

Authenticity and Ephemerality

The Memes of Transcultural Production

in Italian Diasporic Culture

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I, Anthony Dion Mitzel, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract and keywords

This dissertation seeks to contribute a new model for the observation, interpretation, and analysis of Italian and American cultures utilising a semiotic-memetic grammar for analysing and interpreting culture as it transforms and disseminates through time and space. Semioticians, linguists, philosophers, historians, and cultural theorists have written on culture and its relation to language, ethnicity, and identity perception. However, the mechanism for the arrival to specific loci is often overlooked. For the purposes of this study, the cultural systems in question are diasporic Italian manifested in the form of the Italian Americans operating in the periphery (USA) and peninsular/insular Italians operating in the centre (Italy). This dissertation addresses the question of how meaning is constructed, maintained, and propagated in the periphery by diasporic peoples with general inferences on both Italian Diasporic culture in the United States, and specifically a cohort of Americans of Italian, mixed Italian descent that reside in Mahoning Valley in the state of Ohio, USA. I argue that using signs that arrived via memes i.e., non-biologically spread cultural data to the United States through migratory flows, American Italians have the ability to semiotically interpret Italian signs thereby maintaining an authentic and ephemeral connection to Italy while in the periphery.

In the present study, signs found in the peripheries of Italy as centre that work in unison to create meaning or Memetic Codes Clusters have been identified and defined as interpretable and communicable cultural value systems. They are examples of multimodal structures operating as memes outside of an origination point connecting and maintaining perception to a core culture: cultures that have historically exerted influence due to hegemony, mass communication, and popular appeal. Multiple examples from a selection of targeted audiovisual and literary texts have been correlated with the aforementioned clusters serving as aesthetic markers. Preliminary findings suggest there are discernible semiotic attributes contained in both samples that illustrate the fecundity and hybridisation of Italian culture in the periphery.

Keywords: culture, diaspora, Italian America, memes, semiotics

Impact Statement

This research was undertaken with the objective of improving the teaching of culture and language to undergraduate and graduate students at the *Alma Mater Studiorum* Università di Bologna, Italy. Regarding teaching, the immediate and ongoing impact has been dissemination of reflections over Italianness and questions of identity as well as discussions of Italian heritage during a period when cultural identity is facing an epistemological crisis due to ongoing global migration, sometimes in the form of diaspora. Moreover, due to the systematic nature of the research, a novel methodological framework has been developed which has the possibility of helping both students and lay persons better decipher their temporal existence. While the impact of this research has been immediate at the collegiate level through the author's teaching at the University of Bologna, Italy, in the future there will be an ongoing dissemination of the research through traditional channels, such as international conferences and lay presentations, academic journals, and book publication. With that said, in the public sphere the impact may prove to be more immediate by utilising relatively newer technology such as the medium of podcasting and documentary filmmaking. While the usefulness of this research will first be on the local level both in Italy and the USA (specifically the area of inquiry Youngstown, Ohio), we can foresee it benefiting a larger international audience as the theme of

intercultural communication and knowledge becomes more of a tangible commodity, both inside and outside academia.

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Abbreviations

DI:	diasporic Italian *
DIY:	Do it yourself
EAL:	English as an additional language
IA:	Italian American
L1, L2, L3	First language, Second language, Third language
P/I:	Peninsular/Insular Italian

N.B.:

Throughout this text DI and IA should be considered analogous terms unless specified. IAs are DIs but DIs are not necessarily IAs since IAs constitute an ethnic group inside the confines of the United States of America, or who have a shared Americana past at one point in time. DI is the larger purposely broad, umbrella term for all Italic peoples living outside Italy proper with a history of immigration around the world. At times diasporic Italians and Italian Americans will overlap. Therefore, while an Italian American — depending on their specific immigration history — is a diasporic person this does not mean all diasporic Italians are necessarily Italian Americans. It should be noted that these terms, however, remain in flux due to contemporary Italian migration and its effect on historic immigration nomenclature.

Glossary

The two lexical choices regarding nomenclature most used in the dialectic and discourse surrounding the Italian in and outside of Italy are fraught with epistemological confusion owing to the lack of cooperation between different manifestations and interpretations of Italian people for unique and historical purposes linked to self-perception and identity — both from within and outside the culture. Since establishing a universal is problematic due to the constant and consistent changes in both time and space exerted on the lexemes /Italian/ and /Italy/ as a unified geographical, historical, linguistic, and cultural entity, we shall make some initial distinctions regarding these terms, their meaning, and their usage. They are defined as follows:

Diasporic Italian A person of Italian ancestry whose history is linked to the dispersion of Italian immigrants in the great migration encompassing the period of Italian Unification in the 1861 to the mid 20th century. This definition is now used by others in the academy specifically in fields related to Diaspora studies, Post-Colonial studies, Ethnic studies, and Immigration history to define this group. This definition has emerged

from these fields and is now being used more and more in Italian American studies proper and by the group to recognize itself.

Italian American. A person of Italian descent either born or naturalized in the United States of America. The usage of “American Italian” as well as other grammatical constructions existing with varying degrees of differentiation can be found. But Italian American stands as the *de facto* term when referring to Americans of Italian descent in the United States of America while Italo-American is generally used more in British English. This definition emerged from the group and is used by the people in the group to recognize themselves. Yet it should be stated that people of Italian descent, while residing within the confines of the USA refer to themselves casually and formally as “Italian” or *paesan’* and not Italian American, often switching depending on who they encounter in conversation. It is only in the interaction outside the town, city, state, country that people will say the latter if at all¹. Although, it should be further stated that the US Census Bureau has allowed self-identification for some time now with regards to Italian ancestry. This falls under the problematic construct of “race” specifically as it pertains to whiteness. In the nascent post-colonial

¹ This difference in usage may be caused by the dual notion of national vs. ethnic identity common place in the United States and in other ex-colonies yet less common in places such as Europe or any country that has not adopted USA style hybridisation naming practices.

nation of the United States of America, the census was a crucial component necessary to rectify two of the War of Independence's (in American English *Revolutionary War*) main grievances: taxation and representation. Because of this, the census played a critical role in the distribution of power and pegged taxation to a simple population count (Watt, 2016). First used in 1800 and 1810 censuses. The United States Census Bureau defines white as: "A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa. It includes people who indicate their race as "white" or report entries such as Irish, German, Italian, Lebanese, Arab, Moroccan, or Caucasian" (Census.gov, 2018)². "Italian American" is used by most IAs to self-identify and is considered the prescribed nomenclature today regardless of hyphen. It should be noted that the first instance of identification outside the black-white binary was when race was expanded to include "C" for Chinese followed by "I" for Native American or "Indian" in the 1870 US census. In this expansion we can see a direct lineage to later questions of ethnicity that would aid in compiling the official demographical documentation of IAs in the United States (Statistical Profile of Italian Americans in U.S.A.: Socio-Demographic, and Education Achievement Level, 1991). Moreover,

² It should be noted that during the Roman empire census officials travelled throughout the empire every five years conducting censuses.

the choice to use a hyphen or not is informed by and keeping within the regulations and writing conventions outlined in the *Italian American Review*, a peer-reviewed journal published by the John D. Calandra Institute of Italian American Studies, Queens College (CUNY), NY, NY. Furthermore, from critical perspectives on the “hyphenated writer” see Tamburri, 1991. Most standard convention sources require a hyphen; Tamburri writes Italian/American whenever the words are used as an adjective and not as a noun, which requires no hyphen or slash.

Peninsular/insular. The use of this term is to acknowledge a serious point of contention in diasporic Italian and Italian naming conventions; the frequent or standard assumption that diasporic Italians are not in fact *real* Italian people. By delineating geographical loci, the understanding of Italian culture broadens beyond Italy proper and encompasses both the temporal and historical experiences of Italians as well as the Italian immigrant/migrant experience and realities generated from it and manifestations of it around the globe. The use of peninsular and insular also recognizes the unique history, language, and cultures of both Sicily and Sardinia.

Youngstalian. People of Italian (or mixed Italian) ancestry from in and around the Mahoning Valley of Youngstown, Ohio, USA which encompasses the border of the states of Ohio and Pennsylvania in the Norther Appalachian

subregion³. This includes people who immigrated to, were born in or have lived at one point in the Mahoning Valley (See MSA in appendix) which also extends into western Pennsylvania, but now reside outside the area yet nonetheless identify with the diasporic Italian American culture of the Mahoning Valley. A neologism of Youngstown and Italian, the term was created by the author to denote a specific culture group originating and/or residing in and around the city and its outskirts with quantifiable cultural markers and linguistic attributes as well as discernible geographical boundaries. These markers of a fundamentally socio-anthropological nature pertain to culture and language that cuts across identities and provide us with a more concise description of this lesser-known Italian cohort. Admittedly this lexical distinction is a purpose-built “protologism” (Epstein, 2012) to denote a specific typology of diasporic Italian Americans living in the Mahoning Valley of Ohio and as such emerged from the research and currently is not readily used by the group to recognize itself.

³ See Appendix 1.

1 Introduction

Ubi sunt qui ante nos in mundo fuere?

“Where are those who, before us, existed in the world?”

(*De Brevitate Vitae*, also known as *Gaudeamus Igitur*, a 13th century song)

1.1 Prologue: setting the scene

Italian culture as a semiotic system continues to exert both active and passive influence in many geographical and temporal locations around the globe in part, or as a whole, whether they be located in Italy proper or outside the confines of the modern Italian republic. And as such, Italian culture, and all culture, oscillates between the literal and figurative. Immigration in the form of diaspora has played a large role in diffusing these signs and embedding meaning and deep knowledge into Italian diasporic culture. Immigration out of Italy has been happening since the Dorian Greek expansion and subsequent incursion into southern Italy and Sicily, i.e., *Magna Grecia*; the movement of people has been fundamental to both how Italy interprets itself as well as how the world interprets Italy. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, specifically the periods of

1880-1924⁴ until immigration was curtailed after the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1924, the “Johnson-Reed Act”, Italians had immigrated to almost every part of the globe, a trend that continues today in the form of transnational migration (Ratti, 1932; Schiller, Glick, Basch & Szanton Blanc, 1995; Rouse, 1991; Ruberto & Sciorra, 2017). Even before this notable period of Italy’s “historical migration” (Thernstrom, 1980; Tamburri, 2018: 194) to the United States — the people that have inhabited the Italic peninsular and insular region were no strangers to human migratory flows. For the numbers of Italian Americans in the USA up until 1991, the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute for The City University of New York compiled a “*Statistical Profile of Italian Americans in U.S.A.: Socio-Demographic, and Education Achievement Level* (1991). Due to self-reporting, ascertaining the exact number of Italian Americans/Americans of Italian descent is almost impossible. Instead, what we can understand is who identifies as /Italian/ — quite possibly a better indication of ethnic-cultural retainment in the USA. In any case, these reports serve as a general indicator of a statistically relevant population.

