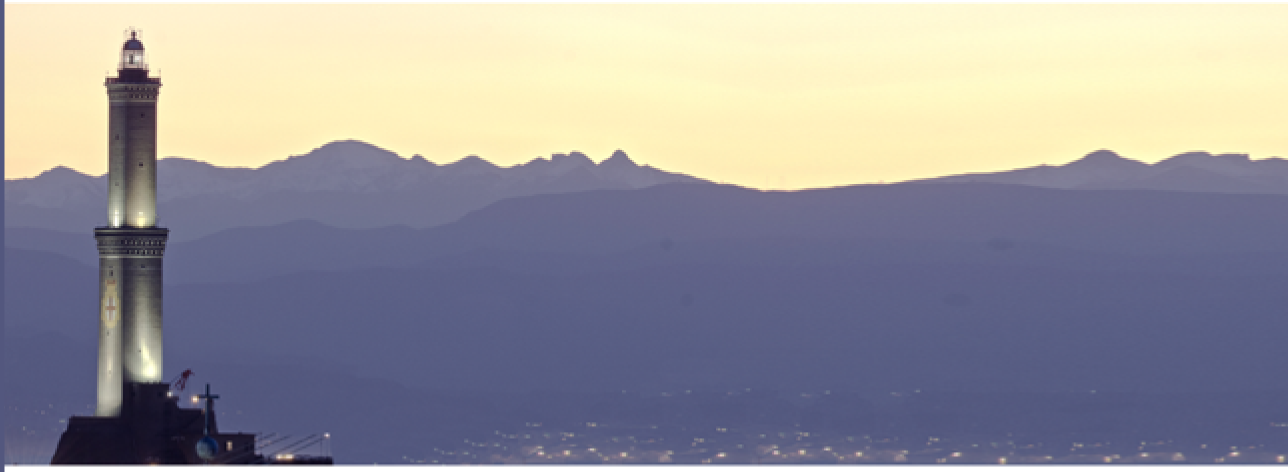
DIASPORE ITALIANE

ITALY IN MOVEMENT



BETWEEN IMMIGRATION AND HISTORICAL AMNESIA

CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS

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The third edition of Diaspore Italiane was hosted by the Istituzione Musei del Mare e delle Migrazioni, at Galata Museo del Mare of Genoa.

"**Between Immigration and Historical Amnesia**" conference, is the title of the third and final installment of the international symposium Diaspore italiane – Italy in Movement, organised in partnership by CO.AS.IT. Italian Assistance Association (Melbourne), the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College/City University of New York) and Mu.MA - Istituzione Musei del Mare e delle Migrazioni, which is soon to include the new Italian Museo Nazionale dell'Emigrazione (MEI).

The inaugural conference of the symposium, "Living Transcultural Spaces," was held at CO.AS.IT. in Melbourne in April 2018, followed by "Transnationalism and Questions of Identity," held at the John D Calandra Italian American Institute (Queens College/City University of New York) in November 2018.

The Diaspore italiane initiative constitutes a significant contribution towards the building of a "truly transnational Italian studies" as well as being an important networking opportunity for scholars and institutions working on various aspects of the Italian diaspora worldwide, and on the influence of immigrant communities in contemporary Italian society and culture.

The Genoa conference was a fruitful and productive meeting that gathered here in Italy more than 100 speakers, scholars, indipendent researchers, professors, school teachers and museum staff and cultural operators.

Special thanks go to the organizers for their effort and time in organizing panel session and gathering all the papers presented in this report, and also to all the panelists that made it possible to develop a conference with such a wide variety of contents, perspectives and interpretations.

