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TRANSOCEANIC RACE  
A POSTCOLONIAL APPROACH TO ITALIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

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As a graduate scholar of African Studies, studying for the first time outside of Italy, I learned how the legacy of colonial culture had a significant impact not only on those nations—such as Britain and France—that had an uncontested imperial past, but also on my own country. Italy, after all, had created its own “minor empire” on the Red Sea, had given Eritrea its actual name, turned Libya into a “fourth shore,” and claimed a protectorate over Somalia after it had lost its other colonies. The fact that I had discovered this significant and controversial part of Italian modern history not while residing in Italy but once I had become a migrant—a privileged one, for sure, but a migrant nonetheless—reveals the epistemological impact of both diasporic life and postcolonial historiography.

My dissertation work (Lombardi-Diop 1999) pivoted around one question: What did it mean to be Italian for the colonial settlers, women and men, who lived in the Italian colonies from 1890 onward, most of whom were of middle-class origin? (A history of the colonial peasant settlers is still to be written.) How did they perceive their class and racial privileges in relation to the Africans they had turned into colonial subjects? How had they expanded their sense of nationhood abroad, and how were class hierarchies, and regional and national affiliations, reconstructed in the colonial setting? My critical framework strived to apply to the Italian context what I had learned from Black Studies, Race Theory, and Postcolonial Studies. I soon realized that adapting a theoretical postcolonial framework to the study of Italian colonial history required a series of adjustments that would account for the specific history of diasporic movements, alongside the regional and class imbalances, that characterize the history of the Italians in the nineteenth and twentieth century. As one manifestation of Italy’s “many diasporas,”<sup>1</sup> the African colonies provided

<sup>1</sup> Reference here is to Donna Gabaccia’s inspiring title. See Gabaccia.

the ground for the emergence of political and cultural models unique to the colonial context, yet also implicated in the larger framework of the transformations of *italianità* brought about by emigration and diasporic dispersion. Without undermining the import of conquest, racial privilege, and imperial claims inextricably embedded within the construction of colonizing subjectivities, it could be argued that the critical tools employed to analyze Italian colonial racial discourse may also shed light on the process of the formation of racial identity in other diasporic contexts, such as the building of Italian communities in the New World. Conversely, although rooted in the context of hegemonic white America, the study of Italian American racial models of *italianità* may illuminate aspects of colonial and postcolonial racial culture that might otherwise remain muted.

The emergence of new forms of racism in contemporary Italy and the analysis of race provide a fertile ground for probing the validity of connecting diverse diasporic contexts under the same theoretical umbrella and, more specifically, under the umbrella of postcolonial studies. As David Goldberg explains, “racial ideas, meanings, exclusionary and repressive practices in one place are influenced, shaped by, and fuel those elsewhere. Racial ideas and arrangements circulate, cross borders, shore up existing or prompt new ones as they move between established political institutions” (360). Let me go back to my own critical trajectory in order to explain my point. My interest in Italian colonial racial discourse had stemmed from the need, which I felt compelling at the time, to reconstruct a genealogy of the social perceptions and racist representations of African immigrants in Italy in the 1980s and 1990s, when racism had turned from being possible to being real,<sup>2</sup> and racializing processes were beginning to permeate the public sphere by cementing themselves around the idea of blackness as foreign and abject.

Returning to the colonial past as a point of departure seemed necessary, given the limitations intrinsic in a synchronic explanation of Italian racism as a contemporary phenomenon engendered exclusively by the demographic changes and the subsequent multiculturalism brought about by immigration. Such an explanation left the many transformations of racism over time unaccounted for, as it undermined the very idea that the as-

<sup>2</sup> I am referring here to the research, published in the early 1990s, on the emergent forms of racism by Laura Balbo e Luigi Manconi in *I razzismi possibili* (1990) and *I razzismi reali* (1992).