In what we can consider to be the beginning of the modern period of Italian immigration in the mid 19th century, pre-Unification Italy⁵ had less than

⁴ <https://history.house.gov/Historical-Highlights/1901-1950/The-Immigration-Act-of-1924/> (Retrieved 19.12.2017).

⁵ Here I am extending the use of “antebellum” to encompass Italian Unification as it shares many similarities with the US Civil War specifically regarding the North/South geographical divide, mixed demographic make-up of belligerents, and crucially the influence both events had on the modern nation states that grew out of the conflicts.

853 “Italians” living in the USA for a total of 13,000 but that number would grow on an order of magnitude not seen before by 1920 (Cannistraro & Meyer, 2003: 6).

Yet, physical boundaries of distance and geography were secondary to the connections through signs, and their spread through memes would remain constant if at times constrained and detached from Italy as centre. These cultural attributes would continue to create shared identities and customs thereby creating meaning amongst those people identifying as /Italian/ in the periphery. Due to its central position in the Mediterranean basin, Italy was, is, and will continue to be one of the world’s crossroads, semiotically, culturally, linguistically, philosophically geographically, and demographically. Therefore, these migratory flows of people and ideas provide a template and window for the study of the transmission of symbols, meaning, and values from one place to another: the transmission of, in a word, culture (Hall, 2006: 597). Moreover, these immigrants, who were often temporary workers, brought with them their macro and micro cultures that operated and continue to operate as vectors of Italian signs and as such, a connection to Italy as centre.

Ideas in the form of signs and value systems, like metaphors, do not “come out of thin air” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980: xi); they come through a synthesis of time, place, culture, and language. In relatively modern times, the dispersion of Italian people also included the diffusion of the Italian language and along with it, Italian thoughts and customs. More importantly though, was the Italian as a distinct sign and sign system as well as a meme and memeplex (Speel, 1995;

Blackmore, 1999) bringing with it a novel and continuous interpretation of the world and influencing host cultures both in the past and into the present⁶. However, in modern times the dynamics of migration in the Western, and westernized world have changed considerably due to mass communication coupled with relatively cheap and efficient international/intercontinental mass transit; it is distinctively different compared to countries or regions that are torn apart by war, conflict, persecution, or even disasters triggered by natural hazards. Added to this is the global internet system of digital infrastructure that for most of the world enables immigrants, migrants, refugees, exiles, and expatriates to remain connected to their home countries indefinitely. In actuality, what this means is that, in contrast to the past, a person need not sacrifice or lose their first language competency just because their language is not represented in the host country. In contemporary times, a person is never truly away from their cultural and linguistic home, at least in a metaphorical sense, as was the case in pre-mobile modern times. Before the advent of the cell phone and modern methods of communication via the internet, migrants would essentially be leaving their point of origin with the thought they may never see their family, friends, and home ever again. Today, one can just press a button or open an app and be speaking to someone on the other side of the planet in real-time whereas in the past this was often done by postal service or telegraphy. Distances have all been rendered inconsequential as distance itself is no longer an obstacle to

⁶ See pages 213, 236 for semiosis and unlimited *memeiosis*.

instantaneous, or timely, communication and, by extension, political boundaries theoretically erased, to a certain extent. Yet, when it comes to discourse on Italian identity, the metaphorical sense often has more meaning than the literal, whether they be the Italians from the Italic peninsula and islands, or the descendants of the millions of Italians that left Italy in their diaspora.

In fact, while this was not always the case, many Italians were either coerced and tricked through shipping fraud (Giannin, 1874) or forced to leave Italy in the modern history of the country. Although it must be stated that Italians in many parts of Italy, while subject to less-than-ideal living and social conditions, did have a relative degree of agency in their migratory choices since they “exercised a considerable choice over when to leave home and where to go” (Gabaccia, 2000: 6). This point will become even more relevant when considering the new, more contemporary Italian migration patterns out of Italy.

Through a mix of opportunity and chance coinciding with larger macro migratory flows and the advent of photographic technology, a case for the Italian being an iconic (visual) symbol denoting the quintessential immigrant story, or “emblems of the new immigration”, can be made (Osborne & Battaglia, 2013). Moreover, the *Italian* immigrant as contentious sign and sign system, due to the mass movement or flow of Italian people at a crucial moment in technological advancement and financial and economic hegemony, also stands as one of the multipolar American immigrant stories unified through migration and recorded in text and image at a time when the two were gaining prominence in the emerging mass media and American collective conscience. The Italian immigrant

as a meme (Dawkins, 1976) in and of itself, containing contentious narratives and conflicting myths. This Italian /meme/ and memeplex has generated and re-generated ideas and expressions of material culture ever since a *Genovese* mariner, Cristoforo Columbo (1451-1506), sailed the blue, tumultuous Atlantic Ocean and ever since a Tuscan navigator, Amerigo Vespucci (1454-1512), demonstrated that North America was in fact a stand-alone landmass. With these two figures, we have two examples of the initial stage of the Italian meme cycle both in Europe and in North America. From this expansion and exploitation would come more and more people who arrived in the “new world” bringing with them their language, cultures, values, and customs. Those histories and stories have complex and often controversial links with the legacies of colonisation in relation to indigenous Amerindian people in the North and South of the Americas who were already there. Of course, as the North and South American landmasses were already populated, in the pre-Columbian period there were already cultural memes that were then supplanted by “European” based cultural memes.

The generally accepted history of Italian immigration into the United States has therefore focused on the period from 1880 to 1920 both due to its influence caused by the sheer number of arrivals and the technical aspects that allowed the experience to be well documented for posterity by both official governmental bodies as well as both private citizens and at that time, recent arrival themselves. Subsequently, the baton would be picked up and shared by families and descendants in the future leading to a collective narrative building

and contrast between larger cities and smaller towns that continues today. Yet due to the influence caused by the sheer number of immigrants and the effect this would have had on the culture, it can be implied that many people hold the belief that Italians arrived only after the 1880s from Italy to the United States. Some authors have stated that Italians, or those people that identify with a certain locus on the Italian peninsular and insular region, were amongst the first to travel, or migrate to the North American landmass. The thought after all is not outside the scope of reason. In the beginning to *La Storia: Five Centuries of the Italian American Experience*, Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale (1992) posit that *Cristoforo Colombo* wasn't the only (proto) *Italian* on those westward sailing ships. They state:

Nearly five centuries before modern Italy became a nation and Italians began migrating to the Americas in large numbers, Italians were adventuring under the sponsorship of French, English, Portuguese, and Spanish governments as explores, warriors, sailors, soldiers, and missionaries. Starting with Christopher Columbus, who combined the characteristics of adventurer and missionary (he began many of his pronouncements with *Jesus cum Maria sit nobis in via*), the earliest members of the Italian vanguard were the explores whose findings would reveal a new world. (1992: 3)

In their position, Mangione and Morreale clearly recognise that Italians have been around since the early stages of the United States of America, but they have played a supporting role and as such have not been signified as *Italian per se*. Moreover, lost in the hegemony of competing empires as Mangione and Morreale allude to, Italians were just along for the voyage as many other

unknown ethnics were in those exploratory years during the European Renaissance and maritime travel and exploration, European westward expansion that ultimately led to and was embodied by the US's policy of Manifest Destiny — the widely held belief during the 19th century the United States and its inhabitants, whether they be citizen, settler or, more often than not, recent arrivals were entitled to disperse all over the North American continent. Locked in this “destiny” was the concept of virtue and that the Americans were doing was just and unrepachable. Furthermore, Mangione and Morreale's declaration runs counter to the narrative that Italians came to the Americas at one specific temporal moment; they are making it clear that *they* (Italians) have always been there. Therefore, if we follow this particular inclusive frame, we must continue to re-view and reassess the /Italian/ contribution to the USA as further research comes to light.

In order to understand the culture of diasporic Italians, one must learn to decode the signs that create and maintain the culture. Due to these “non-indigenous” (Crystal, 2000: 119) signs — as early narratives — entering into a culture by way of memetic diffusion, those of a host country must re-evaluate and either reinterpret or in many cases, interpret themselves for the first time. This can lead to first, an epistemological crisis followed by the passage into epistemological confusion. The epistemological crisis is a reaction to a complete lack of understanding that an immigrant encounters upon arriving in a new locus, while the confusion sets in after the novelty, the outside world becomes incomprehensible due to a lack of language skills, culture shock, and class

displacement. It is out of this crisis then subsequent confusion that a liminal space emerges straddling two polarities exerting a sort of gravitational force on diverse cultures, pulling and tearing, adding and subtracting elements to each. Out of this event, new narratives begin to emerge, and old narratives fade away or, in the case of what the Greeks considered a disease, (nostalgia) returns⁷.

Take for instance the flattening of migrant groups into monolithic entities or tropes being used time and time again for nefarious purposes, swaying public opinion and, at time, guiding domestic and international policy. The immigrant as interpretant sign (Peirce, 1940; 1950, 93) was and continues to be an idealized vessel for social anxiety and mass panic leading to othering: in the host country, and within the hegemonic culture they speak a strange language, look different, and have different customs. All these attributes can create tension but, paradoxically also have the potential for making an interesting night on the town from a culinary point of view. In the United States for example, though it may seem outdated, many Italian (American) restaurants of the past purposely used garish post card image décor to entice customers to frequent their dining establishments, an aesthetic habit that morphed into corporate franchising as well as a return to nostalgia dining in the form of “red sauce joints” or else other trendier places selling outlandishly large meatballs. These non-spatial dimensions are often coloured with a healthy smattering of green, white, and red

⁷ Interestingly, nostalgia was still considered a diagnosable disorder of “considerable interest” through the 19th century (Rosen, 1975: 340).

and become, in the absence of an original, simulacra. These intermodal realities generate new interpretations of social values, aesthetics, identity perceptions including the concept of self, as well as consumption practices namely in the form of, but not limited to, culinary choices. Some of these places are just stops on the tour of what sociologist Jerome Krase refers to as “ethnic carnivals,” i.e., places and spaces perhaps containing social semiotic remnants where once thriving, relatively homogenous ethnic communities once lived but now have been reduced to what Jean Baudrillard referred to as a “third order of simulacra” (Krase, 2012: 5). Furthermore, these “places and spaces” – in the cultural geography and philosophical senses of the words – are fundamental to “all academic work that extends the field of consciousness” (Tuan, 1979: 389).

