Ways We Remember: Rethinking Symbols of Italian American History and Imagining Alternative Narratives

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Ways We Remember: Rethinking Symbols of Italian American History and Imagining Alternative Narratives

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American Studies Senior Honor's Project
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This project is dedicated to my great-grandmother Concetta and all the people whose complicated histories have yet to be told.
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CHAPTER I.
Reimagining Italian Immigrant Histories

Since I was a young girl, I have felt a fond attachment to the Italian part of my family. Growing up in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., I always looked forward to the occasional family gatherings with my father’s Italian American cousins, aunts, and uncles who shared their memories of growing up Italian: stories of nine children growing up in the cozy quarters of the family’s rowhouse in the shadows of the United States Capitol building; the Italian American community they shared in the neighborhood; how my great-grandfather somehow survived getting hit by a train not once but twice as a laborer in the railroad yards of D.C.

My family’s history was passed on to me in fragments, but it was enchanting: Once my great-grandfather was poor and unemployed in a small town named Cittanova in the southern province of Calabria; once my great uncle was held up, maybe beaten, by an Irish cop who called him “guinea” in Washington, D.C.; the next generation worked hard and saved up; now everyone lives in the suburbs and reminisces over cold cuts at rare Italian delis, at the annual Anastasi Christmas party where we rent out an entire community center but recognize fewer people in the room each year.

Regardless, my family’s stories made me feel connected to something. Shared with me, their memories of sights, smells, and sounds of growing up Italian American mutated in my mind to become a symbol of “real” life and culture, I thought - much more so than the sterile life I knew in the suburbs.
In the case of my own Italian American family's history, when I began digging for more information beyond the symbols I had absorbed for most of my life, I encountered contradictions, moments of discomfort, forced silences and gaps in the “rags-to-riches,” “work hard to achieve the American Dream” narrative. A Microsoft Word document passed on to me narrating our family's history is titled “Anastasi (Grandpop's) Story,” though both of my father's paternal great-grandparents emigrated from Calabria. Inside the documents I found clues about my great-grandmother, Concetta Giovinazzo, whose sorrowful history I slowly realized had not filtered to the top of the stories passed on to my siblings and me. Though no one has found evidence of her official entry to the United States, around 1907 my great-grandmother Concetta's father sent her from Cittanova to marry my great-grandfather's brother, Giuseppe, who was also Concetta's first cousin. She had only attended school for two to three years in Italy, and worked mostly inside the home.
My great-grandparents are the couple sitting behind the two men on the table. As far as I know, this is the only picture I’ve ever seen of my great-grandmother, Concetta, ca. 1920 (Anastasi Family Collection).

When Concetta arrived in the United States, Giuseppe was already married. That was when my great-grandfather, who was sometimes Antonio and others Antonino, said, “I’ll take her.” In 1908, they married in St. Joseph’s Church across the street from the house they would live in and raise the nine children Concetta would give birth to in 17 years. The last child born in 1925 was Michael J. Anastasi, my grandfather. In 1926, a cousin tells me that Concetta was committed to a psychiatric ward in a nearby hospital. Doctors declared her “mentally incompetent.” A year later, she was transferred to another psychiatric hospital, where she lived, only able to visit home for rare, short visits, until her death on December 19, 1971. There is a lack of consensus on why Concetta was locked up for the last 45 of her 85 years of life. Another cousin tells me that everyone just says she was “sick,” but really no one in the hospital except the custodian spoke Italian. She tells me that nobody understood; that she was a sweet, loving woman. After a closer reading of the document “Anastasi (Grandpop’s) Story,” I noticed that Concetta’s mother, Angelina, was also deemed “an invalid” six years after giving birth to Concetta, until her death.
When I asked my relatives about Concetta, no one denied her existence or chastised me for my questions. On the contrary, I feel closer than ever to my Italian American relatives in our search for clues about our ancestors. So what explains the gaps, the silences, the fragmented retelling of tragedies and struggles? The purified family narrative and symbols of ‘Italianness’ filtered to me may not be relatable to other people of Italian ancestry, who may have stronger senses of their history, stronger identifications with “Italian America”, or a higher concentration of “Italian blood.” In exploring Italian and European immigration history in general, however, I found symbols everywhere connoting this sense of purified nostalgia of the noble immigrant who struggled and triumphed. More times than not, the eulogized European immigrant is male. Southern and Eastern European immigrant women's stories are left in the shadows and, if included, confined to memories of the immigrant home and stereotypes of submissive, passive maternal figures dependent on the patriarch working hard to lift his family out of poverty.

Throughout my research, uncomfortable moments occurred when I was confronted with expressions of Italian Americans’ sense of entitlement to citizenship in the United States above new immigrant groups, even applying xenophobic or anti-immigrant rhetoric at immigrants from Central America or Mexico, who the New York Times actually dubbed “the New Italians.” In mainstream productions of Italian American history such as the new PBS documentary The Italian Americans, the story arcs often focus on the process of “assimilation,” mentioning counternarratives or evidence of silenced histories, like Concetta’s, only briefly before moving on.
For white descendants of Italian immigrants from the *Mezzogiorno* - the name literally meaning “midday,” used to describe Italy’s poorer, stigmatized southern provinces, from where the majority of Italian immigrants emigrated – it is important to avoid purifying history. When I say “purifying history,” I refer to Haitian academic Michel-Rolph Trouillot’s idea that producers of history and knowledge are constantly “sanitizing” historical events and figures: they, we, are stripping them of their contexts and complexities, twisting and packaging the “facts”, blowing them up to larger-than-life proportions, to meet specific political ends, promote easier and wider consumption by the masses, and as Trouillot’s book’s title suggests, silence the past.

What would I learn from deconstructing the symbols of my great-grandfather as “hard worker” and my great-grandmother as “invalid”? What would I learn with a framework that considers them as individuals with their own subjectivities - meaning their own personal experiences and agencies related to the many intersections of their identities - who are also people influenced by the structures of their environments? What would I learn about their struggles if I considered an Italian American history as inseparable from the history of Jewish immigrants, African Americans, or the white working-class they competed with for jobs? What did sites of cross-race and cross-ethnic interactions look like?

Throughout this project, I adopt such a framework to challenge traditional narratives of individuals in history that construct them in a masculine and white-normative lens, painting their triumphs and struggles as experiences occurring in a vacuum. Although my sense of my Italian ancestors’ history may be severely limited
as compared to others of Italian descent, for a number of reasons I will not explore here, my Italian ancestry has been the fragment of my personal history most highlighted and readily available to me in my upbringing. In contrast, many white descendants of European immigrants I know have little, if any senses of their histories. Like the other segments of my cloudy European ancestry, their understandings of their ancestors have been reduced to symbols.

It is not uncommon for white Americans, especially younger generations, to know little of their own family histories and to not identify with a “white ethnic” immigrant group. In an increasingly racially, ethnically, and culturally mixed society, many, if not most, white European Americans whose families have been in the United States for multiple generations have stopped seeing themselves as anything but “American.” A common sentiment I have heard when European American white people participate in discussions about race and racism in the United States include, “I’m just white,” or “I don’t have an identity.” Such sentiments lend themselves to nativism, which I use to refer to descendants of European immigrants’ false claim to primal ownership and belonging to the land, which is usually coupled by xenophobia and exclusion of immigrants based on their differences. White nativism not only breeds hatred and violence towards non-white people and newcomers to the country, but also erases the histories and existence of people indigenous to the western hemisphere and their pre-colonial ties to the land. Since colonizers invaded indigenous lands in the Western Hemisphere in the 15th century, white supremacy has served as a project to justify what Cherokee feminist intellectual Andrea Smith deems the “heteropatriarchy and the three pillars of white
supremacy”: slavery, genocide, and Orientalism (Incite! Women of Color Against Violence, 66). Whiteness is -- for those who hold it as property, as legal scholar Cheryl Harris poignantly argued in 1993 -- seemingly invisible, and structural racism teaches young whites to maintain the status quo and affirm their whiteness by adopting anti-Blackness.

When white descendants of Eastern and Southern European immigrants explore their immigrant histories, however, many will discover that their ancestors did not share their sense of “nothingness” or “plain,” default white identities, and in fact their whiteness was often questioned, if not outright rejected. Whites who considered themselves “native” -- meaning entitled to the United States as “Americans”, not as American Indians -- created slurs and barriers to equality for Irish, Finnish, Slavic, and Italian immigrants, among others.

In this project, I focus on the experiences and histories specific to Italian immigrants of southern Italian ancestry who made up the largest group of the so-called ethnic white immigrant groups that entered the United States in the late 1800s and early 1900s. 1.4 million Italian immigrants entered the United States between 1890 and 1900, and by the 1920s, 4 million Italian immigrants were living in the United States (Library of Congress). While many Italians would return to Italy after working seasonally, the 2010 United States Census recorded that 18 million Americans claim Italian ancestry (Table 52). When I use the term “Italian Americans,” I refer to any individuals living in the United States who are of Italian ancestry and the Italian diaspora. I use the term “diaspora” to talk about the spread of specifically southern Italian individuals across the globe.
The history of the racial identity of Italian immigrants and their (dis)associations with non-white peoples demands attention for historical and political context. Historians commonly consider immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as “white ethnic others” who upper class whites looked down on as exploitable labor, unintelligent and inferior races. First and second generation Italian Americans, like other Southern and Eastern European immigrants of the time, occupied unique positionalities during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Labeled “inbetween peoples” by some and “white on arrival” by others, Italian immigrants experienced both discrimination and privileges for their racial and ethnic identities. Non-Italian whites often hurled anti-Black, anti-Slav, and anti-Mexican epithets at Italians, and used eugenics in an effort to prove their racial inferiority. Italians were criminalized as mafiosi, or members of the Italian mafia, and leftist radicals or anarchists who challenged systems of capitalism and the United States government at their roots and envisioned alternative, revolutionary socio-economic and political realities. Xenophobia and a desire to maintain the status quo lead questions of Italian immigrants’ whiteness to appear in the press, and were often used against newly arrived working-class immigrants.

The largest lynching of Italian immigrants occurred in 1890 after the unsolved murder of New Orleans Police Chief David Hennessy, which was blamed on the Italian mafia. New Orleans erupted in anti-Italian riots, resulting in massive arrests of Italian immigrants and the lynching of 11 Italian men, with the March 15, 1891 New York Times headline reading, “CHIEF HENNESSY AVENGED; ELEVEN OF
His Italian assassins lynched by a mob. An uprising of indignant citizens in New-Orleans -- the prison doors forced and the Italian murderers shot down." The incident would fuel the beginning of an everlasting stigmatization of Italian Americans as criminal, violent mafiosi with no concerns of the "common good."

Though Roediger described Italian Americans as "the new immigrant group most victimized by extralegal violence" during the early 1900s, it is important that white descendants of southern Italian immigrants do not limit their explorations of their histories to a game of superlatives (Working Towards Whiteness, 106). This project is concerned primarily with Italian Americans and characteristics unique to southern Italian emigration, but descendants of Central, Eastern and Southern European immigrants share histories of racial "inbetweenness" and ongoing claims of colorblindness and a post-racial society (Working Towards Whiteness, 106). While beginning to explore one’s immigrant roots can be emotional and inspiring, it is also important to be self-reflexive and make connections with their ancestors’ past identities’ connections to the white power structure and their own. Invoking immigrant histories can be dangerous if they lend themselves to arguments such as:

“We struggled, too”

“And we made it with no help”

“My ancestors never owned slaves”

“My ancestors weren’t even in the country during slavery”
or any sentence with the word “bootstraps” in it.
Such sentiments fail to consider the context of their ancestors’ advantages as white ethnics over Black people living in the aftermath of two hundred and fifty years of slavery, indigenous people struggling to survive on the land that was stolen from them, and non-white immigrants who do not receive the same benefits. The above quotes promote, as explained by scholar Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, the notion of “colorblindness” and “racism without racists.” In an effort to escape accountability for their complicity in racism, Jennifer Pierce and a Black male lawyer interviewee from her book describe such behavior as “racing for innocence.”

While the days of mobilizing along ethnic lines for assimilated immigrant groups may seem unlikely for white Americans, I encourage Americans of European descent to look back and learn from their ancestors’ pasts. In whiteness, there is no community that holds an individual accountable for their actions or frames of thinking that oppress people of color. Embracing whiteness requires embracing notions of individualism and denying modes of collective resistance. Whites must therefore collectively confront the oppressiveness of whiteness. White individuals who are able must take it upon to examine their pasts until they make connections between their ancestors’ racial identities and experiences with class and their own. This requires individual self-reflection, but also notions of collective

How do we learn about Italian immigrant histories, one might ask, and what part(s) of those histories do we learn? How does the preservation of certain histories benefit and harm Italian Americans and people of color? What can white descendants of Italian immigrants learn histories of immigrants who critiqued the
social order and structures of power such as capitalism, patriarchy, and racism? As James Baldwin asks in “White Man’s Guilt,” “[W]ho established this distance [between white America and Black America], who is this distance designed to protect, and from what is this distance designed to offer protection?” (323). For Italian Americans, desires to sanitize immigrant histories may be rooted in a messy combination of historic anxiety brought on by southern Italian immigrants’ shaky relationship to whiteness, white guilt, and a desire -- a need -- to retain connections to the “old country.” As a result, sterilizing histories robs a narratives’ proximity to reality, to humanity, and awareness of inequality and difference.

Readers may be wondering, Are all symbols in history bad? Do symbols have to be bad? Don’t we need good symbols and icons too? Symbols and icons are, of course, invaluable to civil rights and social movements. For the purpose of this project and interpreting history, however, I encourage shifting away from a “good/bad” binary of interpreting historical actors. I hope to demonstrate that, by expanding our ideas of the historic individual, we can expand our understandings of, or reimagine, history.

In this project, I strive to begin to answer the questions posed above. In the following chapters, I juxtapose analyses of two commemorations of Italian immigrant history. First, I examine some Italian Americans’ relationships to Christopher Columbus and their anxiety surrounding increasing challenges to his celebration on Columbus Day. I explore the ways that Italian Americans have appropriated Columbus into their history to rebuff historic anxiety surrounding the fragility of their whiteness, and the consequences of his commemoration on other
peoples and their histories. In the following chapter, I present the narrative of Italian immigrant woman garment worker Angela Bambace (1898-1975). I consider multiple dimensions of her identity -- her gender, race, ethnicity, interpersonal relationships, political beliefs, work, etc. -- to illuminate how she navigated the structures of power shaping her historical environments.

