

Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities

Volume 4
Issue 1 *Threats to the American Dream*

Article 18

2015

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Recommended Citation

Anastasi, Kathryn N. (2015) "Columbus Day & Consequences: Re-examining Italian American Commemorations, Historic Anxieties, and (Some of) the Narratives They Silence," *Tapestries: Interwoven voices of local and global identities*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 18.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/tapestries/vol4/iss1/18>

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Columbus Day & Consequences: Re-examining Italian American Commemorations, Historic Anxieties, and (Some of) the Narratives They Silence

Kathryn Anastasi

[Note to Readers: This is the second chapter of the author's honor's project, titled "Ways We Remember: Rethinking Symbols of Italian American History and Imagining Alternative Narratives"]

Il paradiso abitato da diavoli *[Paradise inhabited by devils]*

1860: Pre-Unification Italy, Luigi Carlo Farini travels to Naples and reports back to the Northern Piedmontese rulers.

Let me say it to you one more time, the state of this miserable land is appalling....The multitudes teem like worms in the rotted-out body of the state: some Italy, some liberty! Sloth and maccheroni. No one in Turin or Rome will envy us the splendor and dignity of the capital of Italy as long as this one continues to be the capital of sloth and of the prostitution of every sex, of every class.

.....
... But, my friend, what lands are these, Molise and the south! What barbarism! This is not Italy! This is Africa: compared to these peasants the Bedouins are the very pinnacle of civilization. And what misdeeds!

.....
The annexation of Naples will become the gangrene of the rest of the state. (qtd. in Moe, 165, 176)

"It was an Italian who began the story of immigration to America."
– the Library of Congress

Introduction

In October 2014, I began receiving email alerts from Italian American organizations urging me to “Join the Movement to Save Columbus Day.” I received these messages because I am on various Italian American organizations’ mailing lists, mainly because one of the organizations granted me an academic scholarship for the first three years of my undergraduate education. Though my formal affiliation with the organization has since ended, in the past year my American Studies background and love for my family has fueled a growing interest in my Italian ancestors’ pasts and their connections to my white racial identity.

This October, I noticed warnings of the threats posed by the growing support for the replacement of Columbus Day with Indigenous Peoples Day plastered on the web pages of prominent organizations such as the National Italian American Foundation (NIAF) and the Order Sons of Italy in America (OSIA). For many, the holiday change is a (symbolic measure that carves a space in the United States calendar for the acknowledgement of indigenous peoples’ pasts and presents. Moreover, it centers indigenous people on a day historically reserved for Christopher Columbus, the man who symbolizes the “discovery” of the New World and progress for some white people, and the beginning of the colonization and genocide of indigenous people for others. Though my personal experience as a white descendant of Italian (among a mix of other European) immigrants has not included a strong tradition of celebrating Columbus Day, many Italian American organizations and communities treasure the holiday as a celebration of their heritage and community. However special the celebration, in these messages Italian American Columbus Day supporters demonstrate that they have failed to see the power in an Indigenous Peoples Day, and espouse anti-indigenous and nativist rhetoric in defense of their own holiday.

Projects that minimize indigenous histories and colonization like the Campaign to Save

Columbus Day are nothing new in the United States. Indigenous people, scholars, intellectuals, activists, schoolteachers, schoolchildren, and other people far and wide have critiqued Columbus and his commemoration as justifications of genocide and colonialism, and promotions of American imperialism and consumption of non-white Others.¹ While the range of critiques deserve and receive attention by many, their nuances are ultimately beyond the scope of this chapter. Keeping in mind, then, my intrigue in peoples’ efforts to connect to and preserve Italian American histories, and informed by the scholarship of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Unsettling Minnesota*, and indigenous scholars Waziyatawin and Andrea Smith, I search for answers to questions like: How have Italian Americans constructed Christopher Columbus in his memorialization, and why? Why are Italian Americans clinging so tightly to Columbus Day? And what does Christopher Columbus actually have to do with Italian American history? What histories does the Campaign to Save Columbus Day silence, and why is that damaging to indigenous peoples and descendants of European immigrants alike?

Some of these questions prompt responses either infinite or impossible to reduce to one simple conclusion. However, in this chapter, I encourage Italian Americans of southern Italian ancestry – myself included – to expand our understandings of the way Americans have constructed Christopher Columbus as an historical figure and the histories his memorialization has silenced. I argue that Italian Americans’ sanitization and cooption of Christopher Columbus as an Italian American hero is actually a manifestation of historical anxiety about Italian immigrants’ ethnic otherness and the ongoing instability of whiteness. By “sanitization,” I refer to Trouillot’s philosophy that “commemorations sanitize further the messy history lived by the actors,” and “help to create, modify, or sanction the public meanings attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration” (116). I use this understanding of

sanitizing histories to imply that in the last one hundred and fifty years, Italian American organizations have followed elite American capitalists' leads in constructing Columbus as a hyper-masculine individual who succeeded based on his superior merit – thus isolated from the people that helped him and the people he oppressed along the way.

Perhaps realizing the success of Columbus as a meme for an historical American hero, Italian American organizations sought ownership of Columbus by characterizing him as the first Italian immigrant. In doing so, Italian Americans' commemorations of Columbus reflects their grappling with a desire to preserve a distinct Italian American history that the mainstream finds acceptable, i.e. meshing with dominant modes of American history that celebrate the individual white American male who succeeds based on his alleged merit, patriotism, and exceptionality. Furthermore, I posit that inadvertently or not, in their efforts to preserve an immigrant history acceptable to White Anglo Saxon Protestant America, Columbus Day defenders partake in the United States' violent denial of the existences of indigenous peoples and promote the erasure of an Italian American "people's history."²

In this chapter, I explore a brief and summarized history of Columbus Day, searching for the root causes of Italian Americans' attachment to the holiday and their anxiety surrounding its disappearance. I argue that a meritocratic – specifically, a *masculine, individualistic, and ahistorical* – construction of Christopher Columbus assuages south Italian immigrant histories of marginalization and continued stereotyping as criminal, lazy, unintelligent, hypersexual, buffoonish dark "Others." While founded in a desire for acceptance and equality, I highlight that Italian Americans' investment in commemorating of Columbus does violence to indigenous people and their history, undermines Italian American "peoples histories," and ultimately reinforces power structures that privilege whiteness, justify the genocide of

indigenous peoples and the dispossession of their lands, and erase non-normative historical narratives.

Disclaimer: I Love

As a major point of this paper is to challenge the extraction of individuals from their historical, political, and social contexts to meet the goals of their manipulator, it is important to also consider Italian American defenders of Columbus Day as complex beings with specific identities, histories, and anxieties of their own that inform their attitude towards the holiday. As a member of their extended community, I do not wish to villainize, shame, or renounce my connections to Italian American organizations or their leaders. Nor is my intention to apologize for or excuse the Campaign to Save Columbus Day for its violence against people native to the Western Hemisphere or its negligence of an Italian American "people's history." Instead, I approach Italian Americans' defense of Columbus Day with a loving and critical lens, in hopes of ultimately widening people's understandings of the forces that made the emergence of Columbus Day as an Italian American holiday, and later on the Campaign to Save Columbus Day, desirable for Italian Americans.

As indigenous critiques must be included in the conversation of Columbus Day and its symbolism, we must center indigenous scholar Waziyatawin's call for a "truth-telling forum" that forces non-native people to acknowledge America's history of violence (11). She calls for the literal and figurative removal of "all monuments, institutions, place names, and texts that continue to celebrate the perpetrators of genocide or the institutions and systems that facilitated the implementation of genocidal and unjust policies" (12). Only then, she argues, will settler society "create a moral imperative for restorative justice" and "question the morality of continuing to celebrate" icons of colonization (11).