Pierangelo Campodonico
Director of Mu.MA
Istituzione Musei del Mare e delle Migrazioni, Genova

Not so white on arrival: unearthing the memory of Italian American slavery in Mary Bucci Bush's *Sweet Hope*

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Abstract

At the turn of the 19th into the 20th century, Italian migrants to the USA were often considered as "not-white" An example is the experience of the Italian peasants who ended up working in the Southern plantations as replacements of the former black slaves who had left for the North. Mary Bucci Bush's *Sweet Hope* (2011) – based on the recollections of Bush's grandmother, who worked on the Sunnyside Plantation (Arkansas) as a child – tells this almost unknown story. My essay aims at showing how the novel tries to create a fictional substitute collective memory to fill the gaps in official historical reconstructions of the Italian American experience – to unearth a harsh reality both cultures, American and Italian, have long tried to bury in historical amnesia.

Keywords:

Italian American fiction, Italian migration to the USA, Cultural memory, Racialization

Thomas Guglielmo's groundbreaking *White on Arrival* (2000) persuasively argues that the ethnic prejudice against Italians in the high tide of the Italian migration to the United States was based much more on notions of "race" that on differences in skin color, so that Italians were not actually considered on the same ethnic level as African Americans or Native Americans (or Mexicans), but rather grouped together with Southern European/Latin/Mediterranean immigrants, who clearly belonged to a much different race than "Blacks," "Reds," and "Browns," notwithstanding the varieties of skin colors they featured (and which sometimes made them look as "lighter" African Americans or average Mexicans). This even helped Italian migrants, according to Guglielmo, to enjoy, at least in the Chicago area he studied, some of the "privileges" accorded to people unambiguously labeled as "white." Nonetheless, examples of the crossing of the "color line" (using Frederick Douglass's expression, made even more famous by W.E.B. Du Bois) which located Italian Americans in an equivocally "colored" racial space peopled also by Mexicans and African Americans may easily be found in the last quarter of the 19th century and the first of the 20th, as in the case of the Italian peasants who migrated to the USA and ended up working in the Southern plantations as replacements of the former black slaves who had left for the Northern cities. This is what happened with the Sunnyside Plantation in Arkansas, whose workforce mostly consisted of migrants from Northern and Eastern Italy. Mary Bucci Bush tells this story in *Sweet Hope* (2011), directly based on the experiences of her grandmother, who worked on the Sunnyside Plantation as a child, and was therefore a first-hand witness of this experiment in the racialization of Italians, which repeated the very first process of ideologically justifying slavery on the basis of race – the enslavement of Africans. For all their being more or less clearly "white on arrival," Italians were the victims of the protocols of sub-division of the migrant communities according to their supposed belonging to this or that racial group, so that their whiteness often got "darker" from the very beginning.

In the last few decades historians and literary scholars have tried to unearth the memory of this systematic categorization of Italians as "non-whites" and of its social and cultural

consequences, but both in the United States and in Italy public discourse has very rarely addressed this disquietingly problematic issue and its annexes, first of all that of how African Americans have been exploited at least twice by white dominant culture – on the more concrete level as "free labor," but then also as a sort of touchstone, if not as a proper template, for the exploitation of other ethnicities. Also thanks to its extreme readability and its adhesion to the imperishable tenets of literary naturalism, Mary Bucci Bush's novel tries to fill this void, to close the gap between official history and those personal experiences whose legitimation is always deferred when it does not fit into dominant cultural formations. And the "blackening" of Italians which the novel exposes (as Fred Gardaphé has stated, the distinction between Italian and white "has never before been dramatized with such power and precision in American fiction"; Gardaphé 2014, 417) is of course something that neither the myths of America as the migrants' promised land nor the Italian cult of the migrant hero can easily accomodate. Besides, the novel draws a picture of both the Italian American and the African American experiences, and of their intersections, which is much wider and goes much deeper than the surface plot of the novel, with its obsessively extended metaphor of the plantation as a claustrophobic concentration camp.
As the late JoAnne Ruvoli stressed, Bush connects the predicament of the Italian migrant family, the Pascalas, "to the global circuits that support the agricultural labor and racial violence that dominate American economic and social history" (Ruvoli 2018).