As a producer of knowledge and historical narratives and analyses myself, I approach this project with an awareness that my scholarship comes from a particular and privileged space of whiteness, a middle-class background, and with the support of my family, friends, faculty advisers, and academic institution. In these pages, my opinions and analyses emerge from my particular relationship to my partial Italian ancestry, my academic training and experiences as a white scholar in American Studies, among other experiences particular to my life. Though I argue for re-examining and expanding historical narratives, my own perspective and interruptions are limited. The framework of this project relies heavily on feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s concept of situated and embodied knowledge, which establishes that “feminist objectivity is about limited location” and knowledge grounded in partial truths attributed to one’s particular, and inherently limited, view of the world (583). As a researcher, claiming situated knowledge with an awareness of intersectionality is vital. By “intersectionality,” I refer to the term coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw signifying the multiple identities that a woman, for example, holds, i.e. her race, class, sexuality, religion, etc., and the diversity of women (“Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color”).
Consciously producing knowledge from a socially located position is important for avoiding faulty claims of transcending one’s socially located position for the sake of making potentially universalizing or essentializing generalizations. Moreover, claiming one’s positionality and situated knowledge demonstrates the subjectivity of the researcher, meaning clarifying the particularity of their perspective and agency in a society otherwise constrained by power structures (Droege). Feminist scholar Paula Droege’s argues that we can learn about by studying the ways individuals react to and interact with their structures (“Reclaiming the Subject: Or a View from Here”). Although I study individuals in history, I aim to flesh out their narratives by seeing them as individuals with specific subjectivities who interact with, thus influencing and influenced by, their larger environments. After all, “situated knowledges are about communities, not about isolated individuals. The only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular” (Haraway, 590).

Ultimately, this project does not aim to define a single correct Italian American identity or historical narrative. In these pages, I hope to communicate the power of re-examining history for white European Americans as one that can be conscious-altering, and a crucial tipping point for whites to begin to see themselves as racialized identities. Coco Fusco shares,

Although American society has defined progress as a focus on the future, we must now return to the past in order to place ourselves in that history and understand how we got to where we are. As we try to grasp at crucial parallels and tease new stories out of them, new alternative chronicles surface; these are the latest examples of how collective memories, those storehouses of identity, once activated, become power sites of cultural resistance. (36)
Certainly, knowing where one comes from and understanding that one is racialized will not erase ongoing institutionalized oppression or the histories of genocide, colonization, slavery, and other forms of racist and colonial violence haunting the lands that now make up the United States. However, I search for a way to honor immigrant and diasporic histories without purifying or fabricating them, or silencing other histories in the process.

Although I challenge Italian Americans for their complicity in white nativism and racism, I must emphasize that my charges, along with this project in its entirety, is rooted in Black feminist intellectual bell hooks’ definition of love. hooks views love as “the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth,” and insists that “commitment to truth telling lays the groundwork for the openness and honesty that is the heartbeat of love” (6,53). “Awakening to love,” she argues, “can happen only as we let go of our obsession with power and domination” and requires accountability (87). I embark on this project in an effort to encourage Italian Americans to cease their pursuit of power and domination in regards to whitening narratives of their pasts and presents. Opening ourselves to love, as hooks defines it, requires confronting the moments of lovelessness and abuse of our pasts (9). In the following pages, I present and analyze uncomfortable, painful, and outright devastating moments of Italian American history, but I do so in an effort to spread a type of love that heals and nurtures growth, mutual care and connection, and justice.

I encourage white people of the Italian diaspora who are newly exploring their histories to view their ancestors with loving and critical lenses that consider them as complex individuals who are also influenced by their social, economic, and
political contexts. In these ways, we can better understand that, as Robert Orsi posits in his groundbreaking piece on south Italian immigrants’ ethnicity, southern Italian immigrants came to the United States with specific cultural characteristics that did not disappear overnight.

Instead, as I intend to do with this project, we must re-consider the way we remember immigrant histories, and move forward in expanding European immigrant histories. Doing so holds promise as a tool for preserving diasporic histories in a way that lovingly holds descendants of European immigrants accountable. The very nature of diasporic histories presents obstacles for exploring the past, but my proposed framework of contextualized historical analysis increases these obstacles. Interspersed in these pages are photographs, immigration documents, and stories that my family members have shared with me — remnants of my past collectively uncovered and re-examined. Certainly, not all white descendants of European immigrants share my privileges of a sustained sense of family history, family network, and my own independent research skills made possible by my middle class status and enrollment at an elite academic institution. For white descendants of European immigrants who do not have access to family archives or living family members willing or able to re-examine their immigrant histories, I encourage building inter-generational networks with other white European Americans and start asking questions (When did your ancestors enter the United States? What did they leave behind? What was their experience in the United States?) and challenging any colorblind responses. Throughout this journey, the power of imagination and the wisdom of Avery Gordon will be helpful to white
descendants of European immigrants. Gordon argues, “To study social life one must confront the ghostly aspects of it,” and “link imagination and critique” and finally see ourselves as part of the ghost story that engages the “fictional,” the “factual,” and the “theoretical” (24-27). If we allow ourselves to re-examine, expand, and imagine when we look at the past, we may be surprised at how we can grow.
CHAPTER II.

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

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 and Catholic American organizations and communities treasure the holiday as a celebration of their heritage and community. However special the celebration, in these messages
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. 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 the questions posed above 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
existsences of indigenous peoples and promote the erasure of an Italian American “people’s history.”

Before moving on, it is important to note that the policing of histories and racial identities has occurred across immigrant groups, and race, class, and ethnic lines, and is not isolated or unique to Italian Americans or even Italian American organizations. At the turn of the twentieth century, European immigrants from Ireland, Russia, Finland, Greece, and other parts of Southern, Central, and Eastern Europe, all experienced confrontation for their Otherness in one way or another. Histories of subversive immigrant women, cross-difference solidarity, and cross-difference violence exist among all European immigrant groups, but they are also erased from United States history textbooks – never entering the classroom or the student’s consciousness. My focus on Italian American organizations and Christopher Columbus is a case study, based on my social location as an Italian American, American Studies researcher and feminist with ties to such organizations and a personal interest in resurrecting my history without sanctifying it.

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 feminization, 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 and maleness, 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 project 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 – referring to European immigrants’ establishments on indigenous lands – “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 them invalids. Between
songs, parents of the groom happily introduced me to everyone, pointing at me and laughing, “Bisnonni calabresi!” [Calabrian great-grandparents!]

Photo of 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, June 2014. (Author’s Personal Collection).

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.
Concetta’s niece, Teresa, lives here today – I snapped the photo above moments before meeting her, June 2014. (Author’s Personal Collection).

When I returned to the United States, I shared these photographs and stories with my parents, brothers, aunt, grandmother, and 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. 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. As previously emphasized, the manipulation of history and policing of racial identity is not confined to the Italian Americans discussed in this project, but is common among all descendants of immigrants to the United States. 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, and consider this vantage point to hold potential for transformative justice.

A Brief History of Columbus Day

In *Silencing the Past*, Trouillot maps out the emergence of the masculinized, Americanized celebration of Christopher Columbus on October 12 each year. Neither October 12th nor Columbus was particularly celebrated until all male, fraternal organizations began promoting Columbus as a patriotic symbol. On October 12, 1792, 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 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 transform 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, C. Vanderbilt, and Wall Street 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 ; “Columbus Day”).

Not only did the Columbian Exposition make the United States tens of millions of dollars and attract worldwide attention, but it also generated a masculine symbol that, with multi-layered institutional support, justified 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).

Organizing as Italians celebrating Columbus Day diverged from the campanalismo, or regionalism, that characterized Italian immigrants’ heterogenous histories and 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,” or middle and upper-class, Italian immigrants “were concerned with the growing prejudice against their nationality and wished to elevate its
prestige among the Americans and other ethnic groups” (414). Barriers to this prestige included the notions of southern Italians as exotic, inferior, or feminized Others, and fears of Italian immigrant networks’ threat to American values. Columbus Day, then, offered an opportunity for Italian American organizations to nurture a distinct masculine Italian identity in congruence with a normative 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). 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). 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 able to be, to use Trouillot’s words, “discovered by Europeans” (or in this case, WASP 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. 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 or undesirables unable to assimilate, 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). Such characteristics glorify traditionally male and Eurocentric characteristics, such as reason, bravery, and ethnocentric claims to act on behalf of “the common good.” In an Enlightenment or neoliberal framework, modern Eurocentric ideas of the “common good” imply that spreading European civilization is in the rest of the world’s best interest, and further promote “logic of genocide” which native scholar
Andrea Smith terms as the way of thinking that “holds that indigenous peoples must disappear,” that “they must always be disappearing” (68).

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; Father Brian 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. 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” (Cavaioi, 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, Venitian 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, lent 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 lofty notions of “exploration,” “progress,” “discovery,” and the “New World.” Columbus helps distract Americans from perceiving Italian Americans as dangerous men in the mob, while still asserting Italian American masculinity, 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 book *The View from Vesuvius*, Nelson Moe explains that in the eighteen hundreds 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,” northern Italians 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). Such accounts have established and perpetuated notions of southern Italians as feminized, exotic Others mysteriously close to nature (Moe). 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 directed at them in Italy (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.” For the purpose of this project, 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 Black 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. Andrew Anastasi explores this phenomenon 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 guidos 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 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 confused 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 to consider the organization’s denial of Italian American history to be a purposeful, or self-conscious 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 some 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, historic anxiety must not warrant searches for racial innocence, nor justify 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” (T. Guglielmo, “No Color Barrier,” 376).

Emphasizing that, while there were and are instances of discrimination in the political debates or even the media today against Italian Americans for 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, 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). 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 Italians 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. 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.

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.  

**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 colonialism and 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 Taínos so that he could find gold and send back to Spain; that he captured over 500 Taínos 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 reapings came short; that fifty years after his arrival, only 200 of the one to three million, or more, Taínos 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, resistance, and survival of indigenous peoples.

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 (Star Tribune). 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). Italian Americans must resist the minimization of honoring their history to one day and one symbol.

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. 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.”

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)16

Like most anarchist groups, writers from the L’Era Nuova experienced 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).

The erasure of such critical discourse from history gives way to the rise of the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality among conservative whites. 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).17 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. 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.

The legacy of Columbus crafted by such elites celebrates the man in a neoliberal framework, celebrating him for his traditionally Eurocentric, masculine values. By “masculine values,” I refer to the idea among some 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. While I recognize that this project 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.

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
subscribes 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 Iacovettsi’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. The academics also explore the
dissolution of their radicalism, and the pressures and privileges of assimilation. 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 their histories and identities.

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. ◆◆◆◆
Uncle Joe

My great uncle Joe died several months after his 99th birthday party. I couldn’t make it to the party because I had been studying away in Mexico, but my dad emailed me an image that I tried to recreate in my painting class. In the photo, Uncle Joe sat in front of two giant silver 9-shaped balloons, wearing a pale blue trilby hat matching his pale blue button-down and grinning before a tall glass of red wine. In the photo he’s clasping his liver-spotted hands together like he did at any monthly cousin’s lunch, beckoning the table hush so he could sing.

In a video I took from a gathering at a nearby barbecue joint, Uncle Joe addresses the table.

“I have a lady next door. One day, I’m goin’ in there. I’m gonna say, ‘Ester, sit over here because I wanna sing you a song. She’s 85. I told her, ‘I’m only 86, so don’t worry about me.’”

He was 98 at the time. My dad’s voice interjects, “Too young for you!”
But Uncle Joe folds his arms over his chest, begins to croon,

*Put your head on your shoulder*
*Put your arms around my waist*
*Give me a great big hug*
*And say you hate me*

Everyone laughs.

I wouldn’t hear Uncle Joe sing again until a week before he died, when my dad took my older brother and me to visit and probably say goodbye. We came in through the sliding back door, and my dad flicked on a lamp, yellow light splashing his motionless body. He lay lost in blankets, melted into a reclining chair whose back perched over a cream cheese-colored carpet.

“How’s Joe?”

His head was cocked back, eyes closed, his mouth a gaping black hole. My dad grit his teeth half-comically, calling his name again with no response.

Maria -- Uncle Joe’s forty-something year old caretaker -- a Peruvian woman who had accompanied him from everywhere to Peru, Spain, and Italy, to the grocery store and the bathroom in the last years of his life -- rushed into the room and greeted us.

“Oh, he’s just sleeping,” she said, waving a hand. She neared her lipstick-stained mouth to his ear, shouting, “Joe!” until he snifflled and wheezed, his eyelids fluttering. My warm hands cupped his cold hands and my dad showed him my painting, which we left for him to keep and has since disappeared. He told us about the propeller plane he used to fly around Rockville to scope out houses for his real estate business. My brother, Andrew, asked him about an underground tunnel Italians used to push booze into the Capitol building during Prohibition.
Interrupting him, Uncle Joe sat up in his chair and said, “I’m gonna sing you guys a song.” He declared that he would sing *Daddy’s Little Girl*, a tune apparently crucial to any good Italian wedding.

“This here song,” he croaked, “is guaranteed to make the tear drops fall.” He licked his cracked white lips and sang.
CHAPTER III.
Angela Bambace: A Life of Love, Work, & Politics

Introduction

Although many Italian Americans have invested in the symbolism of Christopher Columbus, the man is by no means the sole representation of Italian immigrants’ pasts promoted by Italian American organizations or consumed by the American public. In his essay “Journeys into the Heart of Whiteness,” historian Peter Rachleff describes whiteness as “fragile, unstable, rife with contradictions, and even susceptible to explosions” (138). Awareness of this instability infused white working-class culture with an edge, a tension, a barely suppressed anger and cynicism ... [that] could give way to radically unexpected behaviors, from interracial love and labor solidarity, on the one hand, to race riots and brutality, on the other. (Rachleff 138)
We see this contradiction in Italian Americans’ simultaneous use of Columbus as a trophy of whiteness and their initiatives to maintain and educate Italian Americans about working-class southern Italian immigrants’ past struggles. When we expand our understandings of south Italian immigration as diaspora, the desire to preserve as many Italian immigrant histories as possible is not only logical, but also deeply personal and emotional. To highlight one example, NIAF’s Milestones website houses an archive of information on Italian Americans throughout history, and a surprising amount of accounts of traditionally forgotten figures. Museum exhibits and textbooks and other sites of historical narratives explore leftist radicalism and labor struggles within first and second-generation Italian American communities. PBS’s new documentary The Italian Americans centers some historic working-class Italian immigrant triumphs and struggles.