Truth-telling for white people of Italian ancestry does not only require acknowledging the

genocide of indigenous people and the dispossession of their lands by white European colonizers. Waziyatawin, Andrea Smith, Ward Churchill, *Unsettling Minnesota*, among other indigenous intellectuals emphasize that part of truth-telling and a necessary step towards decolonization and justice is the act of non-natives confessing that *they are from somewhere else* (*Unsettling Minnesota*, 56). Such calls for consciousness do not necessarily demand that non-natives pack up and find new homes or live in perpetual shame and guilt for their non-native, settler statuses. The problem is much bigger than any one individual, and such ideology lends itself to conservative anti-immigrant rhetoric and inhumane immigration policies that disproportionately affect immigrants of color. More so, it is important for non-natives to respect and learn the histories of injustice in what is now North America, and explore their own linkages to and departures from other lands.

Even basic familiarity with Italian American people or culture would demonstrate that this awareness is not the issue at hand, however. Many Italian Americans claim pride in their Italian heritage and maintain connections to “the homeland,” even if only symbolic, or via cuisine, travels to, nostalgia for, or dreams of Italy. Italian American organizations sponsor Italian language and cooking classes, and trips to Italy to promote connections with Italian roots. In my own extended Italian American family, for example, it sometimes seems that every gathering’s conversation somehow turns to Italy: who has been, where they went, have they been to our ancestral hometown of Cittanova?; What did they eat, and where?; shouldn’t we all move away from the D.C. suburbs and buy a villa somewhere?

I made the journey to southern Italy myself in June 2014, after having had the opportunity to work on a farm in a small town called Calvanico outside the city of Salerno, about an hour south of Naples. Unlike my first trip to Italy when I toured the dazzling Northern cities of Venice, Verona, and Rome, my time in southern Italy was characterized

by confusion, joy, and an intense yearning for my family in the United States. In Naples, I wandered to Porto di Napoli, the port where my great-grandfather Antonio Anastasi(o) climbed on an overcrowded steam ship, *il Piemonte*, and sailed to the United States in 1905. That night I dreamt of my dad’s father, who died before I was born. He told me about all the flavors I had to taste, sharing a few expressions in his parents’ dialect that he remembered.

In Calvanico, I attended a wedding where a Calabrian woman with a thick silver braid down her back taught me how to flick my wrists while I stepped to a folk rhythm, as my great-grandmother Concetta or great-great grandmother Angelina may have done with their sisters before the world deemed each of them “invalid.” Between songs, parents of the groom happily introduced me to everyone, pointing at me and laughing, “Bisnonni calabresi!” [Calabrian great-grandparents!]

I was only able to make a day trip to Cittanova, where I wandered down trafficless alleyways lined with decaying homes with brightly flowered windowsills and eventually reached the house where my great-grandmother Concetta’s family lived before immigrating to the United States. My great-grandfather lived next door, and at the end of the closed-off alley is a small church named Chiesa San Giuseppe, or St. Joseph’s Church. Patterns continued my great-grandparents to the United States are not difficult to identify: in 1908 in Washington, D.C., Concetta and Antonio were married at St. Joseph’s Church, right across the street from the rowhouse where they lived and raised most of their nine children.

When I returned to the United States, I shared these photographs and stories with my parents, brothers, aunt, grandmother, half a dozen of my dad’s cousins and their partners, all of whom in turn had photographs and stories to share of their own. Those of us who have been to Cittanova find connections in our experiences – we have all accidentally wandered into the same small restaurant, La Mamma; some of us have found the

fountain where my great-grandfather remembered sitting as a boy; etc. – and we help paint a picture of the small Calabrian city for those who have never been, and maybe never will. Although my luggage containing my journals, gifts for my family, and booklets about Cittanova’s history was lost and never returned by an airline, sharing, blending, and recreating my memories with my family over plates of Eggplant Parmigiana was the highlight of my summer – it was enough. When I met my great-grandmother Concetta’s niece Teresa in Cittanova, she told me, “You have a good family, a beautiful family.”

I did not grow up in an Italian American community, and my description of my family’s conversations or experiences may be particular to my family members’ and my own methods’ of performing Italian identities and preserving our diasporic family history. But, generally speaking, if Italian Americans know that their ancestors are from Italy, and if many of us romanticize Italy as an ancestral homeland, why are so many people attached to Christopher Columbus, whose symbol connotes an individual’s conquest of indigenous soil? Incorporating an indigenous critique of the Campaign to Save Columbus Day may require reconsidering the reasons for Italian Americans’ desire to claim Columbus as part of their history. Moreover, an indigenous critique encourages all non-natives to rethink ways of asserting non-natives’ equality and humanity in the United States without asserting “earlier arrival” as a signifier of *entitlement to equality* of the land or *superiority* over others.

In this paper, I aim to better understand the statements issued by Italian American organizations that have supported me throughout my education and consciousness as a person of partial Italian ancestry. I must emphasize that the organizations that participate in the Campaign to Save Columbus Day do not pour all of their efforts into saving Columbus Day; they are complex groups of people that promote a variety of historical narratives, support Italian American traditions, histories, and communities in numerous

ways – so many that I cannot claim to know the extent of their reach. Without them, I would have less of a sense of my own history, and fewer opportunities to connect to and re-examine my Italian heritage. Therefore, I approach this chapter as a way to spur dialogue about Columbus Day, its significance, and its consequences not only because of my critiques of the holiday, but also because I deeply care about those celebrating it.

A Brief History of Columbus Day

In *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot maps out the emergence of the celebration of Christopher Columbus on October 12 each year. Neither October 12th nor Columbus was particularly celebrated until an organization of New York men with “a taste for public attention, parades and lavish banquets” called the Tammany Society, also known as the Columbian Order, held a banquet on October 12, 1792 in honor of Columbus’ arrival to the Bahamas (Trouillot, 120). One hundred years later, the Knights of Columbus, a New Haven-based fraternal society for Catholic men, sponsored a public celebration that drew “some forty thousand people – including six thousand Knights and a thousand-piece band conducted by the musical director of West Point” (Ibid., 123). Trouillot attributes the rise in popularity of Columbus Day partially to Catholics’ desire to belong in the Protestant-dominated United States and the increasing inclusion of history in school curricula in the early 20th century, but largely to the United States’ and Spain’s capitalization on the holiday’s potential to become a “mass media event” (Ibid., 124).

In 1892, during a time of economic and political turmoil, Spanish leader Antonio Cánovas del Castillo took advantage of increasing public interest in Columbus to manipulate the quadricentennial of his landfall into a yearlong extravagant commemoration, replete with trans-Atlantic reenactments and international parades, that symbolized Spain’s “anticipated revitalization” and world power (Ibid., 125). The following year, noting the financial success of international fairs

and the increasing visibility of Columbus thanks to the Spanish celebration, American elites like W. Rockefeller and C. Vanderbilt and stockbrokers invested in and organized the 1893 World's Fair in Chicago, also known as the World's Columbian Exposition (Ibid.,) United States President Harrison encouraged Americans' celebration of Columbus, and the Exposition gained power with the support of Franz Boas, Harvard University's Peabody Museum, and the Smithsonian Institution, among others (Trouillot ; Viola). Not only did the Columbian Exposition make the United States tens of millions of dollars and attract worldwide attention, but it also generated symbolic justification for American exceptionalism and imperialism at the time (Trouillot).

In the nation's approval and celebration of Columbus, however, Trouillot explains that "those who wrote the script for Chicago could not control all the possible readings of that script,"; thus, in so decontextualizing Columbus the man, "Columbus was not theirs alone," and was therefore made available for manipulation by Italian immigrants and American-born generations eager to advocate their belonging in the United States (Trouillot, 130).