1.2 Multimodal Narratives

When considering the aesthetics of the Italian diaspora, a classic example of décor can be found in cinematic representations of Italian restaurants such as in one of the most iconic sequences in cinematic history. In *The Godfather* (1974), during a “sit down” dinner to discuss a resolution to the intergang conflict taking place, Michael, in retaliation for the failed assassination attempt on his father exacts retribution by killing the culprits, the gangster Sollozzo and police captain McCluskey, while they eat. We can look at this as a *last supper* in an old school “red sauce joint”, that being a stereotypical /Italian/ themed establishment. This type of centre in the periphery, or what the people in the periphery think the

centre looks like – as a defining aesthetic – can be found in most visual semiotic representation of diasporic Italians.

Some decades later, both this aesthetic and narrative can be found in *Big Night* (1996) but would be central to the film's plot. A contrast between what would be considered authentic and inauthentic Italian dining can be found in the tension between Stanley Tucci and Tony Shaloub's Abruzzese characters, brothers Primo and Secondo. One of the central conflicts is the culinary – read cultural – integrity the brothers attempt to maintain while being in competition with a rival restaurateur, Pascal, and his over the top, red-tinged Pascal's Italian Grotto. The award-winning film displays many important paths for analysis, but it is an important artistic representation and provides material for a case study of cultural hegemony and the gravitational pull to compromise one's identity and worldview when operating in liminal spaces in the United States.

Another detrimental attribute to the signs of ethnicity in the USA, is that, as a country, the American capitalist system is focused on reducing foreign culture to stereotypes and then using the reduction to form commodified "simulacritic" representations of culture for commercialisation. For the purposes of this study, the term "simulacra" will be extended and used in adjective form, i.e., "simulacritic" referring to the qualities of simulacra applied to certain objects and temporal states. This underlying mechanism of cultural hybridization is central to the diasporic Italian experience in the USA. Yet, this is not unique to Italian culinary culture. Many ethnic restaurants also apply a similar multimodal semiotic experience, yet Italian cuisine, and the Italian restaurant as sign system,

continues to be one of the more popular dining experiences even though its signifier as “ethnic” is often left unrecognized or else no longer considered as such: once again, the Italian as ethnic signs being part and parcel of the corporatization and commodification of any and all subaltern cultures for monetary purposes. Yet just as a stereotype contains some kernel of truth, contained in these simulacraphic experiences are signs of authenticity, because a sign in and of itself is authentic. It is the interpretation that changes or is corrupted through time and space.

One iconic image that continues to be contentious is the immigrant sign. This sign, and the meaning that it creates through denotation or connotation is a meme that has proven to be quite fecund⁸. It is what we could call the nondescript immigrant aesthetic: the sepia toned image of the poor, illiterate, cardboard luggage carrying immigrant either standing on a large steamer’s deck or else disembarking in the company of an equally sombre family, and while the descendants of these millions upon millions of Italians will recognize their shared family history and story in these washed out images, Italians from modern peninsular and insular Italy will see the images as just a story loosely connected with Italy and, perhaps, a distant relative. For example, the majority of Italians that came to the United States were from Southern Italy or *il mezzogiorno*. Traditionally an agrarian society, due to their lack of formal educations, many

⁸ “Fecund” refers to the fitness of a meme, i.e., how well it spreads, adapts, and thrives within a certain social environment.

diasporic Italians during the great migration after 1880 worked as semi-skilled and unskilled laborers in America but back in Italy they would have spent most of their lives working outdoors. This would have produced distinct qualities such as a darker complexion and fewer and more intensely used garments both import features of the image of the Italian as poor immigrant that would be iconified in images taken at Ellis Island. Due to this aesthetic representation, Italians would continue to carry this visual semiotic from the past into contemporary times. Furthermore, due to the general lack of education or minimal religious formation coupled with illiteracy, these early immigrants would have had difficulties assimilating into American life, faced with linguistic, cultural, and economic barriers. All of these factors went into creating the “sepia toned” Italian immigrant as sign for Italians and non-Italians alike – the accessing of nostalgia through a visual semiotic representation of an implied mythical past. The popularity of the immigrant experience in the United States as well as Americans’ shared history of immigration would all but ensure that this sign became a meme moving virally through the culture. Furthermore, the rise of the film industry, as a form of mass communication and cultural formation vehicle, would create an image of the /Italian/ in the US more powerful than reality itself. This Italian mediatic identity would and still continues to be a major source of aesthetics for people within and outside the culture. Within the culture this nostalgia of both a romantic, bucolic life in Italy and a pride in the struggle as immigrants in *L’America* would become and continue to be core components of Italian American identity. Lastly, as much of Italian American culture is based on a both a non-

recoverable linguistic past and an accessible semiotic present, there is always a tendency for cultural productions to fall into the sphere of nostalgia. Often, the nostalgia “machine” makes it difficult for any sort of progress in Italian American cultural identity, which inevitably leads to clashes between of DI and P/I Italians. Therefore, the intercultural aspect, and the tension between the centre and peripheries of Italian cultural, provides for many areas of inquiry.

This difference in the perception of the immigrant as sign and positionality of the interpreter reading the sign is one of the fundamental differences that differentiates DIs and P/I Italians: DIs must acknowledge the connection between themselves and American, Italian American history while P/I Italians can choose whether or not to accept that it is part of their shared Italian immigration history. Another difference is mediatic in nature owing to the process DIs went through as they became incorporated into US linguistic and cultural hegemony, a spatial and temporal experience lacking in PI Italians. Through various media, different images of the /Italian/ in “America” emerged. From the swarthy and dirty new arrival on Ellis Island to the slick, well dressed gangsters of the Prohibition Era, these nascent screen icons provided the template for subsequent manifestations of masculinity and graft in the films of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin Scorsese, and Michael Cimino to name only a few. Of course, it was not just the big screen that was affected by these icons and the environments they inhabited. These landscapes, whether in Italy or the US, began to take on a mythical quality. It is within these hyper-stylised places that DIs continued to identify as /Italian/ and through this process of signification these

new places became /Italy/ themselves while older, more peninsular notions and images of Italy, even if closer to Italy as cultural centre, faded out. This process of change could account for many DIs viewing Italy as, for lack of a better word, backwards because often their only connection to Italy was through film or old letters and photographs. In the absence of new information, the older information, while obsolete, still remains. Take a sepia-toned image for example: the sepia-tone locks in the sign and forever roots it in a mythic past due to the image fading – a process that in past could only happen through the passage of time⁹. Yet, this iconic image has given way to the smartly dressed Italians or *cervelli in fuga* (literally “brains escaping/on the run” or Italians in flight). And while the classic Italian immigrant’s mode of transit was by steamship, often in steerage, now they step off an intercontinental flight and, due to educational and cultural status, can make their way into post-graduate positions, and other white-collar jobs (Egmont, 2014; Ruberto & Sciorra, 2017; Tamburri, 2018). It is safe to say that these are two generally accepted and propagated narratives, and they make up two faces of the coin of Italian immigration into the United States. These two signs are not mutually exclusive, as the historical and material realities have changed substantially during the late 19th and 21st century. Whereas the immigrants of the past had to sacrifice their families, home, language, and culture only communicating through, if at all, letters, wire services, and much later on

⁹ Nowadays though it can be difficult to tell the exact timeframe and provenance of an object or in the case here, image due the use of smartphones and computer screens. Moreover, with the advent of apps, an image can be made to look 100 years old with a couple of clicks, an act that would have taken decades and atmospheric conditions.

the telephone, these new immigrants will never experience the conditions and sacrifice as did more historic immigrant or “neo-migrant” (Cucchiurato, 2010: 2) groups that, as opposed to in the past, can remain in contact with their families, language and culture. It is safe to assume that emigrating out of Italy today is relatively easier due to modern Italians possessing advanced skills and the financial agency to make a decision based on choice rather than survival¹⁰.

1.3 Linguistic Frame

There is also a linguistic factor to consider when observing IA culture that is an important but not a or the defining characteristic of the culture. At the time of arrival, pre-WWII Italian immigrants to the US spoke only their regional dialect and often local variations of said regional dialects. The post-WWII Italians would begin a shift amongst diasporic Italians in that they would be able to speak standard Italian and still retain their L1¹¹ Italian competency while they transitioned into the American, English-speaking society. The post WWII/1950s immigration to North America constitutes a break from early waves of diasporic Italians. One of the principal differences between this migratory flow and previous ones was the fact these Italians had more agency both financially and socially (Ruberto & Sciorra, 2017). One could also contend that the break was also linguistic in nature due to the educational reforms made after *L'Unificazione* and

¹⁰ For a more in-depth discussion regarding agency and new Italian immigration/migration see Ruberto and Sciorra, 2017.

¹¹ “L1” refers to a person’s first language or native/mother tongue.

during the *ventennio* or the 20+ year fascist regime. Due to their focus on creating a modern standardized system in Italy as a nation, schools focused on one particular dialect of Italian as “Italian,” i.e., the Tuscan dialect, or the “language” of Dante. Therefore, the main culprit for the loss of diasporic Italians’ ability to speak Italian was the fact that “Italian” as a language had not spread as the main language equally across the peninsula (for ISTAT, the Italian diglossia between the regional dialect as indiscernible from Italian finished only around 2005-2007). When the majority of Italians left Italy for South and North America a plurality of dialects was spoken. There is the added effect of the American English linguistic and cultural hegemony to contend with as well. During WWII, there were public service campaigns for Italians, as well as German and Japanese Americans, urging them to not “Speak the Enemy’s Language”. This, coupled with a desire to blend into the American way of life, led many diasporic Italians to lose their language through attrition and neglect. What was left in the end was only the signs of Italy and *italianità* coded into texts and material objects.

1.4 *Italianità* as Cultural and Ethnic Signifier

As an identity marker, *italianità* or Italianness rests in an ephemeral state that is, it is in a constant state of flux. Gardaphé defines the concept of *italianità* as “conforming to the peculiarities of their language or culture or the Italian spirit or essence; Italianness or Italianism” (1996: 20). Therefore, *italianità* is the distillation of what it means to be or a way of being /Italian/. In most practical cases it would seem to mean a feeling based of both internal and external stimuli

anchored in contexts and highly subjective in nature. While in other cases it would appear to signify the act of being Italian either through language or writing. Tamburri et al. (2000) describe *italianità* as a multistate sense of identity while being an outsider and producing texts in order to communicate or tap into a larger field of meaning. Some distinguishing elements are the “writer as cultural immigrant” (2000: 5-10); the main theme being that *italianità* is a dialectal cultural praxis of creation as well as recovery (2000: 5). Inside this kernel we can see both the beginning of an Italian American dialectic as well as the initial push towards performative culture.