Because of historic pressures to abandon Italianness and capitalize on the perks of their tentative whiteness, and general trends of power imbalance in the production of history, it is unsurprising that the most visible portrayals of Italian immigrant histories in the mainstream celebrate narratives of an individual male immigrant’s assimilation and achievement of the American Dream. In a short article entitled “Little Known Facts from Italian American history,” the Order Sons of Italy list Italian American historical figures worth recognizing in addition to Columbus; they name signers of the Declaration of Independence, war heroes, a well-renowned scientist, Bruce Springsteen, Georgia O’Keeffe, and Susan Sarandon (17). The individuals mentioned have undoubtedly contributed to American history - as has
every individual - and have achieved mainstream definitions of success by triumphing in elite spaces. But what do their names tell us about the over four million Italian immigrants who entered the country at the turn of the twentieth century, most of them working-class, brown-skinned, and emigrating from Italy’s despised southern provinces? Narratives of Italian immigrants - and European immigrants in general - are typically filtered to the mainstream in a masculine and politically liberal, individualistic framework, highlighting immigrants as “hard-workers” who “made their way” to middle-class America on their own accord.

Perhaps in a desire to combat stereotypes of Italians as mafiosi, violent, and backwards, and also due to the fact of which feminist scholar and historian Joan Scott reminds us that “no single universal figure could possibly represent the diversity of humankind,” (22) few historical narratives of Italian American history examine the intersections of race and gender within movements that challenged the status quo of industrialism, Italian immigrants’ accumulation of whiteness, and their positionalities’ relationships to other racial and ethnic groups.

On the one hand, histories of labor struggle and southern Italian immigrants that have made it into the mainstream have been groundbreaking in their interruption of dominant modes of history that focus only on elite white men. On the other hand, even productions of subaltern histories are susceptible to reproducing sanitized narratives and symbols that gloss over relationships of power or exclude other marginalized people. As demonstrated by my analysis of the sterilization of Christopher Columbus into a symbol and tool for Italian Americans, it is important to consider historical figures as complex individuals who are also part of a larger
system. Additionally, historians and consumers of American history alike must consider the intersectionality of historical figures or personal narratives.

Works by historians like Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta’s *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives*, Jennifer Guglielmo’s *Living the Revolution*, and Marcella Bencivenni’s *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture*, are groundbreaking in the ways they challenge narratives of American history, insert women into Italian immigrant labor and radical histories, and subvert stereotypes of Italian immigrant women as subservient, passive, and confined to the home and patriarchal families. Similar to scholarship by Rudolph J Vecoli, David Roediger, Thomas Guglielmo, Salvatore Salerno, Philip Cannistraro, these women scholars complicate notions of Italian American whiteness and European immigrants’ accumulation of its associated advantages. There is a growing reservoir of working-class and labor histories focusing on Italian immigrant women and communities involved in non-normative activities: trade unionism; socialist, communist, and anarchist circles; the radical press; antifascist movements; and proletariat feminism, among other radical activities. In this paper, I aim to build off such scholarship by expanding on their chronicles of the Italian immigrant woman garment worker, union activist, and labor leader for over fifty years, Angela Bambace (1898-1975).

In this chapter, I center my analysis of the life of Angela Bambace to challenge the uncritical consumption of immigrant histories that pluck individual males from their environments and attribute their successes to their merit alone. Looking closely at the New York City garment industry and Angela Bambace’s later life as a labor for the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) in
Baltimore, I ruminate on the questions posed by French philosopher Michel Foucault in *The History of Sexuality*, “What were the most immediate, the most local power relations at work? How did they make possible these kinds of discourses, and conversely, how were these discourses used to support power relations?” (1: 97).

**Methodology**

In this chapter, I use primary and secondary sources to examine the life of Angela Bambace and center her narrative as a counter to traditionally masculine, rags-to-riches, and individualistic accounts of immigrant histories. I recognize that focusing on one individual’s history may reproduce individualistic and masculine notions of history. However, as inspired by Mary Jo Maynes’, Jennifer Pierce’s, and Barbara Laslett’s *Telling Stories* and Paula Droege’s “Reclaiming the Subject, or a View from Here,” I consider the examination of personal narrative and as an opportunity for re-examining historical figures as complex individuals with agency and subjectivity, who are influenced by and reactive to the forces of power that structure their local, national, and global environments. Bencivenni suggests, "to understand radical experiences fully, we need a broader definition of the 'political'" and "move away from the workplace as the central paradigm of working-class identity" (3). In this project, to the best of my abilities, I aim to examine Angela's life in all its complexity: her family; her work; her personal relationships; her motivations and inspirations; her modes of communication. As in my argument for a more critical examination of Columbus in Chapter Two, we must examine and re-examine Angela Bambace as a multidimensional individual with personal
relationships, influence on others across difference, and a member of a larger system. Additionally, I treat Angela’s narrative with an ethics of care and love as promoted by bell hooks (2001), confronting both moments of lovelessness and changes made possible by active expressions of acceptance and love across difference.

Throughout this chapter, I adopt gender and race as analytic categories. As described by feminist historian Joan Scott, gender as an analytic category requires an “analysis not only of the relationship between male and female experience in the past, but also of the connection between past history and current historical practice” (59). I follow her lead in asking questions like, “How does gender work in human social relationships? How does gender give meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge?” (59). Although I aim to examine the many intersections of Angela Bambace’s life and identity, I must still recognize, to reinvade Haraway, that my interpretations and analysis is partial and situated, produced from my social location as a middle-class white Italian American woman and American Studies researcher.

Similar to Joan Scott’s warning of the dangers of considering women’s “herstories” as in their own “separate sphere” from men’s, it is important to not consider Italian immigrants in a sphere separate from other ethnic and racial groups. Feminist theorist Nancy Forsythe also cautions feminist researchers that using gender difference “as a social dynamic as independent--conceptually, spatially and temporally--of the other forms of social difference” reproduces essentialisms and erases differences across women (151.) I therefore apply Kimberlé Crenshaw’s
lens of intersectionality to my interpretations of Angela’s life, and especially her relationships across racial and ethnic difference. We cannot consider Angela’s Italian immigrant background separate from her gender; moreover, centering her narrative contributes to the counter of stereotypes of Italian immigrant women as passive in the home and garment industry.\(^\text{18}\) It is important to clarify that Angela Bambace is not an exception to this stereotype; she is merely one of many Italian immigrant women who came before and after her, who organized in and outside unions for institutional changes.\(^\text{19}\)

Nor can we ignore Italian immigrants’ relationship to whiteness. Historians of southern and eastern European immigrants’ experiences must pay attention to Thomas Guglielmo’s caution “not to exaggerate the precariousness” of what some scholars consider their “inbetween” racial statuses (“No Color Barrier,” 36). It is important to avoid “racing for innocence,” a phrase Jennifer Pierce applies to some white Americans’ efforts to highlight marginalized aspects of their identities or histories to prove their innocence in racism along with their “morality and national identity” (82). While these are essential frameworks, I also aim to weave throughout the chapter awareness of the inbetweenness, or the instability of whiteness, that has manifested itself in anti-Italian discrimination and ongoing anxiety for many southern Italian immigrants.

Ultimately, I question dominant narratives of southern and eastern European immigrant histories by exploring the intersections of Angela Bambace’s politics, gender, class, race, ethnicity, family, and personal relationships. I demonstrate that highlighting Angela Bambace’s life history in context challenges male-centric Italian,
nationalistic, and sterilized rags-to-riches Italian immigrant narratives. Contextualizing Angela Bambace’s life history with a feminist, class-conscious, and critical race theory lens exposes the workings of systems of power, while encouraging expanded exploration of Italian immigrant histories.

A Life of Love, Work & Politics

The daughter of Giuseppina Calabrese of Sicily and Antonio Bambace of Calabria, Angelina Bambace was born in Santos, Brazil in 1889 (New York State Census, 1915). A year later, her sister Maria was born. Her father worked as a fisherman in Brazil but he became ill and unable to work. He believed that the only cure of his poor health - described as depression - would require returning to his hometown in Calabria, a southern Italian province populated by people stigmatized as impoverished, criminal, and backwards, largely for its proximity to Africa (“Notes to interview questions dictated by Angela Bambace to Marian”).

After Antonio’s mental health did not improve in Calabria, he willed his wife to move to the United States. They eventually resettled in Port Chester, New York, and then East Harlem, where “it was a must” that Angela go to school every day (Ibid.) When Antonio’s mental health problems left him unable to work, Josephine, like many Italian immigrant women, pursued work in the garment industry to support her family. She began sewing and mending items for people at home, known as “homework” or “piecework,” which involved piecing together garments at home for a fixed price per finished garment (Ibid.; J. Guglielmo, Living the Revolution, 46). At the time, piecework was of the lowest-paying, least secure positions in the
garment industry, and was a position commonly held by southern and eastern European immigrant women who needed to balance their responsibilities at home with financially supporting their working-class immigrant families (Ibid. 45-47). Though Italian immigrant workers were often considered “Black labor” in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it is notable that Black women were reportedly barred from obtaining homework “when it entailed her waiting in the same sitting-room with white women” (Miller 75). In this case, Italians were white.

After she finished high school, Angela worked as a bookkeeper at a laundry to help support her family. The Bambace sisters joined their mother in the garment industry in 1917 as sewing machine operators at a shirtwaist factory shop sewing blouses family (“Notes to interview questions”). At that time, working conditions had been and would continue to be deplorable for most garment workers, characterized by long hours, low wages, exposure to hazardous chemicals, and verbally and physically abusive employers (Orleck ; Enstad ; J. Guglielmo, Living the Revolution). Women workers often experienced sexual harassment and violence, and it was not uncommon for employers to prohibit their workers from going to the bathroom, charge workers exorbitant prices to use a chair or locker or replace an accidentally spoiled piece of fabric, or even lock their workers in the workroom to prevent them from taking breaks (J. Guglielmo, Living the Revolution). Possibly the single most horrific consequence of such abusive practices was the 1911 Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire which claimed the lives of 146 garment workers, most of them young immigrant women, who were locked in workrooms on the eighth and ninth floors where they burned or jumped to their deaths.
When Angela entered the garment industry in 1917, Jewish immigrants - most of them from Russia - still made up the majority of women workers (Laurentz). There was a minority of Italian immigrant women workers, followed by white women workers who were not recently arrived European immigrants. In 1900, the census recorded 803 of the 16,114 Black working women in New York City as dressmakers, though their stories and specific oppressions have rarely been centered in New York City garment worker narratives (Laurentz, 83). Black people had been living in New York City since being brought there as slaves, hundreds of years before masses of Jewish and Italian immigrants entered the country. New York City’s Black population grew by more than 60,000 people between 1910 and 1920, and suffered from job loss and increased poverty with the influx of European immigration. Dealt “further discrimination and economic oppression of blacks in New York” from waves of European immigrants entering New York City, Black people had increasingly limited access to labor jobs unless employers recruited them to break strikes or work for poorer conditions than their white counterparts (Ibid., 87).

Contrary to popular stereotypes of Italian immigrant women as docile and confined to the home, Italian immigrant women workers organized with each other and women workers of other ethnic and racial backgrounds to rise up against employers’ abusive practices. The shop where Angela and Maria began their garment work was initially non-union, but The Amalgamated Clothing Workers Association helped organize the blouse shop, marking the beginning of Angela and Maria’s labor organizing careers in 1917 (”Notes to interview”). Angela joined the
front lines of garment worker walkouts and strikes, and tried to convince other garment workers to join her and her fellow strikers. In her early years of organizing, Angela faced violence at the hands of garment workers’ employers and men hired by factory owners to break up strikes. Angela’s son Phillip remembers her as “a foot soldier” in the “war” of garment worker activism in which employers beat her, threw her down stairs and jailed her when she ruthlessly confronted of their exploitative practices (“Speech, November 15, 1980”; “Notes to interview”).

While Angela was outspoken and fiercely independent in many respects, she advocated for collective forms of resistance and largely survived because of networks with women in her family and on the front lines. When union leadership sent Angela and her sister Marie to factories to ensure adequate working conditions, for example, their mother joined them with a rolling pin in hand (Ibid.) Angela’s mother, Giuseppina, used her networks to protect her daughters and other women workers on strike. After learning that an acquaintance of hers had hired men to beat up Jewish women on strike, Guiseppina convinced him to stop (Scarpaci). After men hired by employers - likely from the Sicilian mob - badly beat up Angela, Giuseppina called her Sicilian friends and told them, “Non si tocca Angela!” (Don’t touch Angela!). The men never hurt her again.23

Angela’s activism first emerged at a time of state violence against south and east European American radicalism in the United States. When her sister Maria married Anthony Capraro, an IWW leader, the sisters became more heavily involved in Italian radical and anarchist communities. J. Guglielmo notes that Italian immigrant women often sought communities of resistance outside of the ILGWU,
whose Jewish male dominated leadership often neglected their interests and became increasingly reformist, as opposed to radical, in the 1920s. The IWW served as allies and advocates for garment workers among other industrial workers, and especially immigrants who were underrepresented in unions.

Angela Bambace and her mother, Giuseppina. (Bambace Papers, Immigration History Center Archives)

The stakes of radical organizing were high. In 1919, two years after Angela began working and organizing in the garment industry, Capraro was kidnapped and beaten by the Ku Klux Klan for his involvement in industrial unionism. That same year, the FBI launched the Palmer Raids against radicals, and especially Italian anarchist groups and members of the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) in the New York City metropolitan area. Under the leadership of director J. Edgar Hoover, the FBI began their crusade of repression of European American radicals who conspired against the United States government; they raided and destroyed radical meeting spots and their presses, and threatened European immigrants organizing as
leftist radicals and anarchists with arrest, incarceration, deportation, and fraudulent charges. The single most visible and controversial manifestation culminated in the unjust execution of Italian anarchists Sacco and Vanzetti.

Also in 1919, 21-year-old Angela married the 27-year-old Roman waiter Romolo Camponeschi, as arranged by her father, and ceased organizing (Scarpaci, 6). She and Maria moved into the same house in Flushing, Queens with their husbands. Angela gave birth to her sons Oscar in August of 1920 and Philip in May 1923. A loving mother, Angela would reportedly still struggle to navigate the constraints of a traditional Italian marriage, confined to “tomato sauce and homemade gnocchi” (Ibid.).