The emergence of Italian American organizations is notable in that the organizing as Italians diverged from the *campanalismo*, or regionalism, that characterized Italian immigrants' adjustments to life in the United States. Historians Robert Orsi, Donna Gabaccia, and Rudolph Vecoli, among others, have emphasized that upon arrival Italian immigrant groups did not unify as one Italian community, but through chain migration settled in neighborhoods with their family members and others from their rural southern Italian villages. Southern Italian migrants became known as "birds of passage," seasonal laborers who made frequent trips between the United States and Italy, and transnational networks of families and remittances emerged along with mutual aid associations. Though the organizations of the association the Sons of Italy, for example, "did not replace local

mutual aid societies germane to particular villages or towns," Vellon posits,

[I]t did coincide with the creation of an image of Italianness that did not exist in Italy. Society banquets, dinner dances, and annual religious feasts celebrated regional ties through the lens of a minority population reviled by many as unwelcome others. As such, organizations often focused on the merits of Italian culture and civilization as a means of community uplift and survival, thereby promulgating a nascent Italian patriotism ... these organizations actually accelerated the emergence of a collective Italian racial identity (21)

Simultaneously, Rudolph J. Vecoli explains in *Contadini in Chicago* that the more "respectable" Italian immigrants – code for higher-class, "were concerned with the growing prejudice against their nationality and wished to elevate its prestige among the Americans and other ethnic groups" (414). Columbus Day, then, offered an opportunity for Italian American organizations to nurture a distinct Italian identity and patriotism in congruence with an American one. At the turn of the 20th century, Italian immigrants were being lynched, demonized in the media for the mob's "crimes of passion," segregated from white workers, and considered a biological threat to the United States' racial order. Italian Americans' claim of an historical figure that American capitalists had invested millions in promoting in the World's Fair distanced them from popular notions of Blackness (Trouillot 108-140).³ Orsi expands,

The issue of the immigrants' place on the American landscape vis-a-vis other dark-skinned peoples fundamentally shaped not only the contours of their everyday lives at work and on the streets but also the 'Italian-American' identity they crafted for themselves in this environment. And the

engagement of 'Italian Americans' with dark-skinned people in the difficult years after World War II to the present cannot be understood apart from these earlier circumstances. (314)

In the decades following the Columbian Exposition, Italian American organizations would hold festivals and parades to celebrate Italian heritage, with Columbus as their mascot – or perhaps even their shield. For many, Columbus Day has become a day for Italian American cuisine, parades, reflections on Italian American history, and contests to win free trips to Italy (Connell 181).⁴ After much lobbying on the end of the Knights of Columbus, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed federal legislation Columbus Day in 1937.

By incorporating the celebrated figure into a southern Italian American identity, Columbus has enabled southern Italian Americans to be able to be, to use Trouillot's words, "discovered by Europeans" (or in this case, White Anglo Saxon Protestant America), and "finally enter the human world (118). Perhaps the largest grace Columbus Day offered Italian Americans was on October 12, 1942, when President Franklin D. Roosevelt declared people of Italian descent no longer enemies of the state or worthy of internment during World War II.⁵ Although the entirety of the one thousand or so Italians interned were not released until the following year, Roosevelt's public announcement on Columbus Day countered stereotypes and paranoia of Italians as fascists, and furthermore symbolized their loyalty and Americanness via an oppressive, masculine historical figure.

Though Roosevelt lifted restrictions on people of Italian descent in the United States, since the early 1900s the government and particularly the FBI had widely surveilled, jailed, deported, and crushed the spirits of dissenters of the government among leftist Italian and other south and eastern European immigrant groups. Though only some one thousand Italian Americans were interned

during World War II compared to the 110,000 Japanese Americans, the government's public disassociation of Italian Americans with enemy status relegated overwhelmingly to Japanese Americans must have been a relief for many, and moreover a sign of their increasingly stable whiteness. Keeping in mind the anti-Italianism, paranoia surrounding foreigners as dangerous radicals, and the difficulty of preserving diasporic histories – especially when early generations of new immigrants like Italians were encouraged to forget their Old World customs – we can better understand why so many Italian Americans hold Columbus Day in such high regard, and are now organizing to preserve it.

Though the influx of southern Italian immigrants in the late 19th and early 20th centuries had next to nothing in common with Columbus, his simultaneous worldwide exaltation and hometown of Genoa, Italy, have continued to offer Italian Americans reprieve from their histories of marginalization in Italy and the United States *and* the instability of their whiteness, in addition to state-sanctioned permission to celebrate their heritage. All the while, and perhaps in exchange for the United States' forgiveness for their non-normativity in the form of a federal holiday, Italian American organizations have continued historical trends of constructing Columbus as someone admirable by dominant WASP standards. Instead, defenders of Columbus Day memorialize the man as a risk taker, a talented and brave navigator, a bearer of European civilization to the New World, and a "quintessentially Renaissance man" (The Order Sons of Italy in America).

Unfortunately, to say the least, in this struggle for survival and memorialization, the protecting shield offered by Columbus does violence to indigenous peoples and their histories. Celebrations, argues Trouillot, "impose a silence upon the events that they ignore, and they fill that silence with narratives of power about the event they celebrate" (118). Supporters of Columbus Day have overlooked or altogether denied the man's enslavement and exploitation of over five

hundred Taínos indigenous to Hispaniola, his antagonistic and exploitative treatment of his crew, his prioritization of finding gold for Spain above all else, or the fact that the population of one to three million Taínos reportedly dropped to 200 by the year 1542. In their defense of Columbus Day, Italian American organizations have demonstrated their unwillingness to consider Columbus as a multidimensional historical figure whose life and legacy is implicated with others' (Viola; Jordan). NIAF President John Viola, for example, writes that while Columbus is a "controversial figure," "memorialization is important no matter what." He continues,

The history of Native Americans, the people indigenous to this continent, is also incredibly important and should be celebrated as well, but it does not have to come at the expense of the Italian American community and the Italian American holiday ("Save Columbus Day!")

Viola's passage reflects a "post-racial," "separate but equal" mentality towards the celebration of Christopher Columbus, which suggests roots in Italian immigrants' adoption of racist and nativist white rhetoric to reject their "inbetweenness" and thus perform whiteness. Such insistence that Indigenous Peoples Day is a threat and a separate interference to Columbus Day validates the "logic of genocide" which Andrea Smith terms as the way of thinking that "holds that indigenous peoples must disappear," that "they must *always* be disappearing" (68). Moreover, comparatively speaking, when we consider the histories of genocide, colonization, and erasure of indigenous histories - *by* individuals like Columbus - and the sheer capital and centuries invested in commemorating Columbus, it is clear that the relationship between Columbus Day and Indigenous Peoples Day are inherently intertwined *and* unequal. I will address such consequences of Columbus Day in the final section of this chapter; next, I move on to better

understand Italian Americans' historic anxiety about their racial status.