sumptions of race are always in process, always implicating multiple historical actors and stages. After all, racism is, fundamentally "a theory of history. It is a theory of who is who, who belongs and who does not, of who deserves what and who is capable of what. By looking at racial categories and their fluidity over time, we glimpse the competing theories of history which inform the society and define its internal struggles" (Jacobson 6). Multiculturalism itself, as a category of analysis, tends to conceal the specific historical links with the colonial racist past. From the perspective of Italian migration and race studies, the postcolonial paradigm offers instead the possibility to add to the analysis of contemporary multicultural societies a diachronic dimension that moves the focus beyond the present, beyond the national context, and beyond the confines of one single disciplinary paradigm. Conversely, if we understand contemporary societies as postcolonial societies, postcoloniality can be refigured as a transnational and historical condition that affects not only contemporary Italians, but the very transformations of what it means to be Italian in a condition of diaspora.

What do we learn about the Italian diaspora and about race when we take a postcolonial approach to Italian American studies? The answer to this question is well illustrated in Robert Viscusi's article "The History of Italian American Literary Studies," where the critic and poet takes the epochal transformation of Italy from a country of emigration to a country of immigration as his starting point, in order to identify three major shifts in the history of Italian American literary studies: a colonial period (1820–1941), a postcolonial period (1941–1991), and a global one (1991–present). The single thread that connects these three periods is the position of cultural subalternity that Italian American culture has held both in relation to the metropolitan fatherland of origin during the 'colonial' period, and to the destination country during the 'postcolonial' period. Its effects were felt most of all at the level of language expression since, after all, both the Italian and the English language functioned as hegemonic national languages in relation to the regional dialects. Italian America as both a 'colony' of Italy and a 'colony' of the United States, experienced "two spatial hegemonies" (Viscusi 49), a situation that, I believe, aptly describes any diasporic postcolonial condition, in which the migratory movement becomes a movement from one colonial order to another. This condition of "double subalternity" is indeed a condition shared by many postcolonial

writers in today's Italy, who have moved from forms of linguistic and cultural colonization in their countries of origin by their former European colonial powers, to a metropolitan center such as Italy where the hegemonic forms of *italianità* still run counter to a truly global and transcultural space of literary and cultural expression.

The identification of the multiple forms of Italian American subalternity also teaches us something important about the multiple trajectories of the Italian racial identity. In the Italian context, the study of racism has focused either on its historical forms or on contemporary institutional discrimination and individual racist practices, and has just lately begun to connect the two temporal periods.<sup>3</sup> Scholars have also looked at the European dimension of institutional forms of discrimination, showing an enhanced awareness of the global dynamics that link new capital mobility and labor production to immigration patterns and legal restrictions. Yet the social critique of racism has dedicated little attention to the ways in which race, as a system of differentiation, "shapes those on whom it bestows privilege as well as those it oppresses" (Frankenberg 519). To pay attention to race means to explore how modern Italian identity has been shaped by a series of racial perceptions and self-definitions that have structured and supported the idea of Italianness as racially coded.

In the field of Italian American studies, instead, the impetus to study Italian whiteness has advanced in considerable ways our understanding of racial identity within the Italian diasporic context.<sup>4</sup> Scholars have studied the place of Italian Americans along the U.S. color line, exploring what it means to be Italian in terms of race. Race, as a taboo term in Europe after the Holocaust and the racial violence of the imperial past, has returned to Italy and to Italian Studies through the analysis of the perception of Italian Americans as racially coded. Alongside the work by such historians and critics as David Roediger and Matthew Jacobson on ethnic whites, Italian American scholars have explored the kind of "fluidity of race" (Jacobson 8) that characterizes the process by which Italian Americans became white.

<sup>3</sup> I have discussed this point at greater length in previous work. For further bibliographical references see: Lombardi-Diop 2012a, and Giuliani and Lombardi-Diop.

<sup>4</sup> The seminal work in this direction was the volume edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, and the study of race relations for Italians in Chicago by Thomas Guglielmo, both published in 2003.