Despite the anti-radical and anti-union backlash, and the patriarchal constraints on immigrant mothers and organizers, Angela returned to the garment industry and organizing in 1925. Though she returned to work primarily for her family's economic stability, Angela also longed to return to struggles for workers' liberation (Ibid., 7) Upon her return, J. Guglielmo documents that Angela Bambace, among other organizers, rejected the sexist organizing practices of Italian Locals of the ILGWU and

became active in Communist Party meetings and strikes, where they formed alliances with Jewish anarchists and communists in the union. For such actions they were denounced by the leadership of the Italian locals. For the rest of the 1920s, Bambace assisted the ACWA's organizational campaigns in Elizabeth, New Jersey (J. Guglielmo, Living the Revolution, 215)
Angela supported the New York 1926 cloakmakers’ strike, and organized within the International Ladies Garment Workers’ Union and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union. In those years, she also met her long-time friends, union activists and socialists Rose and Charles Zimmerman. She continued to throw herself into risky forms of union activism: confronting employers face-to-face for their abusive practices, picketing, staging walk-outs, working undercover in shops to monitor working conditions, standing outside factories and spreading informational leaflets to workers about their rights, and more (Scarpaci, 7). Charles (Sasha) Zimmerman considered Angela’s “major strength” to be “her ability to absorb the ideas of others and apply them in a practical and logical manner. She learned by asking questions” (Ibid., 9). Reflecting on her participation in the 1932 Elizabeth walkout and strike of 75,000 workers, Angela recalls, “We did it with fear” (*The Baltimore Sun* 1973).

Angela Bambace and Rose Zimmerman (Bambace Papers, Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota).
Angela’s husband, Romolo, was less than pleased with her radical politics, however. They divorced in 1927, “though they had been, so to speak, on the outs for a few years before that,” according to their son Oscar (“Speech, November 15, 1980”). Using evidence of Angela’s radicalism in court, Romolo took legal custody of their children. Dissatisfied with her arranged marriage and Romolo’s conservative expectations of her as a wife and mother, Angela threw herself into garment worker activism and communities with like-minded European immigrant organizers. She forged friendships with other radicals who supported her emotionally and with a place to stay when she had nowhere else to go. She also reportedly established “intimate relationships” with communist Vittorio Vidali and her divorce lawyer, Vito Marcantonio, who would later be one of the most left-leaning Congressmen of United States history (Scarpaci, 12-13). Scarpaci explains that Marcantonio, at the time, was employed by future New York City mayor Fiorello LaGuardia, who allegedly asked Angela’s hand in marriage (13). In the late 1920s, however, Angela met and became romantically involved with Luigi Quintiliano, an Italian anarchist and antifascist who worked with leading Italian anarchist Carlo Tresca in editing his newspaper *Il Martello*, and on the defense of Sacco and Vanzetti on behalf of the Italian Committee for Political Victims. Together, Angela and Luigi mourned their unjust execution (“Speech, November 15, 1980”).

Luigi, an Italian immigrant man with skin so dark he was once thrown out of the Whites Only section of a train, was passionate about an anarchist revolution until his death. While Scarpaci describes Luigi as a stereotypical possessive Italian husband, Angela’s granddaughter, Mindy, remembers him fondly as “Lu,” “the
number two Italian radical” to Tresca, a gun owner who engaged in shootouts in the streets with anarchists against the Italian fascist Blackshirts, and the love of Angela’s life.\textsuperscript{26}

Angela Bambace and Luigi Quintiliano (Bambace Papers, Immigration History Research Center Archives, University of Minnesota). Due to the conflicting demands of Angela’s motherhood, radical politics, and work outside the home, however, Angela and her children suffered estrangement from one another. Scarpaci reveals, Angela’s first husband Romolo used the combination of her political activism and emotional involvement as evidence to deny Angela the custody of their children. He hired detectives who followed her first to her political meetings then to the apartments of the friends in Manhattan who gave her a place to sleep. (Scarpaci, 13)

Angela’s repression as a radical was doubled by sexual oppression and the societal expectations associated with being an Italian immigrant woman and mother. In spite of these obstacles, neither her activism, nor her pursuit of emotional connections with people sharing her dreams of revolution, was thwarted.
The loss of custody was devastating for the entire family. Angela’s son Oscar recalls in his eulogy of her that after losing the custody battle, Angela also suffered “a short stay at a sanatorium for a bout with tuberculosis,” and the following few years “were the saddest of the most lonely of her life” (“Speech, November 15, 1980”). She overcame such tough times by hurling herself into her work with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and the ILGWU, and with the support of her “ever present” mother Giuseppina, purchased “a house three blocks away from [her sons’] father’s and there she would see [her children] whenever possible on weekends, during the summer, on holidays” (Ibid.). Angela’s children spent much of their time at Angela’s mother’s house, where she visited after school and on the weekends. Angela’s son Oscar would recall that in those years, his grandmother’s house “was usually filled during weekends with all sorts of interesting people, any of them radical, some of them slightly zany, at least in the eyes of young boys who were more interested in playing ball than anything else” (Ibid.). Her activism persisted through the economic crisis of the Great Depression.

Amidst the beginning of the New Deal Angela would come to admire so greatly, in 1934 ILGWU President David Dubinsky offered Angela a position to organize garment workers in Baltimore, Maryland. Although many garment worker women activists like Angela believed in structural changes to industrialism and United States society, J. Guglielmo highlights that in the end, "Italian women were willing to join a strike orchestrated by the ILGWU because it was becoming
increasingly impossible to organize separately from them” (J. Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 188).

![Image of Antifascists in New York City](image)

Although ILGWU local leadership had criticized Angela in the past for her radicalism, she accepted a temporary job that soon became permanent. The move to Baltimore was challenging and lonely for Angela and her family in New York. She found comfort in the regular deliveries of olive oil and canned tomatoes brought to her new home by her brother-in-law, Anthony Capraro, and by forming strong friendships with other labor organizers in the area (Ibid., 133). She visited her mother, sister, and Luigi as frequently as she could, and maintained communication by writing letters.

In a letter from his first semester of college, Angela’s son Oscar vents about a troublesome “anti-unionist” classmate in his public speaking class, and asks his mother for “statistics and data” to help his argument (“Personal Correspondence”).

In 1945, in a letter to her son Phillip concerning his safety during his service in World War II, Angela ends by mockingly referring to fascists as
the brave ... who wanted to build a new world and thanks to the bankers and international capital they succeeded until they became too dangerous even for them.

Loads of love from us all,
Mother (“Correspondence – Phillip Camponeschi”)

Through these letters and the rest of her life, Angela would blend her displays of love for them with instillations of a sense of equality and justice. When they reunited, boisterous political debates would often characterize evenings around the dinner table.

Though her career with the ILGWU started in Baltimore, most of the factories that Angela was to organize were in small, rural towns spread out in the states of Delaware, Maryland, Virginia, and West Virginia. Unlike the multi-ethnic population of industrial workers in New York City, most workers were whites whose ancestors had immigrated to the United States centuries long enough that people incorrectly labeled them “native whites.” Workers were not unionized, and many had reportedly not even known about the possibility of unionizing - though it is important not to assume they did not resist exploitation in their own ways.

Without a driver’s license, Angela appealed to garment workers by traveling from one small factory town to another with her chauffeur, an African American man named Jesse. In small towns of Maryland and Virginia, Jesse was often unwelcome in the restaurants they stopped in. The two of them would often share sandwiches on park benches, where sometimes she would fall asleep on his shoulder (Scarpaci).
Angela was not an individual who struggled and triumphed in a vacuum. Even in the loneliest moments of her work in the Upper South Department, she shared her stress and accomplishments with her sons and sister Maria. In letters, what her friend Will Allen referred to as “il dulce cinismo del suo spirito” (the sweet cynicism of her spirit) shines, but reveals the overwhelming demands of her work:

The weather man seems to have made up his mind to beat down upon us. Maybe the gods are angry because human beings are such fools and because they haven’t learned anything. I am getting more and more tangled up in my work. As the district expands I have more to reach out and adjust grievances and labor management becomes harder. (“Personal Correspondence”)

In 1942, the ILGWU officially founded the Upper South Department, with Angela as its District Manager. As the district grew, Angela’s responsibilities expanded as well. The same year, in 1942, the year she officially helped found the Upper South Department and became Vice President of the ILGWU, the United States government officially declared Italian Americans no longer alien enemies of the state. In spite of the United States’ increasing acceptance of Italian Americans as white Americans (i.e. forgiveness for their differences and radicalism in exchange for their ascension to whiteness), the father of Angela’s children, Romolo, would continue to chastise her in later years for the deviance of her radical politics and subversion of traditional gender roles. Years after their divorce, Romolo wrote Angela asking for money to pay their son’s tuition, “If you can recollect many years ago when I made the suggestion to save for the education of our children your answer was twenty years from now there will be a revolution” (“Personal Correspondence”).
Luigi and her sons, Oscar and Phillip, eventually moved to Baltimore. Angela supported her sons through years of medical and law school, and “in response to his mother’s urging in the 1960s,” says the Baltimore Sun (1975), Oscar founded a health clinic and company that “provided pretax, prepaid eye exams and eyeglasses to garment workers” (“Dr. Oscar B. Camp”). The company would later become United Healthcare Inc. Although Angela would privately hold Communist beliefs and friendships based on such political affiliations for the remainder of her life, she was inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal for its pragmatism, and adopted a more reformist leadership role as the first female Vice President of the ILGWU.

In a letter to her son Phillip, Angela mourns the death of FDR and reflects on his leadership style:

He was the tireless fighter, a great man and idealist, a practical one, which is very unusual. And an astute politician, which is another quality that does not usually come together. The trouble with most men who dream and believe in something above the general stream is in their lack of application of this
dream. They try to fight all barriers and there are many. And in the effort
needed to fight these passions the dream and goal lag and sometimes is lost.
Roosevelt tried to put his ideas into effect by so many methods using the
opportune moment as it presented itself. Sometimes he baffled the entire
group of friends who followed him closely. All his maneuvers sometimes
good, not so good and sometimes pretty bad, however he never lost sight of
his dream, his goal. "We have nothing to fear but fear," one of his early
remarks. "Youth has a rendezvous with Destiny" ...

These are not very original sayings, many other leaders have made the same
remarks. Only he meant it ... That’s where the Big Interests were fooled!
They thought they had heard all of these platitudes before, never expecting to
find a Roosevelt who really meant to push it through. ("Correspondence –
Phillip Camponeschi")

The qualities that Angela admired of Roosevelt’s leadership manifested in
her own. Friends and family remember Angela as committed to the garment
workers above all else, prioritizing what she saw as the most effective strategies
depending on the context (Scarpaci). Angela ran in circles that plotted anarchist and
communist revolutions in the United States; her life partner, after all, was an
anarchist until the day he died. As Salvatore Salerno highlights, however,

the recurring Red scares, with threats of public humiliation and deportation,
inspired fear within families. Belonging to the radical minority carried a
painful stigma; it often meant being ostracized by neighbors, denounced by
the priest, taunted by other children. Not surprisingly, later in life children of
radicals often professed not to know about their parents’ politics--or refused
to discuss them. (I Delitti, 64)

Following the repression and “demise” of radicalism, most radicals who were
not deported or declared enemies of the state slipped into the background. Perhaps
after witnessing this demise, and with an awareness of the “many barriers” to
equality and justice, Angela chose her angle of interruption – labor rights – and gave
it her all. Under her official leadership, garment worker women throughout the
"Upper South" celebrated contracts with employers ensuring higher wages, overtime, time and a half pay, vacation, and more. At ILGWU conferences, Angela encouraged participation and leadership among the rank-and-file.

As inspired by Roosevelt, in her powerful speeches Angela motivated workers to not lose sight of their shared dreams. Here I include a brief speech of Angela’s in its entirety, to center her voice and allow her to speak for herself:

SO MUCH HAS BEEN SAID...SO MANY SPEECHES... ALL COMPLIMENTARY...MOSTLY EXAGGERATED. YES, IT WAS TOUGH GOING FOR A GOOD WHILE YES IT WAS DIFFICULT AND DISCOURAGING BUT I KNOW THAT THERE ARE A NUMBER OF LABOR LEADERS IN THIS AUDIENCE WHO MET WITH THE SAME STUBBORNNESS AND LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF OUR DREAM, THE ONE DREAM THAT WE ALL SHARE. IT WAS HARD AND IT WAS TOUGH, BUT WE KNEW THAT ONE DAY SOON THE WORKERS WOULD COME TO THE REALIZATION THAT WHAT WE PREACHED MADE SENSE AND SO, LITTLE BY LITTLE, THEY BECAME CURIOUS AND WANTED TO KNOW JUST WHAT THE WORD UNION MEANT. THE WOMEN WHO HAD BEEN RECEIVING LESS PAY FOR THE SAME WORK AS THE MEN DECIDED TO STAND UP AND CHALLENGE THE DISCRIMINATION. THE EMPLOYER, FEARFUL OF LOSING HIS WORKERS AGREED TO GIVE EQUAL PAY TO ALL. THIS WAS THE BEGINNING, AND LITTLE BY LITTLE WE WON, BUT WE KNEW THAT OUR WORK HAD JUST BEGUN.


THE DREAM IS A DREAM NO MORE. IT IS A REALITY. WE WON OUR BATTLES, THOUGH WE MUST NOT LET UP FOR A MINUTE FOR FEAR OF SLIPPING BACK. BUT THE DREAM IS OVER, THE REALITY IS THERE--YOU CAN FEEL IT, YOU CAN TOUCH IT, YOU CAN SEE IT. AND IF WE ALL SHARE CREDIT FOR THIS, WE CAN SHARE A BIT OF BLAME TOO. THE LAST ELECTION SHOWED US THAT WE CAN NO LONGER BE DIVIDED. WE MUST STICK TOGETHER. IF WE JOIN HANDS, NO NIXONS CAN BRAT US. IF WE WORK TOGETHER IN OUR STRENGTH WE CAN WIN WHATEVER BATTLES FACE US. WE MUST WORK TOGETHER AND WE WILL
BE UNTOUCHED BY ANY ANTI-LABOR LEGISLATION NIXON HAS IN STORE FOR US.
SO I LEAVE WITH THIS FERVENT HOPE AND PRAYER THAT WE JOIN TOGETHER HERE TONIGHT DETERMINED TO BE A UNITED LABOR MOVEMENT FOR THE GOOD OF ALL AND FOR THE ACHIEVEMENTS WE CAN WIN THROUGH UNITY AND STRENGTH. LET THE UNION FLAGS UNFURL AND TOGETHER WE WILL BUILD A BRAVE NEW WORKERS WORLD. (Bambace Papers)

In 1955, Angela was named the Vice President of the ILGWU, marking her the first non-Jewish woman to hold such a high position in history. Photos of the ILGWU’s Executive Council highlight Angela’s status as the only woman on the ILGWU leadership, let alone one of the only Italians among the Jewish-dominated leadership.