The Southern Question, Historic Anxiety, & Struggle

Though Columbus has served as a sort of civilizing shield by Italian elites, the notion of Christopher Columbus as a representative Italian American is inaccurate in multiple ways. Christopher Columbus' ship's first encounter with the Western Hemisphere was in the Bahamas, about four hundred years before peasants from the south of Italy migrated to the Americas in the masses. Columbus sailed along the coasts of Central and South Americas, but never touched ground in North America in his life (Strauss). One study finds that before 1820, the "few Italians" who *had* settled "represented the elite classes of missionaries, travelers, teachers, artists, and other professionals" (Cavaoli, 214). Moreover, Christopher Columbus himself hailed from Genoa, the northern region of what is now Italy, before Italy was even a unified state. Columbus' expedition was grounded in inequality, injustice, and exclusion. His priority was to find gold for the Spanish rulers "who were 2 percent of the population and owned 95 percent of the land" after the Spanish Inquisition that forced out Jews and Moors (Zinn, 2). On October 12, 1492, retells Howard Zinn,

[A] sailor called Rodrigo saw the early morning moon shining on white sands, and cried out. ... The first man to sight land was supposed to get a yearly pension of 10,000 maravedis for life, but Rodrigo never got it. Columbus claimed he had seen a light the evening before. He got the award (3)

In short, Columbus and the majority of Italian immigrants would have had little in common. Likening Columbus' and five million Italian immigrants' journeys to the Western Hemisphere both glosses over the harsh realities experienced by the millions of *contadini* or peasants from the

south of Italy and contributes to the illusion of whiteness and the real violence of white supremacy.

While Columbus and the wave of Italian immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s shared privileges as newcomers benefitting from their occupation of stolen indigenous lands, albeit in different ways, two thirds of the 18 million Americans who claimed Italian ancestry in the 2009 United States Census are descendants of southern Italian immigrants from lands of extreme poverty, corruption, and environmental destruction with little to no education. Most south Italian immigrants emigrated from small rural villages in Italy's newly unified southern provinces, namely Campania, Abruzzo, Calabria, Molise, Sicily, and Sardinia. Southern Italian peasants had distinct histories, cultures, and languages, entirely different from those of northern Italy and what people often think of as "Italian culture" – i.e. Renaissance art, Venetian carnivals and canals, high fashion in Milan, luxurious lifestyles in Rome, etc.

As Robert Orsi puts it, southern Italians were instead "most closely bound" to northern Italy "by oppressive taxation policies, not patriotic ties. Their primary loyalties were to their villages and families" (15). Within their villages and families were various power relationships. Vecoli's *Contadini in Chicago* states, "Feudalism died slowly in southern Italy," and the contadini

comprised almost a distinct caste. The upper classes lorded over and exploited the peasants whom they regarded as less than human. ... This is not to say that the south Italian peasants enjoyed a sense of solidarity either as a community or as a social class. Rather it was the family which provided the basis of peasant solidarity. Indeed, so exclusive was the demand of the family for the loyalty of its members that it precluded allegiance to other social institutions. (405)

Vecoli is referring to the concept of "amoral familism," coined by ethnographer Edward C. Banfield in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*. In his study on social life in a village in the southern Italian province of Basilicata, Banfield determines that the southern Italian villagers were loyal primarily to their families, instead of the common good of society, which made their community and culture more prone to family rivalries and organized crime. The study, published in 1958, lends itself to cultural racism and stigmatization of Italian immigrants and American-born generations as inherently inclined to life in the mafia or unable to interact with or care for people outside of their families.

As this aspect of stigmatization continues to haunt Italian Americans, we can imagine that Italian American elites have used Columbus to challenge the charge of "amoral familism" that is undesirable in American society with its prevailing romanticization of the ideas of patriotism, law and order, the common good, neighborliness, and civic engagement. Since 1792, Americans have hardly commemorated Columbus as a loyal member of a larger network or family, or a person with personal relationships. Instead, commemorations have constructed him as an independent individual whose only allegiances were to wafty notions of "exploration," "progress," "discovery," and the "New World." Columbus helps distract Americans from perceiving Italian Americans as dangerous men in the mob, and reminds the government that not all Italians organize socialist or anarchist revolutions. Columbus makes Italian Americans patriotic Americans; he makes them belong.

A contradictory aspect of southern Italians' relationship to Columbus worth exploring is that between the conquest of the lands in the Earth's Western Hemisphere and the seventeenth century economic collapse in Italy. While such a topic is beyond the scope of this chapter, Connell describes that "after the great voyages of discovery created new trade routes around Africa and to the New World, the Italian economy went into a centuries-long tailspin" which plunged Italy

into that economically backward state from which she only began to emerge in areas like Piedmont and Lombardy in the second half of the 1800s" (14).

In his chapter *Italy as Europe's South*, Moe explains that in the eighteenth century French and English intellectuals and travelers considered Italy as a whole as a "backwards" nation lacking the economic stability and social and cultural sophistication required to be considered a truly European country. As northern regions such as Piedmont and Lombardy industrialized and gained stability and power, the Italian peninsula entered the period known as *Risorgimento*, or the unification of the present-day state of Italy. At that time, northerners began traveling to the south of Italy. Conscious of the stakes of "the European (that is, northern, western) identity of Italy," they found their scapegoats in the southern regions (Moe, 19).

In their travels to southern provinces, Northerners resisted identification with the extreme poverty, unemployment, underdevelopment, and the physical, cultural, social, and language differences of the southern populations. Northerners' letters to Piedmontese rulers spoke of the South as a picturesque land unfortunately inhabited by grotesque barbarians, and literally defined the South of Italy as "other than Italy" that "is a sick body in need of the Piedmontese cure" (Moe, 172). Northern proclivities towards the south as an inferior Other became grounded in eugenics as Cesare Lombroso published his work of social Darwinism and positivist criminology, *Criminal Man*, which linked southern Italians with "inherent" acclamations towards crime, violence, laziness, stupidity, and hypersexuality (Schneider ; Lombroso).

Much of the pathologizing and exoticizing accounts of southerners as inferior were and are grounded in southern Italy's proximity to Africa and distinct North African influences in southern provinces; a famous phrase declares that Naples marks the end of European civilization, and

Calabria, Sicily, and all the rest belongs to Africa. Peter Vellon highlights that Alfredo Niceforo, an Italian academic of the likes of Lombroso, feminized the South, "constructing a relationship between femininity and barbarity" in the South "versus masculinity and civilization" in the North (17). Such concerns over the southern provinces' supposed inferiority and underdevelopment became known as "the Southern Question," and Northerners seized upon the opportunity to construct the Mezzogiorno as the threat to Italy's recognition as a truly European state (Moe; Schneider).

Northern Italian politicians argued over how to handle "the Southern Question," and many "dismissed southern Italians as dark-skinned outsiders" (Orsi, 315). Works by scholars Nelson Moe, Jane Schneider, and Elizabeth Wong demonstrate the historical and ongoing marginalization of southern Italians in the Italian media and state in general. Orsi's suggestion that "the men and women of the Mezzogiorno came" to the United States "determined to become 'cristiani,' their word for 'human beings' (and obviously the opposite of 'turks') which was the racialized slur thrown at them (317). For Italian Americans with surviving connections to Italy, folk histories, and attitudes of early generations towards the subjugation of southerners likely circulate in Italian Americans' psyches today.

Interestingly enough, in her anthology *Italy's 'Southern Question': Orientalism in one country*, Schneider reveals that, "Precisely as the Southern Question took its turn toward a racialized essentialism, Italy, the nation, began to encourage the exodus of millions of its southern inhabitants" (19). Because of the fixation on celebrating and saving Columbus Day, Italian Americans lose sight of their actual roots and the realization that Northerners pushed who they saw as southern savages towards other colonized lands, for the sake of their own nation's progress in the larger European arena. It is then essential to highlight that issues of poverty, stigmatization, and the later diaspora of southern Italians were spurred, largely

and ironically enough, *in reaction to the “discovery” of the Western Hemisphere, which is attributed to Christopher Columbus himself.*

At the same time as south Italian immigrants “brought the memories of this stigmatization [as dark-skinned outsiders] with them to America,” they also found themselves hurled into the United States’ racial hierarchy (Orsi, 15). There is debate among scholars as to whether southern Italian immigrants were “whites on arrival,” “inbetween peoples” in a Black-White society, or immigrants who “worked towards whiteness.”⁶ For the purpose of this paper, I incorporate all of the above theories to understand whiteness as a status that, while afforded to Italian Americans, brings up historic anxiety. Though in the grand scheme of American society, Italian Americans have not experienced “sustained” or “systematic” racial oppression, as highlighted by T. Guglielmo, memories of “inbetweenness” and reminders of the insecurity of whiteness manifest themselves in anxiety in the Campaign to Save Columbus Day.