Gardaphé’s interpretation focuses on the lexical choices that authors have used when engaging with Italy as ur-sign while also articulating the behavior aspects of *italianità* which could be implied to be gesticulation - a form of communication in and of itself - and way of being or how someone “carries” themselves. Moreover, two important “codes” of conduct in Gardaphé’s conception of *italianità* as applied to Italian American literature as ethnic literate are “*omertà*” and “*bella figura*”. As he states regarding the two peninsular/insular Italian markers “these codes were carried to America through oral traditions of southern Italian culture, and so it is important to first consider the folkloric basis of Italian American culture” (1996: 20). These different yet complementary interpretations of *italianità* are the foundation of diapiropic Italian identity. They provide a template for observing and understanding the way in which Italians construct and transmit their subjective reality of the world. Moreover, through

these cultural frames diasporic Italian regain the control that they lose by being in the Italian periphery.

Culture, as a system of frequently occurring customs and activities expressed through language and the manipulation of physical space, can be linked to ethnicity; but that does not imply that ethnicity is always linked to culture. One of the major differences between the lexical markers of “old” and “new” and the “worlds” concept was the fact that people in Europe had to spend millennia, while at other times centuries, developing the specific cultures and cultural attributes in which they would come to be known. This process never truly ends as human beings are in a constant state of evolution. Furthermore, since humans have codified cultural behaviours, it stands to reason that culture is continuously evolving in a symbiotic as well and symbolic state (Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981: 1982).

What we consider to be “Italian” today has existed in the current formulation since the *Risorgimento*. Yet the conceptualization did not really have the unifying effect as the south and insular areas of the nascent Italian state automatically became carrion of the old empires that resided there, picked through and discarded by the Northern powerbrokers. A couple of decades later and the question of what to do with this surplus of people would take care of itself in the form of mass immigration out of Italy – alongside the first push of compulsory schooling to primary school level. In the tenements of eastern coastal cities and the agricultural lands of the central and southern US, regional Italian identity would expand its gaze to encompass other Italians that would normally

not frequent each other back in Italy. Yet in the new world, the common bonds of culture would see past geography and dialect forging a new type of American or diasporic Italian which was and is a conceptually blended, multimodal experience of mutually interpretable signs arriving and leaving memetically.

In conclusion, this social semiotic Italianness is what defines diasporic Italians in the United States and keeps them – albeit loosely – linked to Italy as a centre: a multimodal experience continuously generating new cultural interpretations and variations in the periphery, all the while continuing a larger interconnected discourse around and dialoguing with what Anthony J. Tamburri refers to as the “ur-sign that is /Italy/” (Tamburri, 2018: 199).

1.5 Geographical Dispersion

One of the characteristics of diaspora can be found encoded in the meaning of its definition i.e., a dispersion of people. This dispersion essentially creates multiple coexisting realities through time and space but the manifestations of a certain cohort of people are non-permanent and ephemeral, that is they last for only a short period of time. On the other hand, what they leave behind in the form of texts and material objects has the potential to last longer and sometimes into relative infinity if in the necessary conditions in the form of historical preservation and a continuous influx into and out of a specific locus. Crucial to understanding this phenomenon is the location an individual and/or cohort group is in and its relationship to his/her/their point of origination or departure. Therefore, the concept of centre and periphery (section 2.2.3) functions

throughout this study as a core frame that aids in the observation, description, and interpretation of the diasporic Italian culture and its location around the globe. Contrasting this with subsequent recent Italian immigration and new immigrants' economic agency, we can see an important difference that may de facto constitute a wholly different people – to use the term with maximum elasticity – or at least another subset of Italian people created as an expression of evolution. Moreover, if people do leave Italy, we may not even consider modern peninsular and insular Italian immigrants to be diasporic Italians, because their decisions to leave is a choice today. Their basic needs are taken care of by the Italian state in the form of social services such as universal healthcare and relatively robust and diversified modern economy linked to the larger European Union. All these features were non-existent in the later 19th and early 20th centuries and many of these features, specifically a universal healthcare system, are still unavailable to the average citizen and inhabitant in the US. This is not to say Italy is perfect or considered a utopia — as the past is often thought to be — but choices are a cornerstone of relative stability and freedom in a country.

Simply put, Italy has never been closer or more in reach and accessible to all its dispersed people than it is today, wherever and *whenever* they are. Technology has closed the gap that historically existed between the distances — both figurative and literal — imposed by geography. While there may be a physical gap, this has been all but eliminated due to advances in telecommunication and internet connectivity. And while these distances have now become more recognized and assessed moving deeper into the 21st century

as opposed to the past (Verdicchio, 2016: 101), there still remains much to do in the way of critical inquiry. Of course, the onus is thus placed on the individual to remain connected. But these distances that have traditionally kept migrating Italians apart have been, in a certain sense, shortened or even erased altogether. This is not to say that physical distance does not play a role in contemporary migration, only that distance plays a much lesser role in the relationship to centre and periphery. Yet the different manifestations of culture within liminal spaces will always remain constant, overlapping at times and assuredly “fuzzy”, in flux, oscillating between mass and minor cultures, ready to give and take at will depending on the needs, desires, and agency of those inhabiting it while on their way to hybridisation. Hybridisation, as a dynamic and transformative force, is the process of blending cultural elements from two culture to create a third, hybrid cultural entity. This hybrid then fulfils the cultural norms of the host country while still retaining some elements of the original culture. Diasporic Italian communities in North and South America provide numerous examples of these Italian American hybrids which have usually distinguished themselves with the use of a hyphen (Tamburri, 1991). Although, many ethnic groups use the hyphen which in the past was considered an epithet while now it is not (Churchwell, 2019). Moreover, and interestingly, with Italy today emerging as a net importer of migrants and refugees – a position historically not dissimilar to that of the United States – how will the Italian state and peninsular and insular regions handle and deal with this new state of existence, liminal spaces, and hybridisation? Unfortunately, the history of immigration into the US cannot

provide too many clues as the countries are too dissimilar to have any meaningful comparisons or forecasts. Yet, the geographical expression referred to as Italy is not new to the flows of populations in its position at the centre of the Mediterranean basin. Since humans started putting ships in water, or walking overland, Italy has always been a crossroads of culture, thought, and people. In both a metaphorical and quite literal sense, Italy is a quintessential liminal space in and of itself. Interestingly, in relation to narratives the Italian translation of the English lexemes “history” and “story” are both “*storia*”, which could be considered a brilliant way to look at two contentious concepts of recorded events and the ever-present pull between the historical “facts” and the mythical “stories” that are related through time that often-become facts in and of themselves. Yet history has a powerful effect on society and the collective history of Italian immigration has often been lauded as a success story, none more than in the narratives of Italians and the search for the land of milk and honey, *El Dorado*, *L’America*.

1.6 Mental Schemes

Out of all the points of arrival that Italians have migrated to, they have made a particularly large impact on the United States of America, its culture, and most importantly the collective conscience and imagination of the American people. Coming from a country of origin such as Italy, at the centre of what is sometimes referred to in Latin-based cultures and Romance languages as *Europa Latina*, coupled with its language, culture, and history one can surmise that the people

of the land that birthed kingdoms, republics, and the Roman Empire would have difficulty completely losing their cultural identity and assimilating into a host country. In their new home, Italian immigrants would manipulate their environment. In doing so, they first replicated the home culture which then merged with American culture in the form texts and symbolic material objects to remember their origins. These symbols are themselves signs encoded in memes that travelled with the Italians as cultural baggage. These Italian memes or “viruses” of the mind where in fact contained within mental schema ready to emerge when the conditions where advantageous. If these memes were to spread, there would need to be human vectors able to spread them within the population of the host country. The mechanism happened first amongst Italians from the same villages, speaking similar dialects, then onward from that point, those common vectors, growing in concentric circles encompassing other Italians, perhaps not from the same village, cities, or region but from other regions, still sharing a common Italic understanding. Then subsequently the memes would be spread throughout the rest of the non-Italic population. Ideas, recipes, memories, narratives, proverbs; all of these would have been exchanged and disseminated to the point where the new land would support and foster their growth. A people that counted amongst their ranks, artists, philosophers, writers, as well as artistic and social movements generated from their texts and aesthetic expressions, had more than enough cultural data to draw from in creating and maintain their own identity. Though the argument can be made that this is not a unique occurrence among cultures with a history of immigration during the 19th and 20th, century

one might wonder why the Italian continues to command attention. Perhaps the answer lies in the Italian immigrant experience coinciding with the era of American Prohibition and the rise of Hollywood and its fascination with the gangster as icon (Gardaphé, 2007).

Many of the issues touched upon here can be applied to other immigrant group narratives. However, what is *unique*, and perhaps even an anomaly, is the position that the Italian in America holds in the country's collective consciousness via popular culture in the form of musical entertainment, film, and television. Perhaps this was due to the Italians' resting in-between cultures and living in a liminal state in the US. The Italian was after all viewed with scepticism even if considered "white" on arrival (Guglielmo, 2003). Yet, within the racial hierarchy of the United States, at that time Italians would be seen as less than white Americans. Out of this racial conflict, many acts of violence took place that directly affected a nascent Italian *America* in the American collective conscience including the lynching of 11 Italian citizens in New Orleans on 14 March 1891 (Smith, 2007). This tragic event was preceded by another lesser-known lynching of an Italian citizen, Giovanni Chiesa (John Church) in Church Hill, Ohio (north of Youngstown, Ohio) on 27 July 1873, by Scottish and Welsh miners (Lariccia & Tucciarone, 2019: 80-81). During the tumultuous years of anarchist and anti-government bombings would also see Italians involved in what was considered acts of domestic terrorism. On 16 September 1920, Mario Buda placed a bomb outside the New York Stock Exchange in what would be known as the Wall Street bombing (Gage, 2009) in what was thought to be revenge for the arrests of Nicola

Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti (Frankfurter, 1927; Musmano, 1961; Watson, 2007). It has also been speculated that the bombing was in retaliation for the deportation of noted anarchist Luigi Galleani (Avrich, 1991: 213, 227)). Another event that has also place was the forced interment, but to a lesser degree than Asian-Americans, of Italian nationals by the US government during WWII (DiStasi, 2004).