The history of the racialization of Italian Americans is instructive on many levels. Theories of race that had served to classify both the *meridionali* and the African colonial subjects in Italy travelled across the Atlantic in order to help creating a hierarchy of races among the new European immigrants on the American soil. Following the work of positivist anthropologists such as Alfredo Niceforo and Giuseppe Sergi, from 1899 onward the U.S. Bureau of Immigration and the US Immigration Commission began identifying two races for Northern and Southern Italians ("Keltic" for the former and "Iberian" for the latter), while social scientists and opinion makers began attributing civilized cultural traits to the Keltic race and semi-barbaric traits to the Iberian race, primitive also in virtue of their "Negroid ancestry" and deemed unfit to be full citizens of the United States (Thomas Guglielmo 34-35).<sup>5</sup> Italian Americans did not always benefit for being considered white, as their history began as one of lynching, discrimination, and segregation, a history they shared with other minorities in the United States. Anti-Italianism has been a pervasive experience of Italian immigration in the United States. In 1911, the Dillingham Commission published a *Dictionary of Races or People*, a taxonomic volume that enabled the Commission to create a hierarchy of colored races and place the new waves of immigration from Southern Europe in a category different from the Northern European ones, defined as "darker." The federal government instituted the practice of distinguishing between race and color, the former being a taxonomic category drawn from the positivist language of mid-nineteenth century raciology to distinguish among large transnational/ethnic groups (say, between the Celts and the Mediterraneans), the latter being a social category (Thomas Guglielmo 2003a, 8-9; Vellon 26-27) whose function was to serve various goals, but primarily the one to sustain a racial order based on the drawing of the color line between whites and nonwhites (Jacobson, chapter 2).

Naturalization laws in the United States had been burdened with racial restrictions since 1790; whiteness was 'naturally' linked to the privileges of citizenship up until 1870, when the 'white person' prerequisite was abolished for people of African descent, but persisted for other individuals, particularly Asians, until 1952 (Hancy López 42-48; Jacobson 22-23). Naturalization procedures required applicants to specify both race and col-

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of Guglielmo's approach refer to Luconi 49-50.

or; "for Italians, the only acceptable answers were North or South Italian for the former and white for the latter" (Thomas Guglielmo 2003a, 9). If the status of Italians as Caucasians became a debatable and questionable issue, and if the Italians were discriminated and suffered prejudice and offences on the basis of racial prejudices, they were nonetheless never defined as a 'colored race' or as 'nonwhite' by the US immigration and the US census and, consequently, they were never denied naturalization rights on the basis of their color: "while Italians suffered for their supposed *racial* undesirability as Italians, South Italians, and so forth, they still benefited in countless ways from their privileged *color* status as white" (Thomas Guglielmo 2003, 33). Their whiteness had indeed something to do with their perceived cultural 'superiority' as the progeny of the earliest Greek civilization of Central and Southern Italy, considered as one of the birthplaces of Western civilization. "In the end, Italians' firm hold on whiteness never loosened over time [...] Italian Americans' whiteness—conferred more powerfully by the federal government than by any other institution—was their single most powerful asset in the 'New World'" (Thomas Guglielmo 2003, 41-43).

The history of the process of racialization (into whiteness, into blackness) of Italian Americans has been fraught with untold stories; recent literary and scholarly works have opened up the way to a critical examination of racial self-ascription and racism. In narrating the naturalization story of her grandmother, writer Louise DeSalvo observes that "The way my father (and mother, too) dealt with their Italian heritage was to not discuss it. Nor did they discuss *anyone's* race, *anyone's* ethnicity" (DeSalvo 18; emphasis in the original). In her brief memoir, race is a fractured line of identity, and it splits and recomposes—unresolved and lingering—the examination of the self in relation to family, neighborhood, community, and the American mainstream. Rosette Capotorto also painfully admits to her tortuous path to identity "along the race continuum": "I was raised to be a racist. Not the name-calling, dagger-carrying kind but the more subtle, insidious, 'some of my best friends,' let's uphold the neighborhood kind" where racism looms bigger than personal belief and social practices, a continuum where identity is not only determined by the individual free will but by the gaze of others ("when I walk past a 'gang,' meaning a 'group' of black teenage boys I feel the physical tension and I try to acknowledge it, render it real. [...] What do they see when they look at me?" (Capotorto