Italian immigrants’ initial employment, housing, news media, and police discrimination deserve attention in the analysis of Columbus Day supporters. Italian immigrants and later American generations experienced heightened levels of economic exploitation, police brutality, and even lynching. For a time, whites considered Italians to be “Black labor,” and they were often paid and treated as such. Employers often pitted Italian workers against African Americans and workers of other ethnic backgrounds to increase competition and production. Orsi demonstrates that Italian immigrants often moved into Black neighborhoods, where they “competed with each other for jobs, housing, and neighborhood power and presence,” and where “Italians broke into occupations that had long been primarily [B]lack domains, such as barbering, restaurant service, brickworking, and garbage collecting, in most cases coming to dominate the industry and excluding African Americans” (Orsi, 317).

While society may consider Italian Americans to be fully “assimilated,” hateful and

racially-charged reactions to representations of Italian American guido subculture in the media demonstrate that, in certain spaces, people of south Italian ancestry still hold a sort of qualified whiteness. As Andrew Anastasi documents in his essay “Commenting as Social Text,” in response to a popular YouTube video in which a man coded “as a working class, East Coast Italian-American” and guido – a name used to represent a working-class Italian American subculture that rejects some codes of whiteness but is stereotyped as a loud, aggressive young man who likes to party, work out, and tan – some YouTube commenters

recalled the biological-racist language pioneered by the 19th- and early 20th-century meridionalisti and pseudo-scientists. sapphire91288 posted, for example, “someone needs to find a final solution to the guido problem,” referencing Hitler’s plan to annihilate the Jews. In a less explicitly racist but no less problematic statement, the user groenlink commented: “the guido species is just not limited to the tri state area, unfortunately they have spread to other areas of the country (8)

Though individual instances of intolerance cannot be applied to all Italian Americans maintain anxiety about the instability of their whiteness, and still maintain characteristics that deviate from respectable norms of whiteness prescribed by WASP norms. Italian American organizations involved in the Campaign to Save Columbus Day have spoken out in their rejections of portrayals of guido subculture in the media, most notably in the MTV program *Jersey Shore*.

Arguments in defense of Columbus Day betray a larger nervousness surrounding Italian Americans’ white ethnic “other” identity, as further demonstrated by Italian American organizations’ public disapproval of New York City Mayor Bloomberg’s invitation to the cast of *The Sopranos* to walk with him in the 2002 Columbus Day Parade. In an Official Statement, NIAF Chairman

Frank Guarini argued against the invitation “because the program perpetuates a negative and inaccurate image of Italian Americans” and goes against NIAF’s commitment “to promoting the best of Italian American culture and heritage.” While there is much contention over the authenticity of the *Sopranos* and the harmful stereotypes it perpetuates, for Guarini, the late James Gandolfini was both a symbolic reminder that the rest of America had and may continue to see Italians as Other, and a threat to the patriotic American representation of Italian Americans cultivated by the commemoration of Columbus.

Nervousness surrounding Italian American racial identity is not confined to concern over protecting Columbus Day, however, but also reveals itself in Italian American organizations’ attempts to control popular images of Italian Americans in the media, such as in public outcry over of the ‘reality’ TV program *Jersey Shore* and its cast of working-class Italian American “guidos” and “guidettes,” or disapproval of and desire to distance themselves from media that perpetuates stereotypes of Italian Americans as *mafiosi* such as on *The Godfather*, *Goodfellas*, and *The Sopranos*, among others. While such programs may perpetuate negative and shallow stereotypes and resurrect painful periods from Italian American history, Italian American organizations’ announced disdain for such programs is noteworthy in that a common denominator in the programs are the rambunctious casts of olive-skinned Italian Americans with thick accents and ancestry from the Mezzogiorno, or southern Italy. As mentioned, in Italy and in the United States, Italians from the poorer and less politically stable southern provinces of Italy have experienced particular stigmatization as backwards, criminal, hypersexual *cafoni*, or ignorant peasants.

Later that year, African American New York City deejay Chuck Nice said on air, “Italians are n***** with short memories.” In the introduction to *Are Italians White?*, Jennifer Guglielmo remarks that “within days, a response came back” from The

Order Sons of Italy in America that the organization was

puzzled by such a statement and the station’s refusal to do an on-air apology. We understand that Mr. Nice is African American, but we don’t understand why it is wrong for a white person to call an African American that name, but okay for an African American to use it to describe white people. (qtd. in *Are Italians White?*, 1)

J. Guglielmo laments that OSIA’s confusion over the anti-Black epithet used to describe Italians demonstrates their amnesia surrounding Italians’ histories of racial inbetweenness (*Are Italians White?*, 1). Could we expand her analysis of the organization’s denial of Italian American history as a purposeful denial? Is it notable how, in the above comment, the Italian American organization responds to the radio station by first establishing their whiteness, with no mention of Italian identity? Twelve years later, NIAF President Viola sees another threat to Italian American whiteness in the celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day. Viola, an Italian American man of Sicilian and Calabrian ancestry, implores, “Why is it that we are consistently the group that allows ourselves to be trodden on? Why do we keep our heads down, and forget the size of our community, its influence, and its incredible accomplishments ... [?]” (“Save Columbus Day!”). Instead of perceiving Indigenous People’s Day as an opportunity to widen understandings of history and the implications of celebrating a limited narrative of Columbus, he sees it as a threat and a reiteration of historic subjugation of Italian Americans. Viola’s expression of anger and pain conveys a belief that celebrating history is only possible through a masculine and capitalist lens; that histories compete and conquer instead of existing plurally and dialectically; that individuals today must choose one narrative today and stick to it, instead of learning multiple perspectives and relating across difference.

Keeping such examples in mind, perhaps Italian Americans - subconsciously or not - still do not consider their whiteness guaranteed. In many ways, as I have demonstrated, whiteness is not guaranteed for working-class Italian Americans, and especially those who intentionally challenge norms of whiteness. By incorporating Columbus into their history, Italian Americans claim whiteness and the structural advantages it offers at the expense of people of color, *and* they receive official recognition for their distinction as a community and culture. Efforts to promote Columbus Day uphold a history of legitimizing Italians' whiteness and belonging to the United States. Today, in an effort to "Save Columbus Day" amidst increasing support for Indigenous Peoples Day, Columbus Day sympathizers have been rallying to preserve the celebration of the sterilized narrative of Christopher Columbus and, by proxy, a narrative that portrays Italian Americans as unquestionably white [and therefore entitled to the advantages of whiteness.] However, prominent Italian American organizations view the disdain for and replacement of Columbus Day as an attack on Italian American history, identity, and belonging to the United States, and have thus formed the Campaign to Save Columbus Day.

Ultimately, however, historical anxiety must not warrant searches for racial innocence, or justifying the oppression of other groups based on Italian Americans' own history of struggle ("We struggled too"; "It's our turn"; "I didn't kill any Native Americans or own any slaves"). As Thomas Guglielmo points out, regarding political debates over Italian immigrants' right to vote for their likeness to African Americans, Louisianans' "efforts, in direct contrast to those regarding African Americans, failed miserably." He reiterates the point that "we should not exaggerate the precariousness of Italians' color status. Color questioning never led to any sustained or systematic positioning of Italians as nonwhite." Emphasizing that, while there were and are instances of discrimination in the political debates or even the media today against Italian Americans

for their their dark complexion and differences, Guglielmo stresses that the United States government did not implement sustained systems of structural oppression and violence against them, as it did against indigenous people, Black descendants of slaves, and immigrants of color (T. Guglielmo, "No Color Barrier," 37).