Returning to the place of Italians in the US racial hierarchy, both types of Italians - Northern as well as Southern, terminology were classified according to tripartite taxonomic model of European "races" (Ripley, 1899; Grant, 1916 in Caiazza, 2016: 31). It would seem that the process of becoming white in the US implied that a dual existence was emerging in Italian households and boarding rooms. Though discredited by mainstream science, racial theories of the past, under the umbrella of eugenics, and their application to immigration in the United States were adopted by many other countries around the globe. This constitutes a memetic drift of negative connotation, the most tragic of which was the German devolvement and application of eugenics:

Germany had certainly developed its own body of eugenic knowledge and library of publications. Yet German readers still closely followed American eugenic accomplishments as the model: biological courts, forced sterilisation, detention for the socially inadequate, debates on euthanasia. As America's elite were describing the socially worthless and the ancestrally unfit as "bacteria," "vermin," "mongrels" and "subhuman", a superior race of Nordics was increasingly seen as the answer to the globe's eugenic problems. US laws, eugenic investigations and ideology

became blueprints for Germany's rising tide of race biologists and race-based hatemongers." (Black, 2003: 2004)

Yet, what is undeniable is that when Italians came to the US in the major migratory push westward of the 19th/20th century, they had to adapt in some way to the new, strange culture based not in values aligned to agrarian societies — or, as in the more industrialised North, to small/medium sized businesses — but to a capitalistic culture many orders of magnitude larger than anything they had known before in peninsular and insular Italy: Mass industry encountered mass migration. In the intro to *Anti-Italianism: Essays on a prejudice* Fred Gardaphé writes:

Many felt that their culture, language, food, songs, music, identity was a small price to pay for entering American mainstream. Or, they thought that...they could keep these good Italian things in private and become “white” in public. (Gardaphé, 2010: 7)

Private and public spaces as linguistic and cultural *loci* became fundamental to the preservation of culture and personal identity under the weight of American cultural hegemony in what amounts to a Faustian bargain in order to benefit from the American way of material comfort while securing a future for their families. Although there is still some disagreement on both sides of the Italian “whiteness” debate — undoubtedly a worthy and important discourse and area of inquiry — we should not get drawn down into the minutia of what would now be classified as identity politics and miss the larger point: building inter-ethnic

and class solidarity within the United States as a countermeasure to the continued onslaught against a multi-ethnic country struggling in the face of insurmountable financial and social pressures.

Simple acts such as speaking one's native language or demonstrating solidarity with an American de facto colony by simply wearing a shirt displays ethnic affiliation can have detrimental consequence on a street level (Riotta, 2018). Referring to the aggressive treatment of non-native English speakers being chastised for not speaking "American" while engaging in normal daily tasks such as grocery shopping or buying food on a lunch break, base level discrimination is a part of the American experience as well (Sampathkumar, 2018). Although discrimination is not unknown outside of the United States, the overarching master narrative of the US is a place for the tired, poor, and hungry "yearning to breathe free" (Lazarus, 1883) even though this is not always the reality (Cavitch, 2008: 97). Yet it is the activities that culture provides that enables a person and their family to 1. rest from a hard day's labour, 2. retain and gain intangible *cultural* capital through the interaction of family including extended family, friends, and acquaintances in the neighbourhood and/community depending on the loci, as well as 3. engage in acts of food consumption. Rest, capital accumulation, and sustenance make up an infinite loop of working-class immigrant, cultural production. For the *Other* arriving as guest in the host world, they would have had to navigate when and where they could be themselves in the new social and cultural spaces of America.

1.7 Loci and the Memplex

When people migrate, they bring with them, whether consciously or subconsciously, commonly held values and belief systems. Therefore, another important facet regarding the transformation of culture in the context of Italian migration to the US was the fact that Italians were Christians but not Protestant Christians¹². American Protestants viewed Roman Catholicism's practices as unorthodox so much so that they were viewed as subjects to be converted which would have caused a certain amount of inter-religious tension. Salvatore Mondello writes:

Protestant proselytism among the Italian Catholics in the United States was based upon the assumption, held by many Americans, that the Catholic Church represented a medieval anachronism impeding progress in the modern world. (1966: 84)

Here we find an example of the religious tension that would go on to exert force on the immigrants, pulling them out of their original cultural orbit and into a new one that would be characterized by assimilation and transformation. (Femminella, 1961). The focus here is not to imply that this only happened to Italians, but that for some reason the event of Italian immigration became the quintessential immigrant story: one that can also be understood as a memetic shift since religion is a defining feature of IA culture regardless of a subject's

¹² For a longitudinal view of the religion of Italian immigrant communities in North America and Argentina see "The Socio-Religious Situation of the Italians in the United States", 2003.

status with the church While it may be impossible to say for certain why, perhaps the answer lies in the influence of mass media coinciding with late stage Southern/Eastern European immigration. This event, coupled with a burgeoning film industry in conjunction with a major population shift from the rural peripheries to the more urbanised centres of the country, may possibly give us a clue, or at least a path towards an explanation.

As is the case with other US ethnics, even if the assimilation process did take hold of these *Italici*¹³, whether consciously or subconsciously, they would still reproduce signs anchoring themselves into some larger group discourse of cultural identity that was more indigenous to their point of origin rather than their new adopted, or in the case of Italian immigrant, “birds of passage”, loci. The culture, and what it meant to be *italiano* was encoded in texts as ephemeral, material expressions of culture thus continuing to influence people in a continuous feedback loop containing language and culture. Contained within these texts, a multimodal semiotic experience unfolds. In conjunction with these signs is their movement through time and space via memes (Dawkins, 1976) that develop into more complex memeplexes i.e., mutually assisting memes that work in unison (Speel, 1995; Blackmore, 1999). We shall see that the meme is useful in helping to define the complexity of diasporic Italians through time and space and

¹³ *Italici* is used here to describe people from the geographical region of the Italic peninsula i.e., present-day Italy who may or may not have been part of different empires, such as the Austro-Hungarian, or had spent time in South America or Africa before moving onto North America. For a more nuanced interpretation of the term *Italici* see Bassetti, 2017.

specific to this study, how Youngstalians interact with said memes in the periphery; a periphery that then becomes a centre on to itself.

These memes and the signs they contain therein are fundamental to keeping diasporic Italian culture alive in diverse loci. For the purposes of this study, this diasporic culture is the Italians of the Mahoning Valley or *Youngstalians*. The subsequent transmutation of the sign-meme synthesis, due to the evolving interpretations influenced by new loci, lie at the core of this study. Herein lies an interesting set of questions:

- Who exactly is *Italian* in the 21st century?
- What are the recognizable signs that create an identity both inside and outside a culture and by extension its texts?
- Where do these texts place in the canon of Italian American literature?

1.8 Research Questions

Considering the points made in the introduction thus far, this study intends to answer the following questions:

RQ1. In what ways is *italianità* used to create authenticity in textual and cultural expression of lesser-known diasporic Italian cohorts in the United States?

RQ2. What are the aesthetic and semiotic attributes that create, maintain, and propagate Italian culture as it relates to Italians in the periphery?

As corollary to RQ1 and RQ2 this study also asks:

RQ3. What is the mechanism whereby diasporic Italians are a variation of peninsular/insular Italians?

1.8.1 Research Hypotheses

Based on preliminary, cursory analysis, the following hypotheses were formulated:

1. Authenticity: Diasporic Italians, in the form of Italian Americans from Youngstown, Ohio (*Youngstalians*) in the Mahoning Valley possess a unique cultural identity. Their identity is in a continuous state of flux, at times seamlessly moving between Italian and American and Italian American culture. The oscillation between Italy and the US as two cultural poles is contingent upon the available signs in the spaces they inhabit and the visual and linguistic texts they access via signs. Out of this interplay, these signs create varying degrees of authenticity based on who is interacting with them, when and where they are doing it.
2. Ephemerality: The hypothesis to ascertain is whether self-published Do-it-yourself literature and visual texts offer authentic examples of living documents capturing the fleeting moments in time of this specific community of diasporic Italians. It is postulated that their artistic endeavours create value(s) while establishing and re-establishing a connection in the present for the past to live on through the authenticity of the artistic output of these communities.
3. Altruism: it can be argued that *Youngstalian* texts are not only unique to the characterisation of diasporic Italian American

identity in the Mahoning Valley but are also virtuous texts that generate intrinsic cultural and social capital as a system of value.

1.9 Research Aims

This project builds on and utilizes a sign-meme or *semio-memetic* epistemology of culture, as it pertains to Italian diasporic peoples. By looking at the specific case study of the Italian as transmigrant (Gibb, 2004; Schiller et al., 1995), as well as the colonies and communities they develop we can find many examples of human ingenuity and evolutionary struggle. Moreover, if this phenomenon at the micro level can illuminate human cultural interaction, at the macro level it can also inform us on human culture in general, thereby providing another tool in the kit of scholars dealing with issues related to the topics and themes contained herein. This study also serves as an attempt to aggregate disparate pieces of Diaspora Studies and Italian/American studies in a cohesive discussion with the ambition of a future unification of the field. It does so while proffering an overarching critical ontological framework for the analysis of complex intercultural phenomena, a semio-memetic interpretation. However, this study in no way lays claims to be the definitive explanation of cultural transmission. This is what can be considered an evolution of a “viewing methodology”, i.e., a critical framework that was originally developed to teach Italian university students (L2, L3 English) about the portrayal of Italian American culture as presented and accessible via both visual and written texts.

This research was undertaken under the premise and with the central belief that a synthesis of Dawkinsonian meme theory coupled with the interpretive ability of Peircean semiotics offers an innovative and novel explanation of how particular signs generated and found in one culture (the “centre”) migrate to other loci outside Italy (the “periphery”) while continuously being de-centred and reinterpreted via unlimited semiosis in both loci (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43). A visual-textual representation would look something like this:

ideas ↔ objects/ideas ∞ objects

Ideas do not come out of thin air because they are pre-existing combinations and recombination of existing information in the form of linguistic and cultural data. For our purposes here Italian culture, or more accurately the culture of Italian diasporic peoples, is in a state of intercultural and intertextual flux (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Irvine, 2012) constantly updating through semiosis (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43). Without the interplay of each, humanity and our interpretations of the world would be adrift in the modern world or as J.M. Culkin¹⁴ declared:

¹⁴ Culkin was an associate of Marshall McLuhan to whom the quote is more often attributed. Yet, since they worked together, the quote is consistent with McLuhan’s thoughts thereby causing the confusing.

We shape our tools and thereafter they shape us. These extensions of our senses begin to interact with our senses. These media become a massage. The new change in the environment creates a new balance among the senses. No sense operates in isolation. The full sensorium seeks fulfillment in almost every sense experience. (Culkin, 1967: 70)

Therefore, these conceptual ideas shape the material objects and spaces which then go on to shape the ideas of diasporic peoples hold in mental schema framing their interpretations of the world. Since it is a continuous process that never really begins or finished it is in an infinite state of flux. Moreover, a meme is multimodal vehicle encoded with cultural symbols and values but cannot be interpreted without some foreknowledge; rather than the two being separate entities, they are integrated and hyper-contextual to the spaces they occupy. By continuing to transmit cultural information through and the shift in the meaning of metaphors to subsequent generations, the texts, material objects, and spaces that are consumed and manipulated constitute multiple realities of Italian and American culture, realities that form the core of the diasporic subject identity.