![ILGWU Executive Board. Bambace Papers, Immigration History Research Center Archives, University of Minnesota.](image)

Though Angela dedicated her life to advancing the rights of women workers, their inclusion in union hierarchy, and even attacking other systems of oppression, Angela resisted being seen as a feminist. Even in Angela’s memorialization, Scarpaci characterizes Angela as “a champion for labor not a spokesperson for women,” and assures that Angela’s “involvement with women
did not convert her to feminism” (Scarpaci, 17-18) Instead, she preferred the label “humanist,” and insisted that women were no better than men, arguing that she sought equality for all. Angela’s aversion to the label “feminism” reflects a reading of feminisms as one universal feminism, and as anti-male. This is not a reflection of close-mindedness or anti-womanism; Angela’s outspokenness about discrimination against women workers and her commitment to advancing women worker’s rights for over fifty years demonstrates her care for women, along with all people. Instead, it is important to aim to understand Angela’s rejection of the term “feminism” in its historical context; meaning, understanding that in the course of her life, to most people “feminism” meant one type of feminism: middle and upper-class White Anglo Saxon Protestant feminism. Though Angela’s activism was rights-oriented, much like mainstream white liberal feminism throughout United States history, Angela Bambace’s preference for the label “humanist” reflects her desire not to reproduce hierarchies of power, and moreover could signify a number of factors: the impracticality and potential dangers of declaring herself a feminist as the only woman on the ILGWU’s all-male Executive Board; the impracticality or dangers of WASP feminism to the labor movement and collective working-class resistance; conceptions of all feminisms as anti-male and limited to bra-burning or debates on homemaking; dominant middle- and upper-class white liberal feminists’ goals’ irrelevance to or possible interference with her own goals; dominant WASP feminism’s elitism, classism, and exclusion of difference; or her own personal disagreement with the content or methods of dominant feminist discourse of her time. Regardless,
Angela Bambace spoke publicly about the lack of representation of women in leadership positions. In 1973, Angela refers to herself as “a token” for the ILGWU in the *Baltimore Sun*, arguing that the Executive Board needs “to get more women, and more blacks.”

Angela Bambace may have privately held communist beliefs until her dying day, but as a Vice President of the ILGWU and one of the only woman leaders on the Executive Board, Angela was constantly confronted with difficult decisions and compromises that sometimes frustrated workers (Scarpaci). However, the sheer statistics of union membership increase, contract wins for workers, and increased participation of rank-and-file in union activities under her leadership reflect her efficacy as a negotiator in the anti-union climate of the “Upper South.” Under her leadership, the Upper South membership grew from “two locals and 750 members” to “10,000 members in forty local unions” by 1958 (The ILGer). ILGWU scrapbooks document various women worker’s victories and conferences in which Angela encouraged the rank-and-file to participate as much as possible.

President’s Commission on the Status of Women. Esther Peterson, Jacqueline Kennedy, Angela Bambace. (Immigration History Research Center, University of Minnesota)
Major political leaders honored Angela throughout her career in the Upper South Department, and she operated in various spaces fighting for labor and civil rights. Robert Kennedy appointed her to the Commission on the Status of Women; the city of Baltimore honored her for her outstanding citizenship; she was the first labor leader awarded an Amita (American-Italian Award). In her later years, Angela involved herself in activities of other civil and labor rights organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, Americans for Democratic Action, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Italian American Labor Council, the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and Histadrut, the Zionist labor movement (Bambace Papers). Her involvement in movements and organizations specific to Jewish immigrants reflect her strong alliances with the Jewish majority of her colleagues. The archive of Angela Bambace’s papers at the Immigrant History Research Center hold various photos of Angela smiling with Jackie Kennedy, A. Phillip Randolph, and Hubert Humphrey, a friend of Angela’s who called the hospital to speak with her during his Vice Presidency as she neared the end of her life. Only three years after retiring from her own Vice Presidency of the ILGWU, Angela died from cancer at the age of 86 in 1975. Her obituary ran in the Baltimore Sun, Ms. Magazine, and the Baltimore Afro-American, among other publications.
Angela’s pursuit of justice through labor rights did not inhibit her from forging alliances across difference. After her death, the American Civil Liberties Union commemorated her for “activities in the community [that] kept alive, at even the darkest moments, the promise that civil libertarians, working people and social justice activists could share the same purposes and work toward common ends” (“Awards and Honors”). How did Angela’s racial identity, and the fragility of her whiteness, impact her employment and activism in the New York City garment industry? Did she make alliances across difference in New York and Baltimore? How did her role as the only woman on the ILGWU’s Executive Council influence the existence or lack of such alliances?

Though some productions of immigrant histories tend to romanticize an ethnic group’s unity and experiences as distinct or even isolated from other immigrant groups, counternarratives reveal working-class alliances across ethnicity...
and race as mentioned in Chapter One. In the case of Angela Bambace, she maintained strong ties to her Italian American community, culture, and family, while simultaneously organizing and socialized outside of her ethnic group, establishing friendships and professional relationships with other unionists and radicals – most of them Jewish immigrants.

Angela’s long time friend Clara Larson remembers her as someone who “did not reflect Italianness” but instead “embraced all humanity especially the workers” with “warmth and feeling of interdependence” that “was not limited to Italians” (Scarpaci, 10). It is impossible to know exactly what Clara Larson meant by “Italianness,” and a present-day interpretation sensitive to identity politics may charge Larson with accusing Angela of not exhibiting characteristics “authentic” to Italian identity and culture. However, one must consider the historical and social context of their friendship, Angela’s strong ties to her family, her passing on of Italian language, culture and traditions to her children and grandchildren (“Slim Man Cooks Angela’s Chicken Stew”), and her involvement in Italian and Italian American-specific causes such as the Italian war relief and antifascist movements. It is possible that Larson was actually implying that Angela did not promote Italian nationalism or antagonism between ethnic groups, and was able to relate to and work with non-Italians across their differences.

However tolerant, brave, and radical Angela was, however, it is crucial to present her organizing as located within the hierarchies of the garment worker labor activism. Angela’s sons recall that her work involved

working in sweatshops where she was often placed by the leadership in order to persuade her co-workers to join the
union, walking picket lines, meeting with other women outside
the shop, on their homes, in the streets persuading them,
cajoling them and, when necessary, doing battle with them and
going to jail for it. ("Speech, November 15, 1980")

When her conversations with other workers did not result in their striking,
she “sometimes resorted to ‘pulling the power,’” meaning she switched off the
electricity in the factory so workers had to exit and gather, where discussions of
working conditions circulated (Scarpaci, 12). In the context of a Jewish-dominated
industry and a mostly male-controlled union, Angela was a fearless activist. In spite
of society’s underestimation of Italian immigrant women and the obstacles of her
personal life, Angela challenged employers and workers on the front lines,
advocating for women laborer’s equal rights and humane working conditions.

Historiographies of Angela often underline her tenacity, recalling Angela’s advice to
her sister in a 1919 Harlem garment workers’ strike to punch an uncooperative
worker in the nose rather than talk to her (Segretti). While the story may conjure
admiration for Angela’s militant commitment to the movement, or perhaps may
seem light-hearted and harmless, the memorialization of the quote invites us to
explore the deeper nuances of strikebreakers and their reasons for not joining the
union and striking.

Though Angela and other Italian American garment worker union organizers
acknowledged that the majority of strikebreakers in the garment industry were
actually Italian women, newspapers and union leaders overwhelmingly villainized
Blacks for being strikebreakers or “scabs” ("Notes to interview questions" ; Italian
Immigrant Women in New York City’s Garment Industry Oral Histories). Anti-
Blackness emerging from frustrated union leaders was unlike the inability of union leader Eugene Debs to consider the context of Italian strikers. Instead of recognizing the structural advantages offered to them by strikebreaking, he painted the acceptance of lower pay as a cultural, or racial problem. Collapsing Italians into a singular “Dago” who “works for small pay, and lives far more like a save or wild beast, than the Chinese,” Debs added that Italian immigrants “fatten on garbage” and “underbid an American working man” (lvi). Italian immigrant women experienced such charges, with the additional stereotyping as passive and subservient women, dominated by their husbands and fathers.

Black women rarely appear in literature about the New York garment industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries unless depicted as scabs, disloyal or ignorant to the noble cause of trade unionism. In the wake of mass European immigration to New York City, employers took advantage of Black women's precarious socio-economic positions and encouraged them to break strikes and avoid involvement in ILGWU organizing. Jewish and non-Jewish employers who “had their own history of oppression and were struggling for survival in a highly competitive industry” used Black women “as inexpensive, highly exploitable labor as well as strike-breakers ... to survive and profit in the industry” (Laurentz, 91). Black women often cooperated with employers because “in most cases it was the only circumstance under which white employers would hire them” (Ibid.)

In their book *The Black Worker*, Spero and Harris explain that Black workers' “willingness to break the white man's strike is partly traceable to his slave time distrust of white labor and his dependence on the white master class” (129). Plainly
speaking, striking was not as safe for Black workers as it was for non-Black workers. While Angela often faced legal repercussions for her organizing, her support from the union and activist networks often helped her out of tricky situations, and her trouble with the law did not prevent her from future success as a professional activist and beloved American labor leader. Once when employers had Angela arrested and thrown in jail, she was sentenced 30 days in prison. Even though the union had enough money to bail her out, she was not released, and served her full sentence. She recalled that most of her peers in jail were Black women who nicknamed her “pale face” (“Notes to interview”).

A close consideration of the scenario prompts a number of questions: How many of the Black women alongside her in jail had an organization with a sum of money prepared to bail them out of jail? How many of the Black women would remain behind bars when she would be released, only to return to organizing knowing that she would probably be back in jail again, only to be released a second time? How many Black women would have been able to make that risk? How many Italian American women are incarcerated today versus Black women? Such an examination reminds Italian Americans that as “dark” and “inferior” as southern Italian women may have been considered, they still paled in comparison to Black Americans and the systematic oppression they experience daily.

Moreover, white employers often lured Blacks to fill in work during strikes with the promise of work without prior knowledge of the factory or the ongoing strike (Spero and Harris, 129). Spero and Harris point out that contrary to popular belief, Blacks have made up only a small minority among a larger majority of white
strikebreakers, “but the bitterness of American race prejudice has always made [the Black worker’s] presence an especially sore point” (131). Garment industry employers also recruited Black workers in time of conflict among white workers, which led to increased resentment and mistrust between Black and white workers. When mistrust became disruptive for the work environment, however, employers prioritized white workers’ comfort and preferences even in times of strike by choosing to not hire Black workers. Mistrust also manifested itself in racist violence in which white union organizers “savagely beat and mobbed” Black strikebreakers (Ibid.) The media and union organizers alike consistently exaggerated the number of Black garment workers breaking strikes, making the union, if not the entire factory or neighborhood, an even more unsafe place to be Black in America.

Employers exploited Black women, manipulating them into strikebreaking - often without even informing them of the strikes. Employers capitalized on the legacy of slavery that left female ex-slaves and their descendants with few opportunities for employment by subjecting them to atrocious working conditions and wages lower than those of any other ethnic or racial group. Even if Black workers entered the workforce during times of strike, employers typically fired them as soon as the strikes ended and European immigrant women returned to work (Ibid.). This truth did not rid them of the stigma of scab, however, and suffered continued scapegoating and anti-Black violence from unionists across the nation.

Ultimately, a diversity of strikebreaker narratives is necessary for challenging notions of a striker/scab, righteous activist/traitor binary within larger histories of the garment industry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Even still,
while unionists who excluded Blacks must be held accountable for their actions, it is important to recognize that unionists, too, are members of a larger system of domination, and acted in ways they deemed effective against their oppressors. In their lesson from *Rethinking Columbus*, Rethinking Schools encourages us to re-examine history as events spurring from circumstances created by systems of oppression that necessitate competition, exclusion, and violence for survival.

In *Working Towards Whiteness*, David Roediger explains that employers divided workers “by nationality and/or race” to promote competition “against each other in a strategy not only designed in the long run to undermine labor unity and depress wages but also to spur competition and productivity every day” (Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness*, 73). Such was the case with the reformist leadership of the ILGWU.

Ultimately, radicals within the ILGWU faced a reformist leadership, not a revolutionary one, which continually opted to institutionalize hierarchy to maintain their own autonomy and power in the union. Rather than build an international, multiethnic movement to dismantle capitalism, the leadership of these locals focused on including their members in the U.S. polity. As a result, they cultivated ethnic nationalism in their members, encouraging them to identify as both Italians and Americans. ... [S]uch a strategy created a sense of community, but it also reinforced ethnic antagonism and segmentation within the union. (J. Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution*, 198)

The growth of nationalistic locals made the ILGWU an increasingly accessible space where Italian immigrant women like Angela Bambace could engage in less-radical, and more nationalistic activism that was less threatening to their fragile whiteness. Organizing within the union provided advantages for Angela Bambace
and other Italian immigrant women. Though she maintained ties to radical organizers outside of the ILGWU, Angela Bambace joined Italian Local 89 in 1919. Italian garment workers were able to create their own spaces for ideological and political discourses within their locals.\textsuperscript{32} Local 89 also organized sports teams and English classes for Italian women to help women adjust “in their own language in their own customs, their own culture rather than have them come into something more American” (Italian Immigrant Women in New York City’s Garment Industry Oral Histories).\textsuperscript{33} Such increasingly reformist union leadership and nationalization of workers continued to make the garment industry, let alone union, inaccessible to most Black women. Mostly barred from garment work due to structural disadvantages and outright exclusion, the large majority of Black women workers in New York City at the time were domestic workers, working for white women, and legally unable to unionize - thus blocked from union-backed programs curtailed to their history, culture, and needs (Orleck 153). Ultimately, though nationalism heightened with the birth of nationalistic locals, it is important that memories of the New York City garment industry are not also divided by nationality.

In Angela Bambace’s archive, multiple photographs appear of Black women seated around tables at ILGWU gatherings.\textsuperscript{34} The ILGWU scrapbook documents factory wins for Black women workers who speak proudly of their contract wins, but voice concerns of continued struggles in their shops. Ultimately, however, evidence of Angela’s relationships with Black women garment workers is limited to rare photographs of them together and stories passed on by family members.
In 1934, when Dubinsky offered Angela the position to organize women in the Maryland-Virginia-Delaware region, she found herself organizing in a much different context, with what she considered heightened anti-Semitism and anti-Blackness (Bambace Papers; Scarpaci). Living separate from her loved ones, Angela organized independently as a lone woman and Italian immigrant for the garment workers’ union and in antifascist causes at a time when the country’s attitude towards Italians became more paranoid and intolerant, considering them enemies of the state.