Though Italian Americans did not experience systematic exclusion or oppression, as a result of their being compared and then differentiated from nonwhites, George E. Cunningham points out that Italians learned an important lesson for advancing in the United States' socio-economic hierarchy:

They had better adopt the customs, prejudices, and way of life white Louisianans as soon as possible. They must look with loathing upon everything that the native whites loathed. Once they did so, the Italians could gain acceptance among the native whites, though not at first on a basis of complete equality. (qtd. in Gates, 82)

Another possible reason for Italian Americans' anxiety about the stability of their whiteness resounds from anti-Italian and anti-radical backlash during the First Red Scare and World War II. As Italian immigrants poured into the United States at the turn of the 20th century, a radical subculture emerged among the European immigrant working-class. With the help of leaders of the radical leftist group, the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), factory workers began organizing walk-outs and strikes to demand better pay and treatment by their employers. Additionally, they gathered to study theories behind Marxism, socialism, and anarchism, and discussed their visions of a worker's revolution, with an overthrow of the ruling class, redistribution of wealth, and equality for all people. Italian immigrants - and Italian immigrant *women* - were among those leading and supporting such communist, radical, and anarchist *circoli*, as documented in

groundbreaking works such as Jennifer Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution*,⁷ Donna Gabaccia's *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives*, Cannistraro and Meyers' *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism*, Marcela Bencivenni's *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*, and Vellon's *A great conspiracy against our race*, among others.

In 1919, anarchists' challenges and threats to the United States government spiked, culminating in the delivery of mysterious bombs to the doorsteps of anti-radical politicians, judges, and business moguls. The FBI initiated surveillance of Italian radicals - especially those who, in the words of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, "endeavored to enlist Negroes," resulting in "the Negro ... seeing red" (qtd. in Salerno, 118).⁸ Scholars have noted the power of the Italian immigrant radical press in its circulation of ideas of revolution and justice for working-class immigrants, and its condemnation of the harms done by American capitalism, nativism, and anti-Black racism.

On the one hand, some Italian immigrants quickly and literally bought into nationalism and anti-Blackness as a result of the racial order of the United States and the influence of Mussolini's rising sphere of influence, popularity among Italian Americans, and fascist Italy's invasion of Ethiopia. Some Italian involved in leftist radical circles, on the other hand, spoke out against employers' unjust treatment of American workers, socio-economic and racial inequality in the United States, and advocated for antifascism.⁹ The group L'Era Nuova published an article entitled "I Delitti della Razza Bianca" (The Crimes of the White Race) that specifically condemned white racism in the United States.¹⁰ In February of 1920, bombs exploded in 7 cities across the country, many of them sent in packages to the doorsteps of America's capitalists or stockbrokers. The FBI responded with its campaign of repression of political radicalism known as the Palmer Raids and the First Red Scare, in which the government jailed, deported, and intimidated thousands of European immigrant dissenters into silence. The most famous

manifestation of the government's anti-Italian, anti-radical crusade was the unjust executions of the Italian immigrant radicals Sacco and Vanzetti. While some of the Italian radicals who remained in the country after the Red Scare continued their activism under wraps for decades, many ceased political activity and their histories have largely dissolved from the national memory.¹¹

Consequences of Columbus Day

While the large majority of this chapter has focused on understanding Italian Americans' reasons for celebrating and campaigning to save Columbus Day, it is absolutely essential to consider the consequences of doing so. First and foremost, celebrating Columbus Day and fighting against Indigenous Peoples Day contributes to the violence indigenous people have experienced since Columbus sailed the ocean blue and symbolically began centuries of conquest of indigenous peoples and lands in what is now considered the Western Hemisphere. Organizing to protect the commemoration of Christopher Columbus against Indigenous Peoples Day negates complex memories of colonization and, inadvertently or not, justifies the genocide of people indigenous to stolen lands. Literature disseminated by the OSIA entitled "Columbus: Fact vs. Fiction" spreads lies of a peaceful and humble Columbus who befriended violent savages and attributes the genocide of millions of indigenous people almost entirely to the unintentional and unfortunate spread of disease (4-5). Historians have found, however, that Columbus' "peaceful moments" were manipulations of Tainos so that he could find gold and send back to Spain; that he captured over 500 Tainos and sent them as slaves to Spain; that his men mutilated, raped, and killed; that he forced children along with adults to gather gold, chopping their hands off when their reappings came short; that fifty years after his arrival, only 200 of the one to three million, or more, Tainos survived (Bigelow, 9).

As Waziyatawin, a Dakota intellectual and activist, reminds us in *What Does Justice Look Like?*, "Denial of genocide is a crime," and "silence

suggests complicity with the status quo. To not speak out is to engage in the crime of genocide denial and to perpetrate another crime against humanity” (90, 94). Howard Zinn remarks in *A People's History of the United States*, “To emphasize the heroism of Columbus and his successors as navigators and discoverers, and to deemphasize their genocide, is not a technical necessity but an ideological choice. It serves – unwittingly – to justify what was done” (9). It is imperative that Italian Americans – and all non-native Americans, really – recognize the horrors, rebellion, and survival of indigenous people to the western hemisphere.

Italian Americans rallying to preserve Columbus Day must also recognize that Columbus Day means different things to descendants of Italian immigrants and indigenous people, and that unequal power relationships exist between them – *especially* in the commemoration of Columbus. While the symbol of Columbus protects and propels Italian Americans further into whiteness, albeit fragile, it perpetuates symbolic and literal violence against indigenous peoples.

In “An Open letter to President Barack Obama,” indigenous scholar Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz expresses Columbus’ national recognition in the form of a federal holiday serves as “a metaphor and painful symbol of that traumatic past.” She continues,

None of Columbus’s voyages touched the continental territory now claimed by the US. Yet, the United States soon affirmed that a 15th century Papal Bull, known as the “Doctrine of Discovery,” applied to the Indigenous nations of North America. This remains US law in claiming that Native nations are “domestic, dependent nations” with no inherent rights to the land.

... The affirmation of democracy requires the denial of colonialism, but denying it does not make it go away. Only decolonization can do that.

Native American nations and communities are involved in decolonization projects, including the development of international human rights law to gain their rights as Indigenous Peoples, having gained the United Nations’ Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, which your administration endorsed. It’s time for the United States government to make a gesture toward acknowledgement of its colonial past and a commitment to decolonization. Doing away with the celebration of Columbus, the very face of European colonialism, could be that gesture. In its place proclaim that fateful date of the onset of colonialism as a Day of Solidarity and Mourning with the Indigenous Peoples. (“An Open Letter to President Barack Obama”)

In places where city officials have officially recognized celebration of Indigenous Peoples Day on October 12th, American Indian communities, politicians, and non-native citizens alike have found justice, empowerment, and motivation for pursuing justice for native communities locally, nationally, and globally. A Minneapolis Star Tribune article includes testimonies from American Indian residents of Minneapolis on their perspectives on Columbus Day. One woman, Sandi Mason, recounts memories of being called “Pocahontas” or “squaw” on Columbus Day by her classmates (Roper). A man, Clyde Bellecourt, remembers his brother’s act of resistance in 1992 when he covered a model of Columbus’ ship the Niña, featured at the St. Paul science museum, “in a pint of his own blood ... ‘for all the blood that was drained from [the native] community and [their] nation across the western hemisphere” (Ibid).