At the core of diasporic/Italian Americans' "personal identities" (Hall, 2006: 597) is the duality of holding multiple competing perceptions of self while having the majority of the host country providing the semiotic content. Identity, as an integral part of consciousness, is then a social construct anchored in symbolic sign systems based on the semiotic content of the home country where in the periphery a sort of cultural critical mass occurs. Then, for a short time the centre moves into the periphery where then the periphery becomes a new centre.

Chapter 3 provides examples of these occurrences and correlated rituals both support and construct an Italian identity in diaspora. These special identity-reinforcing acts are surrogate events to “[bridge] the gap between “inside” and the “outside” — between the personal and the public worlds” (Hall, 2006: 597-598). Although Hall was referring to the concept of identity in general, this is also applicable to the diasporic subject. This is due to the diasporic subject’s lack of stability and loss of a “stable sense of self” (Hall, 2006: 597). This dislocated and decentred individual — read here as the diasporic Italian — and, by extension, group are required to live on the terms of the host country and under the hegemony of the new culture. This culture provides social and cultural cues that the diasporic subject did not have previously and now must follow. Furthermore, they, in a literal sense, remain outside both their social and cultural worlds by remaining in the periphery that is the host country. These multiple realities coexist to varying degrees yet are nonetheless important to the subjective participants and interpreters of such practices and pastimes. These historical Italian colonies perceive themselves as new and yet established: their spaces, and neighbourhoods in many cases may no longer exist in the aggregative social cohesion of the original space but their relational space remains there, right below the surface of the Italian American collective consciousness. These relational spaces that constitute the thread among people who identify in this double semiotic identity in some cases come back as if waiting to spring up again, as they do for a saint’s day or, in the case of Youngstown, a de facto multi-ethnic summer festival season. These festivals take place with a degree of regularity every year,

but they do not have one coordinating committee. There is an element of cohesion and spontaneity; in fact, it could be argued that the individual events are loosely affiliated through ethnicity — and not commerce or branding — by the very communities that partake in them. From June through August there are not one but three Italian themed festivals that take place in the city proper, not to mention the smaller yet nonetheless relevant festivals in the city’s hinterland, such as down the river a couple of miles in Lowellville, Ohio. Straddling the Mahoning river, Lowellville, not quite a town but more of a village in the hills just outside Youngstown claims to be one the Mahoning Valley’s “Unofficial” Little Italy (Trolino, 2001; Torella, 2005). According to the official 2000 US census¹⁵, Lowellville also possessed one of the highest population densities of people claiming Italian ancestry in the entire United States at 37.4% (US Census Bureau¹⁶). In terms of the spread of culture and the connections between different cities, countries and states that contain the Mahoning Valley, it is well worth reviewing the combined statistical area (CSA) which includes both metropolitan statistical area (MSA), and micropolitan statistical areas (μSA) provided and compiled by the US Office of Management and Budget (OMB)¹⁷. All these medium and small Italic *colonies* make up a loose patchwork of spaces that use

¹⁵ Though there have been two official censuses since 2000, this particular one was chosen to provide context and to show the ethnic situation as it was at the time of writing both Brier Hill USA and Rose Street.

¹⁶ In the 2000 census, 15,638,348 people in the U.S. claimed Italian ancestry ([2000 Census](#), U.S. Census Bureau; *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, Thernstrom; [Ancestry: 2000](#), U.S. Census Bureau, June 2004).

¹⁷ See Appendix fig. 1, 1.2

Italian to denote their location in diaspora. Moreover, most of the early Italian immigrant spaces in Brier Hill, on Youngstown's Northside have been all but destroyed. Most of the land that was once "Italian" Brier Hill continued to be low-income property that as subsequently destroyed to make way for an interstate bypass. A common feature of many American cities, controversial decisions to destroy these low income, majority African Americans spaces culminated in a Post-World War II "Highway Revolts" seeing many large urban areas of numerous American cities bulldozed. All that remains today are a couple streets, an Italian social club, and a Catholic church. Raymond Mohl explains that this was due to state and federal highway engineers having "complete control" over freeway route locations (Altshuker & Luberoff, 2003: 82; Mohl, 2000: 227; 2004: 674; 2008: 193). Often it was these low - income and abandoned areas that suffered the most due to subsequent generations choosing to transfer to exurban and suburban neighbourhoods beyond the city limits. Many of these former "immigrant" urban spaces were often located in and adjacent to industrial and ex-industrial zones in landscapes that are now the defining post-industrial aesthetic of what are known as "Rust Belt" cities and towns. The Rust Belt (previously the steel belt, manufacturing belt, factory belt) is a region of the United States characterized by deindustrialization, economic decline, dwindling tax base, urban decay, massive job and population loss. It spans from Wisconsin to New England and surrounds the Great Lakes region.

Located at the geographical centre of this Rust Belt zone, Youngstown is but one of many tragic examples of the havoc that industrialization and then de-

industrialisation wrought on the Midwest and Great Lakes region leaving behind many “Brownfield sites” in their wake. According to the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), a Brownfield site is “a property, the expansion, redevelopment, or reuse of which may be complicated by the presence or potential presence of a hazardous substance, pollutant, or contaminant. It is estimated that there are more than 450,000 brownfields in the U.S. Cleaning up and reinvesting in these properties increases local tax bases, facilitates job growth, utilizes existing infrastructure, takes development pressures off of undeveloped, open land, and both improves and protects the environment¹⁸.” What this means is that many diasporic Italians have been twice removed and still remain in a state of diaspora: once removed from the home country and then once again from the area of the host country where they first settled. Therefore, much of what is diasporic Italian culture, and what remains of the Italian immigrant memory is semiotic, memetic, richly metaphorical in nature and is often spread through outward displays of *italianità*. Therefore, Italian identity is *advertised* in homogenous and multi-ethnic spaces since Italian ethnicity, at least for Italian Americans as white ethnics, serves less social purpose than it once did since it has passed into the realm of metaphor and symbol or “symbolic ethnicity”. (Gans, 1962, 1979; Alba, 1985 [2014], 1990).

Social spaces themselves can act as mirrors of ethnicity. In the various forms they take, these communal social spaces are often coloured with a healthy

¹⁸ <https://www.epa.gov/brownfields/overview-epas-brownfields-program>

smattering of simulacra. These multimodal and intersemiotic realities generate new interpretations of social values, aesthetics, and identity perceptions including the concept of self as well as consumption practices, namely in the form of, but not limited to, clothing and culinary choices.

1.10 Structure of this Study

Subdivided into seven chapters, this study aims to answer the research questions by looking at the ways in which diasporic Italians create, interpret, maintain, and propagate their cultural identity via *italianità* or Italianness while occupying the diasporic states of in-betweenness (Bhabha, 1994: 2), hybridisation, dislocation and de-centering (Hall, 1996: 597). The reader should bear in mind that for the sake of conciseness, many of the concepts and ideas discussed in this introduction have been abridged due to time and space. As the arguments in this study develop and progress so too will the examples and ideas proposed throughout.

Chapter 2 frames this study in relation to the current dialectic engaging in the relationship between migration, diaspora and even more complex conceptualizations such as those of identity, being out of place, the “other”, and mass exile. This chapter will also describe the process in the creation of new “Italians” and generally accepted descriptions of culture. To round it off, there is a section on ethnogenesis and how it relates to dislocated diasporic peoples and the new states they come to embody.

Chapter 3 underpins the theoretical discussions of this study as it critically reconsiders the works on cultural levels and memes within broader domains. It will ground the discussion on the core concepts of semiotics and sign clusters that will define which aspects of memetics this study relies on for the analysis of literary texts and other artistic forms of expression in the diasporic Italian American area of inquiry centred in the Mahoning Valley of Youngstown, Ohio, USA.

Chapter 4 discusses the methodology used to choose and collect eclectic forms of popular and local expressions of material culture and ephemera in order to depict the realities behind the memes. This chapter also engages with a memetic tool par excellence: graphic design. It discusses book covers as peritexts because they are the first semiotic reading that subjects encounter before entering written and visual texts.

The next two chapters are a bifurcated hemisphere of inquiry and complementary examples of sign systems; each sample will have its own analysis woven throughout the chapters as they progress towards consilience between the visual semiotic and textual modalities. Chapter 5 provides a first sample containing audiovisual texts that are useful for demonstrating that television cookery shows are effective in spreading through memes out into the public mediasphere, which in turn builds on knowledge viewers possess about Italian cuisine and cultural foodways as well as Italy in general. They reduce food and Italy down into entertaining and easily digestible memes that often employ references to filmic and TV Italianness. Chapter 6 provides a second sample that

discusses the ephemeral texts as *data* considered in this study: it looks at the 1. textual, multimodal, visual, and oral manifestations of the Italian American culture as emerging from the community in Youngstown as well as 2. how this multimodality creates both group and individual experience through what Hall describes as the attributes of culture: symbols, meanings, and values (Hall, 2006: 597). In reviewing these texts, what are the corollary and memes of Italian and American culture that go into creating and propagating identity in the diasporic Italian communities and can we analyse, and categorize them within the non-canonical texts? From these texts a connection between dislocated cultures separated by geography, language, history, and time will be become unified in an epistemological framework. Moreover, this chapter discusses the analysis of multiple sample texts associated with the culture of diasporic Italians and orientates them in the “fuzzy” canon of Italian American literature.

Chapter 7 contains the conclusions that will reassemble all the deconstructed parts in order to round out the totality of the dissertation. It will also address future research as well as more practical and theoretical applications for future scholarship both in the academy and in the public sphere.

2 The *State* of Diaspora

The question of whether Italians who left Italy can be considered as “transmigrants” (Schiller et al., 1995: 48) has proven to be a problematic subject of inquiry. The issues stem from the epistemological and ontological nature of the terminology, whereby the connotations of such terms as “transmigrant” reside in a *fuzzy* state due to the chaotic, transient, and ephemeral nature of population movements in forms such as migration, immigration, displacement, and diaspora. In mathematics and specifically in Set Theory, a state of uncertainty where sets have various degrees of membership is considered “fuzzy”. Here we can extend the term and concept to the study of diaspora through the lens of the humanities and social sciences. Moreover, a plethora of sub-definitions with legally distinct, and at times culturally complex nuances abound in the field. Therefore, in this chapter the position of Italian diaspora will be explored within the current interdisciplinary framework of general Diaspora Studies by contextualizing the state of diaspora(e); the multimodality of the diasporic experience; the specificity of the Italian diaspora with Italians shifting from centre into the periphery; and the ethnogenesis of those inhabiting liminal spaces.

