standard myths of migration are clearly modeled after a pattern of initiation rites. The protagonists must un-

dergo a series of rituals in order to reach some higher and fuller identity. Such challenges are ultimately overcome by shedding the past and accepting the opportunities of an American future. Both *Call It Sleep* and *The Fortunate Pilgrim* seem to accept this narrative pattern, but also revise it, one perhaps by reinforcing the American Dream (but only on the imaginative level) and the other by perhaps defusing it (but only after having given the migrants what they thought they wanted).

Roth's novel substitutes the myth of the melting pot with that of a noisy kaleidoscope where nothing is left behind and everything is preserved and refracted innumerable times. Its young protagonist finally becomes a real hero not by renouncing his old identity and embracing the new self that America wants him to acquire, but through the reinvention of his personal and cultural past (sanctioned by his learning classical Hebrew), which he naively tries to actualize in today's America (he wants to replicate Isaiah's purification through fire by inserting a metal rod into an electrified rail). His attempt at self-sacrifice turns him into the focal point of attention for all the other ethnic communities of the Lower East Side, whose multilingual and multicultural diversity will be saved and later reflected by the mirror of David's future self as a poet (*Call It Sleep* was projected as the first part of a wider *Künstlerroman*).

On the surface, Puzo's novel is more traditional in the development of its plot according to the rules of the Italian American epic of survival. But the title that ironically links the Italian American experience to the mythological founders of American civilization sets the stage instead for a brutal deconstruction of the American Dream, all the more treacherous when the Italian immigrants manage to make it true. They are unfortunate not because they are Italian and immigrants (coming from a Catholic, and not a Protestant environment, they should implicitly be unable to comply with the imperatives of capitalist ethics), but precisely because their experience repeats and redoubles that of the original Pilgrims, revealing the self-defeating, Sisyphus-like logic of a myth of individual and collective progress through the endless deferral of the fulfillment of desire that actually hides (and strengthens) the de-humanizing machinery of exploitation.

When she seems to have brought her family away, safe from that hell, Lucia cannot but mourn what she has lost – first of all, her innocent (and much more American than Italian) desire for the future, a future which is now already past, and no longer retrievable:

> And now a million secret voices called out, "Lucia Santa, Lucia Santa, you found your fortune in America", and Lucia Santa weeping on her backless kitchen chair raised her head to cry out against them, "I wanted all this without suffering. I wanted all this without weeping for two lost husbands and a beloved child. I wanted all this without the hatred of that son conceived in true love. I wanted all this without guilt, without sorrow, without fear of death and the terror of a judgment day". In innocence. (Puzo 2004, 256)

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