While Columbus Day supporters like Viola and the Order Sons of Italy plea for commemorations of indigenous history that do not come “at the expense of” Columbus Day, Minneapolis council member Alondra Cano’s announcement before the successful vote to

introduce Indigenous Peoples Day as a city-recognized holiday is particularly poignant:

This is not necessarily about Columbus. He is not the center of our existence ... This is about the power of the American Indian people and indigenous communities all over the world. We are setting the record straight (Ibid.)

She also emphasizes, “the initiative was merely a first step toward ensuring more Native Americans own homes, practice urban agriculture and succeed in academics” (Ibid.). It is time for Italian Americans to recognize that Columbus is not the center of their existence, either. In the words of Council President Barbara Johnson,

[People with Italian history] are somewhat offended by this change, this recognition ... But I think it's about all of us moving forward, understanding the strength that we have because of all the different groups that have impacted this community, both long ago and today — ongoing (Ibid.).

It is therefore crucial for Italian Americans to understand that indigenous people who want – who *need* – to keep alive their histories of resistance and survival *are not their enemy*. Instead, it is time to both turn inwards and reflect on the implications of their attachment to Columbus, the history of Columbus Day itself, and how it came to be, in 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” (The Order Sons of Italy in America, 1).

While celebrating Columbus Day is oppressive, it is not that Columbus must be tossed out altogether from historical memory or stripped from school curricula. Though he is not the center

of anyone's existence, Columbus is literally and symbolically part of indigenous histories, marking the symbolic beginning of genocide and colonization, and also of resistance and survival. If we consider the history of Columbus Day as an historical process, as I have in this chapter, we can learn a great deal about Italian immigrant experiences as well. In this final section, however, I argue that instead of boiling down Columbus to a simplified historical figure ready for quick consumption, considering him as both a complex individual and as part of a larger system offers educational value for all.

When I say Columbus is a complex individual, I call for the deconstruction of his sanitized commemoration that constructs him as an individual who acted in isolation from others, and a hypermasculine, and a larger-than-life figure. I have already touched on how supporters of Columbus Day have not prioritized narratives of Columbus that consider his oppressive and violent interactions with people native to the Bahaman Islands and Hispaniola. Similarly, supporters of Columbus Day consider the celebration of Columbus Day a holiday designated chiefly to Italian Americans. For NIAF President Viola, Columbus Day is about recognizing Italian American history, not celebrating genocide. He professes that like Columbus, Italian Americans are “risk takers” whose ancestors bravely ventured to the United States “with belief in their abilities and their work ethic ... in order to succeed on their own abilities.”

This “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality is not uncommon among conservative whites, but it also echoes what Orsi recalls as a commonly held belief “among immigrants' children, that Italian-American families never accepted public assistance (which is not true, of course) as an effort to draw a clear border against blacks” (318-319).¹² Though pressured by the socio-economic order, immigrants who distance themselves from communities of color demonized for receiving welfare ultimately harms all people in the long run; it reinforces intolerance and hatred

towards working-class, disabled, and non-white communities, and further perpetuates unrealistic, ahistorical, apolitical, and individualistic notions of success and freedom in a capitalist society.

Unfortunately, to assert Italian American history's belonging in mainstream American historical accounts steeped in patriarchy and white supremacy, Viola adopts their masculinist rhetoric that celebrates the individual, Columbus and the Italian immigrant, who succeeds in a meritocratic society. Such a mindset seems to purposefully combat stereotypes of "amoral familism," but denies the collective nature in which so many Italians emigrated and formed communities in new places for their survival. Furthermore, glorifying the individual immigrant lends itself to ethno-nationalism and denies histories of collaboration and coalition across ethnic and racial lines, which so characterized working-class southern Italian immigrant experiences in the United States.

Additionally, connections made between Columbus and the masses of Italian immigrants promote representation of The Italian Immigrant as Male. NIAF President Viola argues that "Columbus Day is not just a celebration of our incredible accomplishments as a community," "but since its roots has been a holiday celebrating all the best about the American spirit, all that comes from this nation's birth as object of adventure, risk and exploration." I have highlighted that the "roots" that Viola refers to are tangled in histories of world leaders' desires to assert their power, justify imperialism, and make money.

The legacy of Columbus crafted by such elites celebrates the man in a masculine and neoliberal framework: Columbus is a brave adventurer, a curious explorer who took risks for the expansion of European power. In an effort to cultivate their own power and belonging in the United States, Italian Americans have capitalized on the memorialization of Columbus. However, glorifying a single man on a day that purportedly celebrates *all* Italian Americans upholds a man defined by his traditionally masculine values as the essence of Italian Americanness. While I recognize

that this paper largely functions within the parameters of the gender binary, if we consider gender as a spectrum instead, we can still consider the commemoration of Columbus for his masculine traits as shrouding the histories of Italian immigrant women, trans, or non-binary peoples.

Viola's piece, for example, attributes Columbus' experience encountering the Western Hemisphere - which was by accident, resulting from Columbus' miscalculation and luck - to a typical Italian immigrant experience. Not only do Viola's descriptions of Columbus ascribe superior value to characteristics traditionally perceived as inherent to males (bravery of the individual male vs. recklessness or indifference to others), but he also constructs Columbus as the essential representation of this "pure" masculinity. In this way, Viola "proves" Columbus' relevance to American history and national memory, which values men and ideas of masculine values over women and ideas of feminine values. By "masculine values," I refer to the idea among feminists that society has historically defined and glorified masculine values such as reason, aggression, independence, and bravery, among others, over "feminine values," which include displays of emotion, weakness, subservience, passivity, and restriction to familial and household tasks. Even if Italian Americans do not name the violence and conquest precipitated by Columbus, as a symbol promotes connotes a capitalist, hypermasculine figure who conquered land and millions of people on his own for the sake of European progress.

Describing Italian immigrants as people who bravely ventured across the sea and, on their own accords, have since accrued capital and "accomplishments that rank [them] amongst the most successful and influential people in the nation," Viola frames Italian American history with a capitalist and neoliberal lens, subscribing to the belief in the freedom and ability of the individual to start from nothing and achieve the American Dream regardless of the context from which he operates. I use "himself" because capitalism is an

inherently sexist system, considering a neutral individual as male and privileging men over women and non-binary people.

The idea of Columbus representing Italian immigrants' achievement of the American Dream perpetuates memories of Italian immigration that romanticize the male migrant who came to the United States with nothing, only to send for his wife and children once he accrued enough funds on his own accord. Labor histories in general have excluded women's experiences as well. Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta's anthology *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives*, and Jennifer Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution* counter such misconceptions. They document how hundreds of thousands of women who migrated to the United States and around the world to support their families worked *and* resisted economic and sexual oppression. Specifically in relation to the United States, they highlight how working-class Italian immigrant women laborers challenged their employers and dominant White Anglo Saxon Protestant norms, politically organized with men, resisted as mothers, formed collectives with each other and across ethnic and racial backgrounds, and utilized modes of resistance distinct to southern Italian women's traditions of fighting for justice and change in their environments. Marcella Bencivenni's *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture* reveals the subcultures of leftist Italian immigrants who envisioned attacking social and economic problems at their *roots* to achieve political, social, and gender justice. In my severely limited summary of the above scholars' works, it is certain that upholding Columbus as the essential Italian American hero discourages Italian Americans' to find pride in, identify with, or even locate the non-normativity of their histories and identities.