and Painter 254). In her poem, "We begin with food," the term "black Italian" floats on the page with no signified attached; the poem is inserted within a chapter titled "Italiani/Africani," another floating signifier, where we read that "Sicilian is Black is African" (Capotorto and Painter 251). Similarly, Ronnie Mac Painter—musician, photographer, metal sculptor—born of a black father and a white mother, defines herself as "my Black self," and wonders "what makes me Italian?—finding the answer in a mixture of somatic and cultural traits ("What makes me Italian are my eyes and my mouth. If you look very closely at my eyes, you'll see Italy in them. From my mouth you will hear my mother, Beatrice. I say what I want, when I want, to whomever I want").<sup>6</sup>

The distinction between color/race presents itself as pivotal in the naturalization story by DeSalvo: "Becoming a naturalized citizen granted my grandmother (some) rights and privileges of a native-born American but neither the privilege of being completely accepted nor absorbed into the mainstream of North American life" (22). Naturalization—she reflects on the etymology of the term—is "*The action of making natural. (Which, of course, means that what you were—Italian, in this case—was unnatural*" (DeSalvo 23. Emphasis in the original.) The writer's grandmother was naturalized as 'white' in color but as 'dark' in complexion: "Dark made its implied meaning clear: my grandmother had become 'racialized'. To become a citizen, my grandmother had to perjure herself. She had to admit that she manifested an attribute that was not true, but that someone else had insisted was true" (28). Implicit in this statement is that the self-ascribed identity—which is understood as the truth of the 'natural' identity of the writer's grandmother as Italian—is indeed white, while the racist attribution of darkness is false and imposed from above. Italian-ness and whiteness are thus 'naturally' reconciled in the writer's retrospective analysis; whiteness becomes the 'natural' attribute, erasing all possible awareness of its implicit privileges and the very possibility of its critique.

<sup>6</sup> Capotorto and Painter 252. Interestingly enough, the interrogation "What makes me Italian?" links this particular example of diasporic African Italian identity with other diasporic African Italian identities across the Atlantic and, in primis, the one voiced by Somali writer Igiaba Scego in her celebrated short-story "Salsicce." See Scego. In her salient reading of the intersection of blackness and Italian-ness in African Italian texts, Caterina Romeo connects Scego's work with other Italian American memoirs, including Kym Ragusa's. See Romeo.

DeSalvo's story reminds us that the association of Italianess with darkness lingers in the form of a traumatic memory passed down through generations; at the same time, the association of Italianess with whiteness creates a paradoxical invisibility: "Italian Americans are invisible people. Not because people refuse to see them, but because, for the most part, they refuse to be seen. Italian Americans became invisible the moment they could pass themselves off as being white. And since then they have gone to great extremes to avoid being identified as anything but white, they have even hidden the history of being people of color. [...] By becoming white, they have paid a price, and that price is the extinction of their culture" (Gardaphé 1). As Fred Gardaphé argues, one of the possible consequences of having made invisible the history of discrimination Italian Americans share with other groups in the United States is the loss of the power to discursively and visually represent themselves. I agree with Gardaphé that to bring this history to visibility is to read alternative versions of Italian American history, and a postcolonial lens enables us to do just that.

The instability of the racial identity of Italian Americans partakes of the larger, transnational history of Italian identity in the twentieth century. As David Roediger remarks, echoing W. E. B. Du Bois, the 1935 invasion of Ethiopia brought the history of Italy's racist prejudice to international attention, and that history highlights "the important connections of race, violence, diaspora, empire, and national feeling"; most importantly, the invasion provides a perspective on transoceanic race relations, as it reveals the historical continuum linking the racial identity of Italians in the United States with Italy's history of racism, prompting us to reflect "whether immigrants from Italy were ever white *before* arrival, or at least accustomed to race-thinking *before* arrival."<sup>7</sup> For the purpose of this essay, this is a very important connection to make, as it positions the history of race relations within a larger, transoceanic framework, where the ricocheting effects of colonial violence and imperial racism are understood beyond the confines of discreet national entities (Italy, the United States) and from the viewpoint of a postcolonial, transnational approach to Italy's racial history.