Dynamics of anti-Black racism and her own privileges as a non-Black person did not go unnoticed to Angela in her new position. As Italian Americans became more integrated into the United States, Angela gained additional privileges of whiteness but did not adopt the colorblind rhetoric of other Italian Americans eager to blend in after decades of poverty and stigmatization.
Throughout her career, Angela Bambace would speak out against racism and anti-Black figures such as Governor Wallace of Alabama, and even politicians who were “w wishy-washy” about segregation (*The Baltimore Sun*; “Angela Bambace – WBMD”). In her later years, Angela aligned herself and was involved with civil rights organizations such as the ACLU, the NAACP, and the Urban League. She spoke out against pro-segregation candidates and the villains of the civil rights movement such as Governor Wallace of Alabama. She was friends with and publicly spoke out in support of A. Philip Randolph (Ibid.), Black leader of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, the March on Washington, and advocate for socialism, cognizant of the intertwining of capitalism and racism.

She linked her experience of being an ethnic white Other to the Otherizing of non-white peoples in one speech, reflecting that in past decades “we also saw the workings of those other disasters--being born the ‘wrong’ color, or raised in the ‘wrong’ religion, or having the ‘wrong’ kind of ancestors (Bambace Papers). Instead of claiming sameness, however, in her leadership she spoke out on the interlocking oppressions specifically challenging African Americans. In 1963, she argued that in addition to the need to overcome “immediate problems” such as segregation of public spaces, the “long range problem” overlooked by the media was Blacks’ exclusion from a solid “economic base” necessary for full “political, social, human freedom” (“Notes re Civil Rights Meeting”). Additionally, she spoke out in support of programs to jumpstart poverty eradication initiatives and educational programs for African American students and students of working-class backgrounds.
Though she supported Black women and their locals, shared leadership with Black women on the ILGWU’s 1962 Committee of Social and Labor Legislation, and is pictured embracing Black female labor activists such as May Lewis and Local 4’s President, there is no evidence that Angela specifically incorporated a critique of intersectionality to Black women garment worker’s experiences.

In Maryland, Angela’s son Oscar’s family hired a fifty year-old Black woman named Hannah to work as a housekeeper and nanny. She was the primary caregiver for Oscar’s children, supporting them throughout their lives with physical and emotional labor. She mastered Italian cooking, and was considered a beloved part of the Angela Bambace’s extended family. Angela’s granddaughter Mindy remembers her and Hannah’s families as “intertwined,” recalling that other women of Hannah’s family, including her daughter, granddaughter, and sister-in-law, all worked for Angela and her other son’s family, and that Angela’s family helped support Hannah’s great grandchildren through college.

A critical race theory critique of care-focused feminism, which is a type of feminism interested in the ways society views or burdens women as care-givers, is necessary here. Black feminist Patricia Hill Collins highlights that since slavery, Black women have practiced “community-based child care” or “othermothering” – meaning people other than a child’s biological parents parented that child – to navigate the constraints of work demanded of them in both the public and private spheres (180). Although Angela relied on her mother Giuseppina to help raise her sons when she lost custody of them in the late 1920s, Angela’s own children joined
white families across the United States in hiring Black women to care for their children.

Before working for Angela’s family, Hannah worked for a white family in South Carolina. She raised the children of the family, but rarely heard from them once she moved to Maryland. After her death, Angela’s family learned that Hannah’s light skin was actually attributed to a violent Italian heritage. An Italian grocer raped Hannah’s mother when she was thirteen years old. At ten years old, Hannah began working for white families, cooking, cleaning, and caregiving, to help support her mother and four younger brothers. Her grandfather was a slave and groomer for a Civil War general.

In the Bambace household, Hannah often ate in the kitchen while the family ate in the dining room. One evening, amidst a heated political discussion at the dinner table, Angela made a racist remark. All conversation halted, and Angela sat in silence, bewildered with herself. She rose from her seat, went to the kitchen, and apologized to Hannah. They embraced, Angela with tears in her eyes. I have only learned about Hannah and this story through personal conversation and correspondence with Angela’s granddaughter.\textsuperscript{35} How did Hannah, loved as a member of the family, but still a Black American caregiver born from an Italian man raping her mother, experience and remember this moment? I tell this story to highlight that, in spite of all of Angela Bambace’s work advocating for labor and civil rights, she was not a saint shielded from the anti-Blackness permeating all United States institutions and spheres of social life. The same can be said for all non-Black
people socialized in the United States, even those actively engaged in antiracist activism; as the saying goes, racism is in the air we breathe.

I hesitate to glorify Angela’s actions or focus on her in this situation over Hannah, but a close examination of this story highlights that historic struggle or comparison to Blacks does not deprive immigrants or their descendants of the ability to hurt others with racism. As Beverly Tatum theorizes, racism is like a moving walkway that requires whites’ active struggle against to work towards its dismantling. Italian Americans and other descendants of European immigrants can further learn from this story by viewing it with a lens of critical love offered by bell hooks to understand that racism, along with other systems of power and abuse, hurt real people, and are acts of lovelessness (6). Although the moment described above may have been uncomfortable for Angela and her family present, Angela held herself accountable for her hurtful words and the moment of abuse and lovelessness. She prioritized her relationship with Hannah above claiming innocence, or pretending the words never slipped from her mouth.

In contemplation of this moment of Angela and Hannah’s relationship, it is essential to consider Angela’s narrative as tangled with numerous other individuals, who have complex identities, histories, personal relationships and struggles of their own. With respect to Hannah, it is important not to reproduce one-dimensional, stereotypical narratives of Hannah as a Black mammy – doing so sanitizes Hannah’s personal narrative and denies the complexity of the relationships between Angela’s and Hannah’s families. Although institutions like the Immigration History Research Center Archives preserves and promotes the use of personal information like letters,
it is important to recognize that mainstream historical narratives often reduce history to facts, and especially do not prioritize memories of interpersonal relationships across difference. Masculine perceptions of interpersonal relationships as *emotional, intimate* and not traditionally “academic” or important to history, make researching personal relationships even more difficult – but all the more necessary.

What do we learn by resurrecting Hannah’s narrative within a larger narrative that purposefully focuses on the life of Angela Bambace? Although traditional histories would focus primarily on Angela’s accomplishments as a labor leader, by unearthing and re-examining stories of her personal relationships, the tangling of Italian immigrant and Black histories becomes clearer to the descendant of European immigrants. When we consider the personal to be political and the histories of Blacks and Italian immigrants as intertwined, nuances of Italian Americans’ ability to partake in anti-Black violence in spite of their histories of racial inbetweenness expose themselves.

**Conclusion**

Angela Bambace battled gender-based struggles of violence, tokenization, and repercussions for her radicalism resulting in the loss of custody of her children. Keeping in mind her disdain for the term “feminism,” we cannot know if Angela would support the arguments of the plethora of feminisms that have diverged from dominant middle-class white feminism, such as diasporic feminisms, Third World Feminism, Marxist and socialist feminisms, and women of color feminisms, among others. However, if we consider, as feminists do, the
personal to be political -- which is an analytic tool that can be applied to all people, and does not necessitate reproducing inequality between genders -- it is apparent that in spite of exploitation and personal and institutional sexism, Angela found power in collective resistance and subverted gender norms. She never lost a sense of urgency with her union work, all the while maintaining familial love and bonds with other organizers. While all the complexities and nuances of Angela’s personal relationships are not well recorded, even these small hints of intimacy based on shared radical ideologies and visions of revolution demonstrate Angela’s subversion of traditional gender roles and dominant notions of love, intimacy, and family. Her legacy continues to challenge masculine historiographies of Italian immigrant labor and radical histories and Jewish-dominated historiographies of the garment industry.

Inserting Angela’s life history, or any historical figure or personal narrative, does not necessitate an examination of cross-race relationships. However, if we adopt a style of labor histories so encouraged by David Roediger that "put[s] the issues and contest of racial identity and difference at its center" (Towards the Abolition of Whiteness, 194) in addition to class and gender analyses, we can re-examine and widen understandings of power relationships throughout history. To resist sanitized rags-to-riches narratives of southern and eastern European immigrants, commemorating Angela Bambace also requires, as Foucault suggests, “expanding production of discourses on sex in the field of multiple and mobile power relations” (1: 98). Therefore, it is essential to consider Angela as a woman with a radical past who gained power as a union leader, and operated in a society...
that stigmatized radicals and granted southern Italian immigrants a sort of qualified, unstable whiteness. Re-examining her relationships across difference does not prevent us from learning from and even admiring Angela Bambace, but it does prevent us from uncritically committing her to sainthood. Based on her reported humility and critical view of other leaders, I imagine that she, too, would resist her sanctification.

Though we will never know all of the complexities and contradictions of Angela Bambace, we can conclude that, in spite of the anti-radicalism and the luring of Italian Americans to Americanize and chase whiteness (and therefore adopt fierce anti-Blackness), retaining radical beliefs was possible. If white descendants of Italian immigrants are going to draw on history for empowerment, it is important not to manipulate histories for our own political gains that result in violence against others. By unpacking the complexities and contradictions of Angela’s life, we also unpack and challenge stereotypes of passive Italian immigrant women. Looking at her life in context and in complexity, we find what seem, at first, to be baffling contradictions: she was a radical during the Red Scare but became a union leader and beloved by popular politicians; she was a reformist union leader and friends with Hubert Humphrey, and the love of her life publicly defended and ran in circles that critiqued liberalism and plotted against the United States government.

Looking closely at these contradictions, we can understand them as characteristic of fragile whiteness, as described by historian Peter Rachleff. We see that the fragility of whiteness did not, and does not, always necessitate antagonism or violence across difference, as we saw in Chapter two with Columbus Day. We
learn that solidarity across difference has happened, though not perfect -- Angela
Bambace voiced more times than once. But as Black feminist Bernice Johnson
Reagan says in her speech “Coalition Politics,”

You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you
would consider trying to team up somebody who could possibly kill you, is
because that’s the only way you can figure you can stay alive. (356-357)
Anastasi

I recently learned that my last name, “Anastasi,” comes from the Greek word ανάστασις meaning “resurrection.” How can I resurrect my family’s history without converting them to sainthood?

“Aunt Gerlmina, ca 1930s”

Giralamina Maria Zurzolo was the name of Antonio Anastasi’s mother. Her sister, Angelina Maria Zurzolo, was Concetta Giovinazzo’s mother. The intertwining of Anastasi and Giovinazzo that became my family began with sisters.
One of my cousins tells me my great-grandfather Antonio’s passenger information from il Piemonte, the ship he boarded in Napoli that sailed to Ellis Island, New York City, in nineteen days:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nationality: Italian</th>
<th>Marital Status: Single</th>
<th>Physical Health: Good</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Race: Southern/South</td>
<td>Can Read/Write: Yes</td>
<td>Mental Health: Good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Possessions: $10</td>
<td>Anarchist: No</td>
<td>Has lived in almshouse: No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work: Laborer</td>
<td>Polygamist: No</td>
<td>Has been imprisoned: No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From: Reggio Calabria</td>
<td>Deformed/crippled: No</td>
<td>Contacts in the U.S.: Illegible</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Excerpt from an email from my cousin, Sheila

Grandma is a first cousin of Grandpop’s. His mother (see certificate) is a Giovinazzo.

We never could find her on the Ellis Island info.... only Grandpop. It bothers me that we can't find where and when she came over. Maybe you'll come up with something. What other port did these beautiful immigrants come through? ... Also, they wanted so very much to be American in every way, even to the point of changing anything they were asked to change, including their names to make it easier for everyone. But, sorry, I get carried away.

What a sad life. NOT BECAUSE SHE WASN’T LOVED, because she was.... very, very much...

... I’d love to tell you what was wrong with Grandma, but all anyone ever told me (her 9 children and everyone else) was that she was "sick". Katie, they didn't know.... none of them. In that time, I guess some would have called her "crazy", but she WASN'T. She came to this country understanding nothing. I heard she was to marry another man... I think it was Grandpop’s brother???, but when she got here he had already married someone else. Daddy (my Father) told me that Grandpop said, “I’ll take her.”
CHAPTER IV.

COMPARISONS & CONCLUSIONS

I feel our nation's turning away from love as intensely as I felt love's abandonment in my girlhood. Turning away we risk moving into a wilderness of spirit so intense we may never find our way home again. I write of love to bear witness both to the danger in this movement, and to call for a return to love. Redeemed and restored, love returns us to the promise of everlasting life. When we love we can let our hearts speak.

– bell hooks, *All About Love*

At NIAF’s preview screening of the documentary *The Italian Americans* at New York University, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio gave a speech urging his audience to examine their roots, “to feel them more deeply, to demystify them, to show the next generation what it means” to be Italian (National Italian American Foundation). In his speech, de Blasio also remarks that he has instilled a sense of Italian culture and history in his children, and that he is grateful to his non-Italian Black wife, Chirlane, for being supportive of his emphasis on Italian American culture. He says, “at the same time, we taught them deeply about their African-American heritage, their Caribbean heritage, their heritage in Africa” (Ibid.) While it is impossible to know how passing on different heritages actually happens in Bill de Blasio and Chirlane McCray’s family, the concept brings up questions of Black and Italian heritages as separate, not intertwined.
Months earlier, de Blasio gave a more difficult speech in response to the tragic injustice of the grand jury’s decision not to indict Staten Island police officer Daniel Pantaleo for killing 43 year-old Black Staten Island resident Eric Garner in a chokehold over suspicions that he may have been selling loose cigarettes. In spite of the police department’s prohibition of the use of chokeholds, Garner’s repeated insistence that he could not breathe, and bystander Ramsey Orta’s capturing of the homicide on video, neither Pantaleo nor his partner Justin Damico were charged. Garner’s death is one of the many recent highly publicized murders of innocent Black people at the hands of white police officers and vigilantes. In response to the murder of Trayvon Martin, queer Black women Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors and Opal Tometi co-founded and launched the movement #BlackLivesMatter, which has become an intersectional Black liberation movement with protests erupting across the nation and especially in Ferguson, Missouri (Garza, Alicia).

Though political leaders and the media have largely vilified Black organizing, brilliance, and expressions of pain and rage at the gross injustices of recent events, Bill de Blasio displayed what racial justice news website Colorlines considered a relatively “unprecedented note of empathy for the fear felt” by families of color (Murphy). He invoked stories of his and his African American wife’s own experiences teaching their biracial son of the particular dangers he faces with a Black body when he steps outside each day. Police leaders and unions publicly rejected de Blasio’s speech, saying the Mayor “threw them under the bus” (Murphy). In an op-ed for the Italian/American Digital Project i-Italy, contributor Paul Moses responds to the New York Times reference (Baker and Goodman) of “the Italian
roots’ of the New York Police Department.” He suggests that although Italian Americans may make up part of the NYPD today, “today's news of frayed relations between police and minority communities ... should ring a familiar bell to Italian Americans.” Moses highlights that, although NYPD once threatened Italian Americans with mass lynching that would make the lynching of 11 Italian Americans in New Orleans appear “tame in comparison,” Italians eventually “achieved acceptance after years of tense relations with police.” Now, the Times remembers the NYPD as once comprised of a majority of Irish and Italian Americans, and people with last names that imply Italian ancestry are among those actively killing and complicit in the killings of innocent Black and Brown people.