In the second half of the 20th century, the “rise in consciousness and assertion of ethnicity” (Davies, 1996: 2) gave rise to an ethnic revival of the 1960s and 1970s (Glazer & Moynihan, 1975; Eisenstadt, 1980: 1,3: 5-7; Rokkan & Urwin,

1983: 118; Smith, 1981). This in turn led to the emergence of ethnic studies in the United States and the formation of cultural studies in the United Kingdom provided new interdisciplinary collaborations, departments, and practices with which to analyse core notions of culture contained therein (Corner, 1991; Hoggart, Sardar & Van Loon, 1994; Storey, 1996; Dworkin, 1997: 116). Previously the domain of anthropology and sociology, Cultural Studies emerged to consider the effects that population movements, cohort dynamics, and their mediatic representations – as a force – exerted around the world. Of particular interest were those subaltern subjects and voices drowned out by the weight of hegemonic discourse. Often left out of the research and scholarship until then, or spaces where culture with a capital “C” was considered *de rigueur*, in Cultural Studies a space, and place was created for this method of cultural inquiry. The long shadows of antiquated racial and ethnic ideology, post-colonialism, and with specific reference to the domain of the USA as opposed to the UK, the US’s unadmitted (soft) cultural hegemony through *de facto* imperialism and unabashed economic power, left little space for those living outside prescribed narrative norms even though most of the world lived in that large undocumented space. What grew out of this incubation period was a greater push to move away from the hierarchical nature of Western colonial hegemony, which also operated inwardly as a dominant unifying and homologating force, and towards a multipolar understanding of what culture does to people individually and collectively as well as the institutions that they create and in turn influence them. Crucial to this dialectic, which was confronting and interrogating hegemony, was

the study of the diasporic peoples and the cultures that they developed “outside the walls” in peripheral position in relation to the geographical point of origin or the regional location from which they originated and from which they had moved.

As Diaspora Studies traditionally developed out of Biblical scholarship, Judaic Studies, and Postcolonial Studies, the disciplinary boundaries excluded focusing on the movements of Italian people into the USA and their processes of cultural distinction. Italo-American culture, in other words, was not a diasporic subject as such, and when it was, the *Italian* diaspora was just one in a long list of other diasporic histories (Cohen, 1995; Gabbaccia, 2000; Cho, 2008: 109; Stierstorfer & Wilson, 2018). Moreover, scant attention, if at all, is given to the Italian diaspora, Rogers Brubake positions the Italian communities in the US as being after the historic diasporas of “Armenian, Chinese, Druze, Gypsy, Greek, German, Indian, Jewish” and part of the “modern diasporas” of African, Hungarian, Iranian, Irish, Italian, Japanese, Kurdish, Maronite Lebanese, Polish, Turkish Diasporas” (2018: 52). Here in this epistemological and historiographical confusion, we can find multiple, sometimes conflicting interpretations leading to parallel subjective histories emerging out of seldom challenged narratives. These narratives pertain to the Italian outside of Italy that run the gamut of benefiting from “whiteness” (Roedinger, 1991) within western power structures yet paradoxically being dismissed as perhaps not quite white *enough* in early Italian immigration discourse (Richard, 1999; Guglielmo & Salerno, 2003).

In an ironic demonstration of transatlantic discrimination, this point is made clear in *The Lost World of Italian American Radicalism* (2003):

The Italian immigrants received the least hospitality and experienced the most insistent and pervasive hostility. It has become increasingly clear that the American officials accepted notions of southern Italian racial inferiority that had long been propagated by anthropologists in Italy itself. Consequently, Italians were not thought of as “white”, and naturalization certificates issued by the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Bureau used “South Italian” as an officially separate racial designation from Italians in general. (Cannistraro & Meyer, 2003: 6)

In fact, Italian immigrants had a more difficult time adapting to the new social and cultural climate they found in the USA. This was partly due to Italians not having a sufficiently large population to attach to themselves to upon arriving (2003: 6). Moreover, linguistically speaking, Italian dialectal varieties further “partitioned” the immigrants on a linguistic level. This, as well as the different variation of Christianity contrasted the experience of the Irish immigrants that moved into positions of authority and influence relevantly quickly by virtue of sharing the same language as the cultural hegemon. Moreover, not a bug but a feature of that systemic discrimination was to be accepted, or at least treated with deference. It was policy and not coincidence. This the case with the English-speaking Irish immigrants arriving in the USA prior to the mass of Central, Eastern, and Southern European immigrants and refugees. This leads to the current epistemological state, or as previously stated “confusion” of the position of Italian Americans in the ethnic hierarchy of the United States: firmly

assimilated and integrated in the American cultural cornucopia yet at the same time still maintaining an ethnic culture albeit often symbolic and esoteric. Diaspora, as an ontological framework offers the best chance for understanding the complexity of the Italian experience outside of Italy proper while semiotics demonstrates the past and continuing connection to, and “dialogue” with, Italy as *ur-sign* through signs of *italianità* (Tamburri, 2018: 199).

In explaining that diaspora is actually a relationship to power, Lily Cho defines it as a “*condition of subjectivity* and not as an object of analysis” (2018: 109). By extending the frame of diaspora to encompass and include many of the voices that have often been *allowed* to speak, whether in text or on celluloid, yet have not been *listened to* by the larger mass culture of the United States, diaspora as a critical framework in Italian cultural studies is appealing as it has the power to transcend diverse theoretical positions and frameworks. Moreover, with regards to Diaspora Studies, it has always been there and is becoming more recognized due to what Cho calls “obscure miracles of connection” (2018: 109). These obscure miracles of connection are the memories and feelings of loss that permeate the diaspora subjective position and are encoded textually in the that maintain an open channel to Italy.

In his critique of post-colonial discourse and how it has permanently changed post-modern discourse, Homi Bhabha focuses less on the colonizer’s top-down cultural hegemony and more on the liminal spaces that exist and form boundaries intersecting diverse conceptual frameworks of class, race, gender and sexuality. Applied to the diasporic Italian paradigm, this “in-betweenness”

(Bhabha, 1994: 2) leaves the Italians in diasporic position in a precarious state of existence as the population fluctuates due to many cohorts of diasporic Italians assimilating over time and recedes into the past. Moreover, Bhabha's notion of "nationness" as both an "intersubjective and collective experience" (ibid) draws attention to the inherently personal and communal act of culture and cultural production while placing importance on the negotiation itself therefore being in, and of, the liminal space. Yet belonging to a culture means identifying with one whereas liminality creates a condition in which the identification with either parts of the negotiated identity renders cultural identity fuzzy and highly contextual.

Correlated to this liminal space of geographical nature, a similar liminal space in the dimension of time is equally important. In fact, ephemerality plays a crucial role regarding cultural transformation as it provides an aesthetic to culture that is not essentialist in nature but transient in its lack of a strictly adhered to permanence as it exists for a relatively short time. Moreover, since ephemeral objects are transient by their very nature, there is always something new that will come along to modify an object in its temporal state. This conjunction between material objects has ephemeral expression of culture and texts proved the diasporic subject cultural date that may be preserved, repeated, and spread with a certain degree of fidelity. Yet, we should be aware that fidelity itself, without a way to interpret it in a context, has no real meaning. It is static or indiscernible background noise.

The diasporic person, as well as the spaces and communities they create (Anderson, 1982; 2006), define and re-define themselves in relation to their history and environment. They are in a constant state of flux. Moreover, the material objects as cultural production which provide meaning often last for only a short time before passing into oblivion where all meaning ceases and ends. This includes the linguistic aspects of language attrition and/or language death (Crystal, 2000). Moreover, minority language(s), under cultural hegemony, tend to suffer due to the hegemonic exerting force in times of paradigm shifts. Often this is caused by, for example in the case of Youngtown, Ohio, USA, WWII and then later on, the economic decline of the Mahoning Valley due to de-industrialization. This is predominately due to being out of place and susceptible to the metaphorical gravitational pull and the overarching (macro) features of the hegemonic culture (Buttigieg, 2005; Simon, 1982; Verdicchio, 2016). This subaltern existence, a term usually not applied to studies of issues regarding the USA - mainly because the concept rebukes some the fundamental myths of American greatness and social mobility - is quite applicable to the early state of diasporic Italians (Althusser, 1968; 2014; Hall, 1986; Spivak, 1988; Verdicchio, 2016). Unfortunately, we may in fact see this state of immigrant precariousness again, but not only for the "outsiders" but large segments of the citizenry itself.

Whether it be linguistic, political, or social, host cultures are continuously exerting force on liminal spaces and, by extension, altering those existing in-between cultures. It is this tension that is one of the defining characteristics of diasporic peoples in host countries. Moreover, what they are producing while in

this state also has the hegemonic host cultures force exerted upon it rendering any permanent material expression of diasporic culture temporary. This temporary dimension makes the preservation of signs difficult to almost impossible. Even the knowledge of how long structures will remain in a specific locus is tenuous due to the self-destructive nature and culture of capitalism in the US; reducing and eliminating the material expressions of culture by destroying signs that were once instructive therefore ending any possibility of creating new cultural memes or rehabilitating old, dormant ones – an *autodistruzione totale* [complete self-destruction] of material objects in various forms.

Yet, when it comes to the identity of diasporic peoples, Stuart Hall succinctly posits that identity is a transient, dreamscape-like, and multimodal experience that many diasporic peoples encounter when confronting issues of self. In his words, “identity is formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways in which we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us” (2006: 578). We can say identify is an ephemeral state that is not fixed and is, as Hall calls it, a “moveable feast” (2006: 598). This ephemerality then produces the effect of leaving a person to negotiate between the inner and outer self as it comes into contact with different external stimuli in a larger semiotic world. Italian signs via memes (sections 3.5, 3.6) that are found in the social semiotic spaces that diasporic Italians inhabit and interact with in the periphery push and pull on this ephemeral and continuously evolving identity. Moreover, memes, and by extension memeplexes are constantly adding and subtracting to a subject’s world through the course of their life. In an increasingly

interconnected and globalised world, signs from the periphery have moved to the centre or at least known about and recognized there. In the “global village” (McLuhan, 1962: 31) we all now inhabit, signs have never been more powerful. Symbols have become reality while reality is now viewed with scepticism. Technology has changed physical spaces between us and how we communicate, while it has also reinforced tropes. Identity, however, can serve as a decoder for the diasporic subject and a way to continue interpreting signs from the centres in the periphery.

2.1 Contextualising Diaspora

In this section, the meaning of diaspora will be discussed along with William Safran’s framework for distinguishing the attributes of diasporic peoples. Deterritorialization, transnational migration, and conceptions of self and its interactions with identity will also be discussed in relation to diasporic subjects.