This also means that, as often happens when the issue at hand is the location of Italian Americans and African Americans inside US history and culture, on the one hand the novel places these two communities in the most marginal space one could think of – and images of margins and boundaries can be found everywhere in the text, from the first major scene occurring on the edge of a river where two boys, one Italian and the other African American, almost get drowned, to the final one, when Angelina, the Italian American girl who is pregnant of a child and whose Black lover has been killed by the Sweet Hope overseer, decides not to cross the river on the boat that will take her Italian family to some other plantation and to be adopted by her new, African American family. But on the other hand the whole narrative structure clearly sets the two communities of workers at the very heart of the American economic system (or at least of what still was the mainframe of the agricultural economy of the Southern States at the beginning of the 20th century), and also of the political superstructure which in the novel is explicitly described in almost Marxist terms as being based upon the governance of the exploitation of (almost) free labor.
As a matter of fact, the owner of the plantation, Harlan Gates, builds up his political career and the possibility of winning a seat in the State Senate thanks to the "enlightened" experiment of Sweet Hope: "The Italian Colony experiment itself had earned him praise, even from some of his earlier detractors, for replacing the recalcitrant and diminishing Negro labor supply with eager, industrious Italians" (Bush 2011, 308-309).

The parallels and contrasts in the novel between the two predicaments, the Italian Americans' and the African Americans', also demonstrate in almost didactic terms one central feature of the Italian diaspora in the United States (and of all migration processes and diasporas).
As a matter of fact, every attempt to study and also to artistically represent a migration experience cannot but adopt a "comparative" perspective, but this perspective is not to be intended as the filter scholars and writers apply to the object under scrutiny from the "outside." The comparative dimension is an inherent component of the object *per se*, both on the merely "factual" level (since migrations and transnational relations do not take place in a "void," but are constantly enmeshed in a network of contacts with other migrations and transnational relations, from the places of origins of these movements to the places of arrival, and throughout their various, intersecting trajectories), and also on the level of the subjective perceptions and interpretations of the individuals and the communities involved in these phenomena and processes, who inevitably create their own identities by "comparing" their experiences to those of the other migrant (and non-migrant, or not migrant anymore) individuals and communities. This comparative attitude has always already been *there*, in Italian American literature: just think of the number of parallels between Italians and Blacks in Pietro di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*, or at the ways in which Arturo Bandini in John Fante's *Ask the Dust* constructs and deconstructs his ethnic identity through the dual dynamics of identification and distancing, also with clear racist overtones, that

governs his love-hate relationship with a Mexican woman. In her introduction to *Re-Mapping Italian America*, Sabrina Vellucci reminds us of the "benefit" Italian American studies can have "from in-depth studies and analyses of Italian/American culture in conversation with other ethnic traditions as well as with the dominant cultures (both literary and artistic canons) of the places in which the Italian diaspora has set its roots" (Vellucci 2018, xvii), and she quotes a number of recent studies that have followed this approach (Mary Jo Bona's *Women Writing Cloth*, John Gennari's *Flavor and Soul*, Samuele Pardini's *In the Name of the Mother*, and so on). But this conversation is already working both inside *Sweet Hope* and in the historical reality the novel reproduces, and is made directly available to the reader thanks to the adoption of a multiplicity of points of view, through which events and actions are constantly revised by the various characters who explicitly compare their own interpretations with those they think could be the interpretations of the "other." By way of these repeated comparisons, the Italian migrants become aware that even the African Americans can enjoy a far greater freedom of movement than them: in their condition of indentured laborers, they simply cannot leave the plantation until they have repaid their debt, while the Blacks are sharecroppers, and can decide to leave whenever they want. Besides, the company deliberately brings the Italians to the plantation late in the year, when there is no crop to be harvested and sold:

> *That way they could charge rent for the houses and land, charge outrageous prices for food and staples over the fall and winter and all the next year until the Italians made a crop. They would already be in debt before half a year was out. There'd be no way they could pay off their contract. They'd be stuck at Sweet Hope indefinitely in a never-ending cycle of debt. And with no letters allowed out, and travel off the plantation forbidden for Italians, it seemed they were doomed. (Bush 2011, 49)*