OSIA offers further justification for celebrating Columbus by lamenting that while it is unfortunate colonizers seized native lands, the United States became "a haven for the poor and oppressed from all over the world, who find opportunities and freedoms here that their own countries deny them" (5). OSIA's statement is

rooted in southern Italian immigrants inferior status in Italy, and their gratitude for experiencing rights, freedoms, and economic opportunities in the United States greater than in their home countries translates to immigrants from countries around the world. However, the United States as "safe haven" does not warrant the active invalidation of native histories. Moreover, as indigenous scholars press, it is important for all non-native Americans to understand that they have histories outside of what is now the United States, and that the United States did not materialize out of thin air. If immigrants were of "the poor and oppressed from all over the world," they will likely be able to draw parallels between their histories of migration with historical oppression in the United States as well, and may be compelled to engage in actions of solidarity and resistance, instead of perpetuating oppression. An anarchist group of Italian immigrant radicals from Paterson, New Jersey, for example, published an article titled "I Delitti della Razza Bianca" (The Crimes of the White Race) from their paper, *L'Era Nuova* in 1909. Historian Salvatore Salerno highlights that "the article discussed the many crimes whites had committed, and continued to commit, against Native Americans, African Americans, and Asian immigrants" (*I Delitti*, 121). He includes this passage, translated from the article:

The discovery of America marks the beginning of a period of destruction, which lasts even today for the shame of humanity. The white race continues its systematic destruction of the races of color. When it cannot succeed with violence, it adopts corruption, hunger, alcohol, opium, syphilis, tuberculosis— all weapons — as good as guns and cannons (121)¹³

Like most anarchist groups, writers from the *L'Era Nuova* underwent surveillance by the FBI, and were harassed and threatened with arrest or deportation. As highlighted by Salerno, echoing Preston's *Aliens and Dissenters*, the FBI repressed

leftists who spoke out against the United States governments - so much so that later generations were scarred, traumatized from the stigma of being radical. As Salerno posits, "The absence of this critical discourse from the narrative of Italian American experience was a carefully orchestrated campaign on the part of the U.S. federal government" (Salerno 121).

We can now understand Italian Americans' historic anxiety as multi-dimensional as well, spanning from Italian American organizations' fight to continue centering Columbus Day, silence the Jersey Shore, and exclude Tony Soprano are not just about proving Italian American whiteness. Instead, they reveal a desperation to preserve an Italian American history in spite of diaspora, and manufacture an ethnic identity with dignity in response to historic marginalization and state repression of narratives counter to those similar to Columbus.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have aimed to re-examine the emergence of Columbus Day and Italian Americans' attachment to the holiday. In conclusion, I argue that the consequences of Italian American's historic racial "inbetweenness" and associations with Blackness has manifested in Italian Americans' promotion of hypermasculine and individualistic historical narratives that translate and "prove" whiteness. Considering that Italian American organizations' constructions of Columbus Day originated as a means of affirming Italian whiteness and virtuous masculinity, and rejecting Italian immigrants' ethnic ambiguity and associations with Blackness for the weight it carries, we can also consider the commemoration of Columbus Day to be anti-Black.

Ultimately, in response to the Campaign to Save Columbus Day, non-natives must, in the words of Waziyatawin, "challenge, re-examine, and reject the racist and colonialist programming to which [they/we] have grown accustomed" and "rethink the values of domination, consumption, and exploitation that have become a part of American society" (14). Coco Fusco highlights that conservative whites have considered calls for "resurrecting the collective memory of colonial violence in America" as chaotic and "a direct threat to heterosexual, white male self-esteem" (38). However, descendants of south Italian immigrants must not shy away from such investigation. For, as Avery Gordon emphasizes, "Haunting is a part of our social world, and understanding it is essential to grasping the nature of our society and for changing it" (27).

If Italian Americans examine the history of Columbus Day, they will see how elite, masculine, individualistic White Anglo Saxon Protestant definitions of success and history have distracted their time and energy into fighting to preserve a symbol that pits them against indigenous peoples and whose history is not their own. Moreover, if we apply a frame of analysis to Columbus that considers him as a multi-dimensional human being who was part of a "system of empire," as *Rethinking Columbus* urges, Italian Americans may see the contradictions and consequences his symbol carries. I hope that if Italian Americans move towards letting go of Columbus Day, they will be open to or seek restorative justice with other communities, and uncover parts of their histories where they may discover surprising sources of subversive power.



The family & friends I stayed with in Calvanico, Campania while volunteering on their farm. I am in the black and yellow shirt in the center.



Concetta's niece, Teresa, lives here today – I snapped the photo above moments before meeting her.

Notes

1. For more information, refer to Coco Fusco's *English is Broken Here*, Howard Zinn's Chapter 1 of *A People's History of the United States*, Rethinking Schools' *Rethinking Columbus*. These are only some of the sources I have come across; there are undoubtedly many more that I unfortunately have not been able to closely examine.
2. By "people's history," I refer to the Zinn Education Project's, Rethinking Schools', and Howard Zinn's aim of *People's History of the United States* to tell history from historically underrepresented points of view, in a way that closely examines the influences and intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality, etc. I recognize the limitations of my paper for not considering more the nuances of sexuality and physical ability, and my adherence to the gender binary.
3. As previously touched on, Italy has a contentious history of Northerners marginalizing Southerners since the country's unification in the 1800s. Dominant stereotypes of southern Italians persist as backwards, lazy, criminal peasants who are "closer to Africa" and therefore racially inferior. Two-thirds of Italian immigrants in the United States are of southern Italian ancestry, and whites applied anti-Black and anti-Italian epithets to Italian immigrants in the late 1800s and early 1900s. See Roediger's *Working toward Whiteness*, Jane Schneider's *Italy's "Southern question": orientalism in one country*, Aliza Wong's *Race and the nation in liberal Italy*, Nelson Moe's *The view from Vesuvius: Italian culture and the southern question* for contemporary discussion of Italy's "southern question," or writings of Antonio Gramsci, for more context.
4. Citation from Tricario's essay "Narrating Guido" in Connell's anthology. See citation for Connell.
5. I first learned this fact in the PBS Documentary *The Italian Americans*.
6. For more context on these varying viewpoints, refer to Barrett and Roediger's "Inbetween Peoples: Race, Nationality, and the 'New Immigrant' Working Class," Thomas Guglielmo's *White On Arrival*, Roediger's *Working Towards Whiteness*, and Salerno and J. Guglielmo's anthology *Are Italians White?*
7. I mostly refer to J. Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution* in this paper, but her essays "Transnational Feminism's Radical Past" and "Negotiating Gender, Race, and Coalition" are illuminating texts as well.
8. Cited by Salvatore Salerno in chapter 7 of *Are Italians White?* Citation number 18. U.S. Senate, *Investigation Activities of the Department of Justice*, 66th Congress, 1st Session, Senate Document 153 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1919), 13.
9. A discussion of Italian fascism and its influence on Italian Americans is unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper. For more information, refer to works by Salerno and Ventresco.
10. See Salvatore Salerno's "I Delitti Della Razza Bianca (Crimes of the White Race)" and "Paterson's Italian Anarchist Silk Workers and the Politics of Race" for more information on Italian immigrant anarchist and radical presses in the New York metropolitan and Paterson, New Jersey areas.
11. Pieces such as Salvatore Salerno's "I Delitti della Razza Bianca" and Louise DeSalvo's "Color: White/Complexion: Dark" from *Are Italians White?* especially demonstrate a disconnect experienced by second and third generation Italian Americans who face emotional and physical obstacles in exploring personal and radical Italian American histories.
12. In this quote, Orsi cites Richard Alba's *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*.
13. Salerno cites the article "I Delitti della Razza Bianca" from *La Questione Sociale*, Feb. 20, 1909, 1.

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