It would be inappropriate to draw conclusions about officers Pantaleo and Damico based on their last names alone – which may not even signify southern Italian ancestry, let alone Italian ancestry – but explicit anti-Black racism and violence among Italian Americans is neither a myth nor a new phenomenon. Roediger highlights that like other European immigrants, Italians “imported immigrant terms for African Americans” such “tutsun” and “melanzana” (eggplant) which were slurs that northern Italians once directed at southern Italians and Moroccans (Working Towards Whiteness, 113) but can now be heard in casual conversation between characters on The Sopranos. Italian Americans have participated in race riots since their arrival to this country. Perhaps the most publicized and notable instance of Italian Americans' explicit anti-Black prejudice and violence has been the 1989 brutal murder of 16 year-old Black boy Yusuf Hawkins by a crowd of “10 to 30 white teenagers” in the predominantly working-
class Italian American neighborhood of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn (Blumenthal). The young men attacked Hawkins because they incorrectly thought he was the young man of color dating a young white woman from the neighborhood. Ensuing marches and protests by Black Americans drew crowds to Bensonhurst, and sparked national conversations about ongoing racism in the United States. While some Italian Americans may have participated in the mourning of Yusuf Hawkins and spoke out against racial violence, many Italian Americans and working-class whites taunted Black protestors by holding watermelons over their heads and screaming "N*****s go home" (Chan).

Throughout this project, I have encouraged revisiting and re-examining Italian American histories in a way that considers the influences of race, class, gender, and the larger political, economic, and social forces of the time. Can we apply such a framework of historical analysis to Moses’ call to complicate notions of Italians’ dominance in the NYPD? Can we take a step further, by expanding his idea of Italians’ achievement of “acceptance” by police? Can we apply the same framework to better understand the murder of Yusuf Hawkins and the dueling protests that followed? Although the *New York Times* describes the neighborhood where the brutal homicide occurred as working-class Italian American, the newspaper describes the mob of mostly Italian American assailants as “white.” Did Italian Americans have to kill Black people to become white? What can we learn in addition by re-examining one of the accused murderers’ lawyer’s insistence that the murder was not a “racial murder” but instead was “caused by young jealous girls”? (Blumenthal).
If Italian Americans expanded their understandings of the conditions that resulted in Italian Americans’ anti-Black violence, and if more Italian Americans understood their “success” and occupation of privileged spaces today as a result of institutional acceptance that depends on the oppression of non-white peoples rather than individual endeavors and achievements, would Italian Americans without Black sons be compelled to echo de Blasio’s words that “our history sadly requires us to say, [B]lack lives matter”? (Murphy).

If we continue to re-examine our ancestors’ histories, descendants of southern Italian immigrants will learn that upon arrival, instead of smoothly transitioning into assimilated Americans, their ancestors were in a struggle for resources. For a time, the United States was unsure of where to place Italian immigrants in the racial hierarchy, and resisted their increasing immigration. White politicians and citizens who no longer saw themselves as descendants of immigrants and wanted to maintain their power took up stigmas of southern Italians that originated in Italy; they raised fear and suspicion of southern Italian immigrants as racially inferior threats the United States. Newspapers debated whether Italians were white or Black; citizen associations debated whether or not Italians should have the vote; teachers punished children who spoke Italian at school; police profiled Italians; mafiosi stereotypes prevailed through the media. Employers used the stigma to justify exploitative practices and miserable working conditions. Italian immigrant workers rose up with each other and workers across racial and ethnic differences, and many powerful leaders were Italian immigrant women. Because it was in the governments and employers’ best interest to divide workers who
threatened to organize across difference, whiteness made room for Italian Americans. Studies published “evidence” that American-born generations of Sicilian, along with Jewish, immigrants exhibited larger brains and bodies along with lighter hair and eyes; they suggested that proximity to whiteness helped them evolve (Roediger, *Working Towards Whiteness*, 69). Studying one’s European immigrant history with a commitment to accountability and truth-telling, as encouraged by Waziyatawin and hooks, forces that person to self-reflect and come to see their knowledge as Donna Haraway and other feminists see it: situated and partial.

In the previous two chapters, I have examined two narratives important to Italian American history, advocating throughout for the preservation of European immigrant and diasporic histories in a way that does not purify historical figures to sainthood. In expanding our understandings of Christopher Columbus as he relates to Italian American history, I have resisted uncritically celebrating masculine, individualistic narratives of Italian American history. In Chapter two, I re-examined Italian Americans’ relationship to Christopher Columbus in their state-sanctioned celebration of him each October on Columbus Day. I found that a close look at the emergence of Columbus Day as a celebration reveals that, as a result of their historic insecure relationship to whiteness in a white supremacist society, southern Italian immigrants’ have fought for an opportunity to perform their whiteness to the world. Because adherence to whiteness requires exclusion of and violence against non-whites, some Italian Americans have organized to celebrate Columbus Day at the expense of non-white peoples’ histories and human dignity. In exchange for such investment in whiteness, the protective shield offered by Columbus has allowed
Italian Americans the space to celebrate their history, culture, and community in similar ways.

In Chapter Three, I build off of my critique of claiming sanitized symbols by re-examining the notions of “rags-to-riches” or “assimilation” narratives popular among descendants of European immigrants’ who were once considered racially inferior and experience lingering anxiety about their historic inbetweenness. A major difference between a commemoration of Columbus and a rags-to-riches narratives is the latter’s acknowledgement of poverty and working-class backgrounds. However, this self-selected vulnerability redeems itself by proving the superior merit of the immigrant who overcomes all obstacles to achieve the American Dream.

Though Columbus symbolizes conquest and genocide, the issue at stake is the sanitizing and fashioning of Columbus into a symbol. In this project, I have encouraged a search to understand the origins of the desire to sanitize historical figures. Since the early days of his celebration, admirers of Columbus have stripped him of his context and interpersonal complexities for quick consumption and to become a tool for various peoples’ political goals and justifications. In Chicago’s 1893 Columbian Exposition at the World’s Fair, United States elites sterilized the man into a one-dimensional figure, through a masculine, individualistic, and imperialist lens descriptive of whiteness. Italian Americans seized on the chance to associate themselves with the symbol of virtuous masculinity to alleviate popular concerns of Italians as racially inferior and a threat to the nation’s “purity”. By buying into the myth of Columbus, Italian Americans buy into the myth of
whiteness. As James Baldwin famously said, “So long as you’re white, there’s no hope for you.”

Now, as movements to honor indigenous histories on the day historically reserved for Columbus’ symbolic commemoration, some Italian Americans have zeroed their efforts in on the preservation of Columbus’ symbolic importance. By focusing more on *preservation* at whatever cost further distracts people involved in the production and preservation of historical narratives that the histories and legacies they pour their energies into preserving *are about real people*. In addition to the Campaign to Save Columbus’ Day sterilization of Columbus at the expense of indigenous peoples’ histories and ongoing resistance, an unfortunately demonstrative example is the New York City Italian American Museum’s recent eviction of 85 year-old Adele Sarno, one of the last remaining residents of Italian ancestry living in “Little Italy.” The museum, whose mission statement claims “to establish and maintain a museum dedicated to the struggles of Italian Americans and their achievements and contributions to American culture and society,” is evicting Sarno from the museum-owned apartment where she has lived for the last fifty years so that they can raise the rent to support the museum.

By fleshing out a narrative of garment worker Angela Bambace, I hope to re-examine the risks of symbolizing even historical figures that symbolize resistance and power. Though civil rights and social justice leaders who become iconized over time are powerful and needed in our society plagued with inequality and oppression, have we nothing to learn by re-examining historical figures in the context of all of their relationships of power? For example, don’t we all learn so
much more when we throw Ida B. Wells into the mix of classic discussions limited to the W.E.B. DuBois/Booker T. Washington binary? Central to this process is negotiating intersectionality and the “multiple and mobile power relations” at play in any given environment, among any given individuals. No historian can capture all of the complexities of a human being, but we can all try to view historical figures with a critical and loving lens, reconsidering them beyond their symbolism, and additionally as human beings who are multi-dimensional individuals with both agency and environmental limitations. By considering their environments, we learn more about the systems of power and the historical moment, as well.

As with Columbus, in our understanding of Angela Bambace, it is crucial to understand her not as an individual who operated in a vacuum, but instead as a part of a larger classed, racialized, and gendered society. Using a lens conscious of the “instability of whiteness,” as explained in the opening of this chapter with Peter Rachleff’s words, we can better understand racial dynamics in the garment industry and Angela Bambace’s relationships across race. Considering Angela Bambace’s history in relation to other ethnic and racial groups is essential for conceptualizing Italian immigrant histories as intertwined with other racial and ethnic communities. Additionally, it challenges antagonism between ethnic groups and historical narratives that consider Italian immigrants as isolated from other ‘white ethnic’ and racial groups. A narrative of Angela Bambace that explores her various power relationships challenges both male-dominated labor histories and accounts of the garment industry that exclude narratives of Italian immigrant workers. By extending analysis to the garment industries as sites of both alliances and tensions
across and within ethnic and racial groups, descendants of European immigrants are confronted by histories where their ancestors not only held distinct racial identities but also shared experiences with people of other ethnic and racial backgrounds. Such adventuring into history encourages white descendants of southern and eastern European to unpack the instability of their ancestors’ whiteness, and moreover connect their ancestors’ experiences with their own and non-white peoples histories.

Ultimately, this project illuminates how the systems of capitalism, racism, and patriarchy create conditions where individuals are encouraged to compete for power over care for others. As Rachleff posits, considering the precariousness of working-class whites’ socio-economic standings exposes tensions and contradictions that often manifest in unpredictable ways. I argue that we can learn from these contradictions. An ironic contradiction resulting from my own search to undo symbols in history is the symbolic role President Franklin D. Roosevelt plays in Chapters Two and Three. Roosevelt was the President who signed legislation that made Columbus Day a federal holiday, but he was also a major inspiration for Angela Bambace and her leadership. In juxtaposing these contradictions, it is difficult to indulge any temptations to put Roosevelt in a box as a purely evil or saintly symbol.

Understanding the fragility of whiteness, as described by Rachleff and other scholars, challenges ideas of Italian American nativism and white supremacy. Moreover, if we consider Rachleff idea that the instability of working-class whiteness fuels energies that have lent themselves to collaborations and solidarity
as well as explosions of racial violence, the moments of rebellion, contradiction, and tension characterizing Italian American histories become more legible. For some, an historic anxiety surrounding their “inbetween” racial status lingers, and some Italian Americans dispel it by following the examples set by white supremacy to “prove” their whiteness. Such performances of whiteness include Italian Americans’ claiming of Christopher Columbus as an Italian American hero who deserves commemoration over an Indigenous Peoples Day, which I re-examine in Chapter Two, and simplified narratives of Italian immigrant male’s assimilation as a result of their hard work, which I counter in Chapter Three with a contextualized narrative of Angela Bambace. Echoing once more David Roediger’s idea that ”whiteness is not merely oppressive and false, it is nothing but oppressive and false,” (qtd. in Ignatiev) Italian Americans’ pursuit of whiteness as a means of survival has had violent consequences on non-white peoples and Italian American history as well.

In these pages, I have encouraged the preservation and honoring of European immigrant histories in a way that centers narratives that consider individuals in their historical, social, racial, gendered, and economic contexts. I resist commemorations that celebrate Italian immigrant with an individualistic and masculine lens, failing to consider their contexts. Such framing of historic individuals lends itself to false presumptions of Italian immigrants who either “assimilated” into whiteness based on their hard work and inherent superiority, or the fabricated and appropriated symbol of Christopher Columbus which promotes Italian American nativism and anti-indigenous sentiment as exhibited in the Campaign to Save Columbus Day. Ultimately, I have examined how narratives of
European – and specifically south Italian – immigrants have been filtered in a specific masculine, white supremacist, and neoliberal lens. I offer my own interpretation of the narratives of Columbus, Columbus Day, and Angela Bambace. Admittedly, my own analyses are limited and exclusionary in their own capacities. I re-examine historical commemorations of Italian Americans with a critical race theory and feminist framework, but I fail to provide a critique of the heteronormativity and gender binary within the preservation of immigrant histories, for example. Moreover, my focus on single individuals, and specifically on Angela Bambace, may wrongly suggest that Italian immigrant women’s resistance was an individualistic, isolated, or exceptional endeavor. On the contrary, there were many Italian immigrant women who were leaders of worker’s rebellions, anarchist organizing, and proletarian feminist movements, and perhaps more importantly, Italian immigrant women organized collectively, not only independently, and in countries other than the United States.39

As informed by feminist scholar Donna Haraway’s theory of situated knowledge (see page 17), my production of history in these pages is unable to transcend earthly and my own bodily limitations to be all-knowing. Recognizing that my perspective is inherently limited to a specific location, I do not work towards a conclusive, universal truth, and I am uninterested in making sweeping generalizations about all of humanity. Instead, this project can be considered one of many expansions of normative historical narratives of south Italian immigrants that emerges from the racial, gendered, economic, social, and political intersections of my identity.
This project has materialized from my own relationship to my partial southern Italian ancestry and scholarship in American Studies, where my professors and classmates have challenged me to question the status quo and my own racial identity. Expanding my understanding of my family's past, with the help of my family member’s love and knowledge, has helped me make sense of my reality today. I encourage other descendants of European immigrants to explore their histories in a way that does not merely grant a form of purified nostalgia. Although this project highlights characteristics and histories unique to Italian Americans, it is important to note that all white people have histories of racialization. To re-invoke Waziyatawin’s call for truth-telling and self-reflection on the behalf of white Americans, no one is “just white,” or “just American.”