In conclusion, the critical and political implications inherent in fostering a postcolonial approach to Italian American studies are manifold:

<sup>7</sup> Roediger 2003, 261. Emphasis in the original. The reference here is to Thomas Guglielmo's pivotal study on Italian American race relations in Chicago. See Thomas Guglielmo 2003a.

- "Postcolonial" Italy is not simply a derivative of the more 'dominant' traditions of postcolonial studies, but adds a fresh and vital perspective on transoceanic and global postcolonialities;<sup>8</sup>
- Race relations are central to the historical formation of the Italian diasporic identity as they are to the contemporary Italian experience;
- An engaged postcolonial critique of such identity can engender the recovery of the historical memory of both colonialism and emigration;
- Italian-Americans critics, writers, and intellectuals have already foregrounded issues ("questions of recognition, visibility, and recovery"<sup>9</sup>) that are intrinsic to the postcolonial theoretical arena and that are shared by first and second-generation postcolonial writers in contemporary Italy;
- By emphasizing a comparative, transnational, and transoceanic critical exchange, a postcolonial approach to Italian diaspora studies represents a methodological disposition, an incitement to productively practice multidisciplinary and finding new ways of doing and intersecting Italian and Italian American Studies.

I believe that our critical engagement should work in the direction of finding connections among the three phenomena of emigration, colonialism, and immigration<sup>10</sup> by encouraging further critical work that brings to light not only the history of racism but also the stories that tell us about who we are as Italians. This can be done by opening the historical archives, involving different institutional sites, and by telling and listening to our common—and often silenced—private stories.

<sup>8</sup> For a theorization of the paradigms that are foundational to Italian postcoloniality refer to the introductory chapter in Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2012, 1-29, as well as to Lombardi-Diop and Romeo 2014.

<sup>9</sup> Giunta and Zamboni McCormick 2.

<sup>10</sup> The efforts of the Italian American Studies Network, founded in Bellagio, go precisely in this direction.

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REMAPPING THE FIELD  
A TRANSNATIONAL/INTERNATIONAL AMERICAN STUDIES PERSPECTIVE  
ON ITALIAN/AMERICAN STUDIES

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Like other "turns" in literary and cultural studies—from the linguistic turn of a few decades ago to the more recent cognitive one—also what has been variously dubbed as the "international," the "cosmopolitan," the "global," the "post-national," or "transnational" turn in American studies has been the object of heated critical debates concerning its origins, its nature, and its scopes. One could begin by noticing that all the adjectives just highlighted in quotation marks, while implicitly referring to the crisis of nation-based paradigms and epistemologies, mean rather different things to different people. Though practitioners of the approaches associated with these adjectives all share a desire to situate "America" within a much expanded—both temporally and spatially—historical, political, social, and cultural context, they often disagree not only on what may be the most effective ways to do so but also on their overt or covert ideological implications. This is obviously not the place to attempt a thorough mapping of a continuously evolving field of study. All I wish to do here is sketch some of the coordinates of what, for the sake of brevity, I shall call TAS/IAS (Transnational American Studies / International American Studies), knowing full well that while these terms are sometimes used interchangeably, to many they designate different kinds of comparative work. More generally, however, my aim is to suggest how TAS/IAS may intersect the field of Italian/American studies and help us to reimagine it as part of a larger American/Italian discourse beyond the geographical contours of the U.S. One of the main advantages of such reconfiguration, I shall argue, is that of forestalling the appropriation of the Italian/American narrative by what Amy Kaplan has called "the tenacious grip of American exceptionalism," which remain strong even in the age of multiculturalism.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> On the emergence of multiculturalism "as a quintessential American value, marking the United States as a unique society among nations" see Sanchez.