This strongly contradicts what Donna Gabaccia has called "the centuries-long American celebrations of the mobility of white immigrants in the face of long histories of racialized oppression and immobility" (Gabaccia 2017, 47). So maybe sometimes Italians *are* white, as the novel shows more than once in their confrontations with blacks and in the ways in which the "real" whites juxtapose and compare the ones to the others, but even when they are considered as "whites" they are *literally* "whites on a leash" (Gardaphé, p. 4), to use Fred Gardaphé's felicitous metaphorical expression. Or rather, their ambiguous racial positioning has perhaps led both Italian Americans and WASPs (and other ethnic groups) to conceptualize, like Rudolph Vecoli suggests, "Italianness" as an in-between identity which is not "white, nor black, nor brown, nor red, nor yellow" (Vecoli 1996, 17) – an identity marked by negative difference, and in this way circuitously re-connected once again to the African Americans', defined by what they are or were *not* (white, free, migrants by their own volition, and so on).

Another aspect the novel makes clear is the Italian migrants' agonizing awareness of the fact that the ruthless system of exploitation they are subject to is totally unknown (or better, censored and erased from public discourse) outside the plantation, both in the United States and in Italy. In a sort of narrative dead end, the Italian priest who has reluctantly accepted to become a passive and ineffectual *pastore* of the community, seems to finally "see the light" when he discovers that the Black conjure woman who lives in the swamp has witnessed the killing of Angelina's lover, and then makes her testify at the murder trial (to no avail, of course); he then decides to leave the plantation and denunciate what is happening at Sweet Hope: "his eyes were opened. The train station was a few blocks away. He'd be able to reach New Orleans within two days, and no one would question his traveling. He would tell everything he knew – no matter the consequences for him at Sweet Hope" (Bush 2011, 356). This decision seems to open up the possibility of a happy ending, with the good guys coming to save the exploited workers and righting the wrongs that have been done to them. Nothing of the kind happens. We do not know about Father Odetti's fate after he leaves the plantation, the Pascala family is forced to leave Sweet Hope (after having unsuccessfully tried to do it a number of times in the past) with no sure prospect of their future, and Harlan Gates even seems to make the best out of the possible scandal created by the murder trial and the rumors about the conditions of life of the plantation workers when he "reforms" the Sweet Hope system:

> *He outlined the changes he was calling for: filters installed on the wells, to improve the*

> *drinking water. Each household would get free mosquito netting, and the cost of quinine tablets would be reduced.*
>
> *"It's the high store prices and taxes they're hot about," Wade said. "And they want to be able to sell their cotton off Sweet Hope."*
> *"I'll cross that bridge when I come to it – if I have to. Let's see if we can't pacify them with a little sugar water first." His pat smile was almost a grimace. "It costs a lot less."*
> *[…]*
> *In the end, he hoped to be seen as benevolent and long-suffering in the way he dealt with the disgruntled Italians. (358-359)*

Only in the Afterword we come to know about the end of the Sweet Hope experiment (or better of the Sunnyside plantation), but we are told nothing about what can or cannot have happened to the Italian and African American families whose stories we have followed throughout the novel. Their memories seem to be lost forever, if it was not for the novel itself, which manages to create a fictional substitute collective memory to fill the gaps in the official historical reconstructions of the Italian American experiences by bringing back to (cultural, public) life personal recollections (those of the author's grandmother) which never made into "history." In some sense, besides being the story of both the solidarity and the clashes between the Italian and the African American communities, *Sweet Hope* also creates a new connection between them by adopting and adapting the most "black" of literary genres, the slave narrative, so that its configuration could be defined as that of an Italian American neo-slave narrative. And precisely like the African American neo-slave narratives, whose *raison d'être* is fighting against the cultural amnesia that simply wants to delete slavery from the shared "vision" of America, *Sweet Hope* aims at keeping alive the memory of a harsh reality both cultures, American and Italian, have long tried to bury in historical forgetfulness.

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