Though white descendants of European immigrants exploring their ancestors’ histories may discover a sense of identity or empowerment, it is important that learning of past struggles does not translate to racing for racial innocence today. As feminist academic Nancy Forsythe argues, drawing on the work of Mufti and Shohat, “Mobilizing for collective action ... depends on negotiating with the past rather than fetishizing it” (183). I hope that re-examining the nuances of European immigrant histories will honor diasporic histories in a way that exposes the workings of systems of power in the United States, compels white descendants of Italian immigrants to counter antagonism between Italian Americans and non-white peoples, and intentionally contributes to the momentum of present day decolonization, anti-capitalist, and Black liberation movements.
Despite the limits of studying my family’s history, this project has increased my own sense of responsibility to honor my Italian ancestry by re-examining Italian American histories in a way that grounds them in their racial, economic, and social contexts. Equal to the narratives I have produced throughout this project, the production of any history is unable to capture all the complexity of an individual, a population, or a historical moment. However, even the slightest diversions from dominant narratives open up opportunities for alternative perspectives to emerge. For example, although the PBS documentary *The Italian Americans* underrepresents Italian American women’s histories and largely promotes an individualistic assimilation narrative, the four-part documentary’s exploration Italian American history is thorough and publicly accessible. A review of the documentary on the Hollywood Reporter reveals how *The Italian Americans* sparked a personal interest in the author, who called her parents after viewing to ask questions about her ancestors (Amatangelo).

Though I recognize the limitations of the documentary, when I tuned in I learned a great deal of information that supported my arguments embedded in this project, and I experienced a range of emotions including pride, surprise, devastation, and connectedness to my family. When I checked my email, I read messages between my family members reacting to the documentary, reflecting on their experiences, and asking each other questions about our ancestors’ experiences. In fact, earlier the last time I spoke with my aunt she told me with enthusiasm that the last time our cousins gathered for lunch they shared their memories of my great-grandmother Concetta, comparing perspectives and clues in
hopes of reaching an explanation for her forty-five year stay in a mental institution. Although it is important that a project like *The Italian Americans* or my own does not settle in peoples’ minds as the total encapsulation of “Italian American History,” re-examining histories less commemorated certainly holds the potential for stimulating a desire in descendants of Italian immigrants to learn more about their histories. Re-examining symbols and imagining expanded histories contributes to decolonization by making way for the exploration of narratives previously silenced or sanitized beyond the point of recognition.

In closing, I must emphasize that this project is grounded firmly in love. A type of love that Black feminist intellectual bell hooks redefines and theorizes as self-reflective, fearless, honest, exhibiting “a combination of care, commitment, trust, knowledge, responsibility, and respect” that also holds those loved accountable for their behaviors and impacts on others. I hold Italian Americans accountable as people who are capable of loving and can show love to their ancestors, non-white peoples, and each other. As bell hooks insists, “When we understand love as the will to nurture our own and another’s spiritual growth, it becomes clear that we cannot claim to love if we are hurtful and abusive. Love and abuse cannot coexist” (6). hooks’ logic would suggest that, by confronting the lovelessness and abuse plaguing Italian Americans’ pasts, they can make themselves capable of a love that nurtures and spreads today (9). Re-examining Italian American histories cannot undo the pain caused by the real history and symbolism of Christopher Columbus; of anti-Black riots and exclusionary union politics; of a hurtful comment; of the murders of innocent Black people like Yusuf Hawkins or Eric Garner. However, by expanding
perspectives on the contexts from which such painful moments of Italian American history have emerged and by identifying the historic anxieties and struggles specific to southern Italian immigrants in the United States, Italian Americans can begin or continue to negotiate the loveless aspects of their pasts, and begin to cultivate love. Doing so may spur a number of potentially mobilizing realizations: demands for worker productivity and competition for resources largely bred nationalism and caused antagonism between Italian workers and workers of other ethnic and racial backgrounds; prevailing codes and pressures of whiteness explain the erasure of Italian American history more than Indigenous Peoples Day. Roediger’s analysis of James Baldwin’s stand on European Americans and the construction of whiteness is particularly poignant. He says,

Baldwin pairs the embrace of whiteness with the immigrants’ loss of contact with land and community. Baldwin makes the adoption of whiteness a product and a cause of the loss of humanity by new immigrants. Regimented into the disciplines of industrial work, these new immigrants also ‘chose’ to enter the imprisoning confines of whiteness, which Baldwin suggestively terms a ‘factory.’ … joining in acts of racism against people of color made immigrants white over time. (Working Towards Whiteness, 103)

In “On Being White and Other Lies,” Baldwin exposes “America became white the people who, as they claim, ‘settled’ the country became white – because of the necessity of denying the Black presence, and justifying the Black subjugation. No community can be based on such a principle – or, in other words, no community can be established on so genocidal a lie” (2). Italian Americans must then seek connection to the land and community across difference in the United States, while also resurrecting memories of land and community of the lands of southern Italy.
Italian Americans can maintain cultural identification and pride in a way that works towards decolonization and resists ethno-nationalism, sexism, and racist violence. Instead of waiting all year for the protective shield brought by the symbol of Christopher Columbus each October, Italian Americans should honor their histories and ancestors, and connect to their culture year round – but do so in a way that collectively recognizes struggle and difference, beginning with histories in southern Italy.

The exploration of one’s history and multi-layered identity is a self-reflexive process that sustains itself by a network of community members committed to loving accountability and transformative justice. Italian Americans, and all white descendants of European immigrants, must recover their humanity by actively engaging in actions that question, resist, and heal in community; instead of concentrating on securing their historically unstable whiteness, Italian Americans must move towards the exposure, the destruction, and the abolition of whiteness, and the shattering of boundaries it places on Italian American history.

*We need to know where we live in order to imagine living elsewhere. We need to imagine living elsewhere before we can live there.*

— Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*
Notes

1. In his book *Working Towards Whiteness*, David Roediger explains, “‘Guinea’ began as anything but an anti-Italian epithet. In the late seventeenth century, guineas began trickling into British North America. The gold coins took their name from the African slave trade for which they provided merchants, or slave dealers. ... African Americans began to be branded as guineas or guinea n***** by the eighteenth century, with the word serving as either a generalized slur or a rough designation of particular elements of the slave currency. Guinea, that stretch of coastal West Africa extending roughly from modern Sierra Leone to Benin, also furnished its name to guinea population, based on their geographic origin in Africa. Sometimes the word applied to all Africa-born slaves, distinguishing them from those born in the New World.” Later on in the 1880s, “the African American novelist Frances E.W. Harper created Annette Harcourt’s character in *Trial and Trouble* and transported ‘guinea’ specifically into proximity with questions regarding the immigrant’s whiteness” and evolved into an anti-Irish and then predominantly anti-Italian slur.

2. The claims I make about white Americans disconnected from or unaware of their various European immigrant histories are based off my personal experiences as a white woman, personal relationships with other white European Americans, and my education of race and racism in American Studies. For more critiques of whiteness and information about white racial identity formation in the United States, refer to Thandeka’s *Learning to Be White*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism without Racists*, James Baldwin’s *White Man’s Guilt*, and scholarship of David Roediger – especially *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, the works of W.E.B. DuBois, and women of color feminists Audre Lorde and bell hooks, among many others.

3. In this paper, I choose to capitalize the “B” in “Black” and keep the “w” in “white” in lowercase. While debates on all sides may have valuable points, my decision to capitalize “Black” is rooted in Lori Tharps’ *New York Times* article “The Case for Black With a Capital B.” She argues, “Black with a capital B refers to people of the African diaspora. Lowercase black is simply a color.” Although not capitalizing “white” runs the risk of underemphasizing the violence of white supremacy or the reality that whiteness is an oppressive monolith, I consider the excavation of European immigrant histories as a necessary step towards the destruction of whiteness and white supremacy. While white Americans must come to terms with whiteness and the reality of white supremacy, as white abolitionist Noel Ignatiev argues, “Whiteness is not a culture. There is Irish culture and Italian culture and American culture - the latter, as Albert Murray pointed out, a mixture of the Yankee, the Indian, and the Negro (with a pinch of ethnic salt); there is youth culture and drug culture and queer culture; but there is no such thing as white culture. Whiteness has nothing to do with culture and everything to do with social position. It is nothing but a reflection of privilege, and exists for no reason other than to defend it. Without the privileges attached to it, the white race would not exist, and the white skin would have no more social significance than big feet.” There are undoubtedly problematic contradictions to this logic, as Black populations include a
diversity of ethnic and national backgrounds, and do not constitute one single culture either.
4. Certainly not all white people share the same intersectional identities, and therefore some will not be able to “explore their histories” in the same ways as I recommend, if at all. Those who are able have a responsibility to do so to better understand the construction of whiteness and considering their histories as not “native” to the United States. I encourage those who may be physically and psychologically able to explore their histories but unable to strategically uncover their ancestors’ pasts, to instead look into the immigrant group from which they descend, if known. If a white person does not know the immigrant group(s) from which they descend, I would encourage them to research any white ethnic immigrant group of interest (perhaps personal interest, for example if a young white person has a friend whose father is proud of his Irish heritage, or has a teacher that mentioned Finns in Minnesota, etc.) that came into the U.S. during the late 1800s or early 1900s.
5. 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. 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 project for not considering more the nuances of sexuality and physical ability, and my adherence to the gender binary.
7. 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.
8. Citation from Tricario’s essay “Narrating Guido” in Connell’s anthology. See citation for Connell.
9. I first learned this fact in the PBS Documentary The Italian Americans.
10. 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?
11. I mostly refer to J. Guglielmo’s *Living the Revolution* in this project, but her essays “Transnational Feminism’s Radical Past” and “Negotiating Gender, Race, and Coalition” are illuminating texts as well.


13. A discussion of Italian fascism and its influence on Italian Americans is unfortunately beyond the scope of this project. For more information, refer to works by Salerno and Ventresco.

14. 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.

15. 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.

16. In this quote, Orsi cites Richard Alba’s *Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity*.

17. Salerno cites the article “I Delitti della Razza Bianca” from *La Questione Sociale*, Feb. 20, 1909, 1.

18. Jennifer Guglielmo notes that union leaders “routinely expressed the belief that Italian women were ‘hopeless’ because they were ‘absolutely under the dominance of men of their family, and heavily shackled by old customs and traditions.’” Even Robert Laurentz’s “Racial/ethnic conflict in the New York City garment industry, 1933-1980,” which strives to reveal nuances of the history of racial oppression in the New York garment industry, describes Italian immigrant women as “more subservient and sheltered” women who only became impassioned to strike after being swayed by courageous Jewish women leaders. Laurentz, *Racial/ethnic conflict in the New York City garment industry, 1933-1980*, 50.

19. Bencivenni’s *Italian Immigrant Radical Culture* documents the works of dozens of Italian immigrant women who used poetry, novellas, plays, and other forms of art to advocate for the changes they wished to see in their workplaces and home environments. J. Guglielmo posits that Italian women workers “were drawing on communal protest traditions, and turning urban networks of mutual exchange into avenues of activism.” Italian immigrant women enacted “everyday resistance on the shop floor” with collective singing, joking, and walkouts when even one woman experienced on-the-job harassment. Such details are important to include in an Italian women’s narrative because they demonstrate the utilization of distinctly southern Italian traditions of resistance to combat oppression in the United States.

20. Various sources cite Angela’s mother’s name as Giuseppina, Josephine, or Josephina, among others. For the purpose of this paper, I will use “Giuseppina.”
21. Notes to interview questions dictated by Angela Bambace to Marian, February 1975. David Roediger begins Chapter 6 of his book *Working Towards Whiteness* with a 1988 quote by Peter Pascale, a Harlem Resident: "When they say East Harlem ... Harlem was never East Harlem, Harlem was Harlem. When the blacks started to come towards this area, in order for us to explain where we lived ... we said we live in East Harlem, that's where the name East came into being, to separate the white and the [B]lack." One could expand this statement to include an indigenous studies critique that may posit that before Harlem was Harlem, it was a land inhabited by the Manhattan and Lenape, or Delaware, indigenous groups who lived peacefully on the Manhattan peninsula before colonizers from Holland claimed it for themselves as New Amsterdam.

22. Orleck's *Common Sense and a Little Fire* also refers to the small percent of white women garment workers who were neither Jewish nor Italian immigrants as "native whites." As emphasized in Chapter 2, the notion of white nativism to the United States is problematic because it erases memory or histories of indigenous peoples prior to colonization and the history of colonization and genocide of indigenous people. Moreover, this "logic of genocide" termed by Andrea Smith promotes white peoples' sense of entitlement to land, property, and rights in the lands that now make up the United States of America.

23. This and other personal anecdotes largely come from personal conversations with Angela Bambace's granddaughter, Mindy Camponeschi, that took place in January 2015.

24. See Salvatore Salerno's work on Paterson, NJ.

25. Jean Scarpaci, 6. Correction of Philip's birthday from June to May 1923 made on copy of Scarpaci owned by Mindy Camponeschi, Angela's granddaughter.

26. Personal conversation with Mindy Camponeschi.

27. It is noteworthy that in all except one of the images I include of Angela Bambace with other organizers, the other organizers are Jewish immigrants or otherwise identifiable as white. I have seen a number of photographs of Angela alongside Black women at union conferences, meetings, and council member meetings later on in the 60s. Unfortunately, my copies of such images were lost when my phone (my use of camera in my archival research) was stolen, before I had the chance to upload them online or to a computer. My lack of inclusion of more photographs of Angela with women of color in this project is a large gap, and more evidence to analyze the cross-race relationships between Angela and garment workers of color deserve more attention.

28. I learned this information from the personal collection of archival material about Angela Bambace belonging to her granddaughter.

29. Angela's relationship to Jewish American organizations and the Zionist labor movement reflects her many years of friendships with Jewish immigrant and Jewish American labor activists, as well as her career of organizing in a predominantly Jewish union, the ILGWU.

30. I have read a number of Angela Bambace's obituaries in the Immigrant History Research Center's Archives and the collection held by Mindy Camponeschi.
31. In fact, I recently discovered that my own Italian American grandfather often used Angela’s catch-phrase, “Just punch ‘em in the nose!” The family remembers this quip lovingly.

32. On page 198 of *Living the Revolution*, Guglielmo explains, “the Italian locals of the ACWA and the ILGWU included many anarcho-syndicalists and revolutionary socialists who responded to the devastation of the 1913 strikes by infusing these new labor organizations with the kind of ideology and strategy that had defined the prewar movement.”

33. The specific quote cited is from a transcript of Furio’s interview with Vanni Montana.

34. Unfortunately, my copies of such images were lost.

36. Personal conversation with Mindy Camponeschi, details shared with her approval.

37. It is notable that public response and mass media’s coverage of such murders focus on Black men, often forgetting about the Black women (and especially trans women) murdered as well.

38. The papers describe the young woman, Gina Feliciano, as white.

39. I borrow this sentiment from *Rethinking Columbus*’s explanation that a “system of empire” “values property over people.”

40. As I have mentioned multiple times, the works of Donna Gabaccia, Franca Iacovetta, Jennifer Guglielmo, and Marcella Bencivenni are particularly informative about Italian immigrant women’s resistance. Gabaccia and Iacovetta’s *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives* focuses largely on resistance by women of the Italian diaspora outside of the United States.
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