Although traditional mainstream scholarship and mass media tend to focus on what is referred to as culture with a capital “C”, the past is and continues to be quite fickle, or *mobile* to borrow from the Duke of Mantua’s canzone in Giuseppe Verdi’s operatic masterpiece *Rigoletto*. Another obstacle from inside the academy is the dogma within a quasi-immovable canon of traditional Italian Studies, never acknowledging, giving scant recognition to other manifestations of Italians outside of proscribed peninsular and insular Italian literary traditions. What is becoming apparent is that the future of how Italians view themselves

both in their traditional centre as well as in the form of a diasporic peoples in the periphery – a place that often exerts more influence than the origination point.

Much of the discourse surrounding Italian Americana emerges from a dialectic between the United States and Italy evoking at times the descriptor “diaspora” more as a surface, stylistic choice in an attempt to access its pragmatic content. In doing so, the discourse does not align the history and experience of Italian immigration to (general) Diaspora Studies. Instead, diaspora can and should be used as an analytical framework for: 1. locating Italians in the ontology of diaspora; and 2. understanding the place of Italians in the larger critical discourse on diasporic people. Such a view is thereby transforming the historiography and discourse of Italian critical studies and history from one of a typical immigration narrative to an atypical diaspora, thus encompassing an overlooked dimension of Italian immigration: the diaspora of Italian people leaving Italy due to internal social and economic discrimination already mentioned. Before moving further, it is worth here expanding on what is meant by “diaspora”.

The term diaspora itself has traditionally been used to define the biblical exodus of the Jewish people from Egypt (Safran, 1991: 83-89), whereas the Diaspora with a capital “D” (Cohen, 2018: 17) has been used to denote the plight of the Jewish dispersion around the world. Most dictionaries will list the Jewish plight as either first or second, whether or not found in classic print or digital form. According to the OED diaspora is “the body of Jews living outside the land of Israel; the countries and places inhabited by these, regarded collectively; the

dispersion of the Jewish people beyond the land of Israel. Also, with reference to the early Christians: Christians of Jewish origin living outside the land of Israel, as recipients of the Gospels (see James 1:1, 1 Peter 1:1) (hist.). Frequently with a capitalised “D”. (Oxford English Dictionary) The general conception of a dispersion of a specific population from one point to another — or from a centre to a periphery — is applicable to the Italian American experience and, much like Dawkins’s original intent of meme, i.e., the concept of diaspora is a unit of culture that spreads through replication. These two concepts map well upon each other and form a kernel of the central idea that diasporic culture is an ever-morphing collection of recognizable yet out of place signs continuously in flux and interpreted by members of a specific in-group as being “theirs”. This allows the transmigrant to feel semiotically at home in a deterritorialized space (Gibb, 2014).

Yet diaspora as a concept has semantically shifted in meaning to encompass large and medium scale immigration and refugee events that push people to live in locations that are not their points of origin or what they would have considered their homelands (Shiller et al., 1995; Gibb, 2004). Historiographical revision, updating of knowledge, and inclusivity gradually led to the expansion of the term. Moreover, Robin Cohen points out William Safran’s idea that two further important facets of diaspora are the difficult circumstances people had when they left their place of origin as well as the difficulties encountered in the host countries (Cohen, 2018: 17). Living in a temporal state of not being wanted in either country is another key feature of diaspora. For example, the second entry to the OED states:

In extended use. Any group of people who have spread or become dispersed beyond their traditional homeland or point of origin; the dispersion or spread of a group of people in this way; an instance of this. Also: the countries and places inhabited by such a group, regarded collectively. (OED)

Once again, the OED adds "In early use chiefly in Christian contexts, esp. with reference to the Moravian Church, an evangelical Protestant Church founded in Saxony in the early 18th cent. by emigrants from Moravia, a region of central Europe (see Moravian n.1 2). Since the early 20th cent. *diaspora* has been commonly applied to "dispersions" of nationalities, ethnic groups, etc." Moreover, while the third entry in the OED further states that diaspora is "the state or fact of having been dispersed from one's homeland or point of origin", these standard entries do not take into account critical discourse surrounding diaspora(s). Most scholars would contend that the diasporic subject to be living in a state of "diaspora" requires a group to live outside of their ancestral or national homeland and, through no fault of their own, to remain outside that place. Diaspora is a dispersion but is not an atomizing event. Diaspora is a process that both a group and individuals traverse together, at one specific period or on a continuous basis, then beginning again at another point in time in a new context yet still connected to the initial dispersion. It can be both dynamic and chaotic or gradual and in stages - often a mixture of these attributes. The beginning point can be considered the departure or "exodus". In theory, there is no end point per se. The creation of the State of Israel is one example, but since there is still debate on the validity of such a state from inside Judaism itself, many

US “settled Jewish Diasporans” felt positive and prideful about having a specific homeland even though that was not always the case:

In the early years of the state, what began as harsh rhetoric about *shlilat ha'golah* (negation of the Diaspora) and the impossibility of full Jewish life outside of Israel, moderated and Diaspora Jews learned to love Israel, without feeling guilty about not making *aliya*. (Saxe & Boxer, 2012: 92)

What we can glean from this sentiment is diaspora’s dual nature and the complex feelings people hold when they have created a new world outside what would be perceived centre of their culture i.e., Israel. Moreover, the American Jew and the Israel “sabra” make up two sides of the same semiotic coin in the sense that while both recognised signs of Judaism and being Jewish, due to their geographical locations, the signs have been modified to suit each group’s current, and historic temporality. Lastly, due to the distinct semiotic and linguistic qualities of Italian and Jewish culture have often been considered similar within US culture most notably in entertainment - particularly film and television.

For the purposes of clarity and consistency with scholars in current Diaspora Studies, we shall apply William Safran’s (1991) definition of the shared characteristics of diaspora which are generally accepted as the standard interpretation of the phenomenon in the field:

1. they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original “center” to two or more “peripheral”, or foreign, regions;

2. they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements;
3. they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it;
4. they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return – when conditions are appropriate;
5. they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and
6. they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship. (1991: 83-99)

Although no immigrant experience falls perfectly within the constraints of Safran's framework, most if not all diasporic experiences include many of these attributes, which help to delineate the boundaries of discourse regarding diaspora and its intersection with Italian diaspora studies. Moreover, with regards to identity the diasporic subject lives in a hybridised state (Stierstorfer & Wilson, 2018) and ever modulating liminal spaces that vary to a certain degree from one generation to the next. This last idea, however, is linked to the assimilation process and the ability of subsequent generations to adapt to the new home country. Often, this is not the case due to inherited racial, religious, and class tensions. Sometimes a combination of all three inhibits diasporic subject integration into a host country. For the main purposes of this study, the diasporic

Italians in question fall into four of Safran's taxonomy. In relation to point 1, diasporic Italians and their ancestors were dispersed from Italy (as centre) to multiple loci around the world. They can be found in large numbers in both North and South America as peripheral foreign regions. Countries such as Argentina, Brazil, and Uruguay, Canada, and the United States have many diverse communities throughout their territories all with complex histories linked to the new territories that impart features that go into creating their own phenomenologically distinct *cultural terroir*.

Point 2 sees diasporic Italians "retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland – its physical location, history, and achievements." (1991: 82-99) While the notion of a unified "collective narrative" and dialectic (Tamburri, 2011; Viscusi, 1989; 1990) did prove elusive for much of early Italian American culture, both the expressions of artistic creativity – textual and applied (studio art) – and the scholarship and critical evaluations have given way to formal pedagogy in many institutions of higher learning. This information was documented in a survey created by the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute, Queens College of the City University of New York, CUNY (*Voices in Italian Americana*, 2018). Such view is in line with calls for consilience from within the Italian American academic community in the aftermath of the Yousef Hawkins murder – an African American teenager killed in the predominantly working-class Italian American enclave of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, NYC, USA. The subsequent community outcry not only in Brooklyn but New York City mobilised many Italian American scholars who were horrified that youth of a

once discriminated group would be able to perpetrate such a despicable hate crime. Out of this event, the concept of IA lacking a group narrative emerged (Viscusi, 1999).

Italy was, and continues to be, a strong identifying feature of diasporic Italian culture both inside and outside the academy. One can contend that in the past, as well as today, the aesthetic of Italy, as a memory, has more of an influence on the culture of diasporic Italian Americans than the intellectual contributions of peninsular and insular Italy. This last feature, however, is gaining more and more ground every year with scholars focusing on re-viewing texts in both English and Italian and re-evaluating canonical thinking inside both American and Italian literary and artistic traditions. The events that have shaped the general discourse of Italian American Studies, on the other hand, continue to be a dialectic space between competing views of which “heroes” and tragic events the larger Italian American culture wants to recognize and identify as important formative events that raised and continue to raise the consciousness of Italians in diaspora. Here I am referring to two specific debates: One is the contentious relationship contemporary Italian American culture has with Christopher Columbus, Columbus Day, and the monuments in the US dedicated to him. The second is the recognition of the struggle of working—class Italians that were not benefiting from the American system and were, in fact, being exploited by it. Sacco and Vanzetti as well as the Triangle Shirtwaist factory fire were two examples of hidden or ignored history. In the case of the latter, both events peeled back the artifice of American capitalistic and jurisprudence cultures and allowed

and still allow diasporic Italians to probe the inner dynamics of the culture of which they are a contributing part. The trial and execution of Sacco and Vanzetti (1920-27) and the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire (1911) were and are moral and ethical quandaries that have left a long, dark shadow, the nature of which continues to be analysed, discussed, and memorialized even today (Bencivenni, 2011; Cannistraro & Meyer, 2003; Watson, 2007). Events such as these serve to remind us just how “in” or “out” of a host country diasporic peoples are permitted to be. We can also say that the subaltern can only “speak” (Spivak, 1988) if it can remain alive.

Regarding point 4, while it is true that many diasporic Italians look to Italy as a homeland, or more accurately “motherland”, Italian Americans appear to see the United States as their *true* home and see Italy as more of a spiritual home similar to that of Jewish culture and how the Jews view Israel and their obligation to the state. This could be due the divide between pre-WWII immigrations and post-WWII immigrants still retaining many of the cultural and familial bonds as well as linguistic competency through a standardised dialect anchoring them in the larger “state” of Italy as opposed to an allegiance to specific region, city, or town. Yet, many Italian Americans do feel that a trip to Italy is an obligation. Usually this entails a search for an ancestor’s home which may or may not prove to be disappointing. Of course, more often than not, time will most definitely be spent in the major cities of the peninsula, places that would be lauded by Italian American *prominenti* - Literally “prominent ones”. These were influential Italian and Italian Americans of means and power who were also cultural taste makers

- as proof of Italian cultural superiority and points of ethnic and linguistic pride. These places and encoded spaces would provide the aesthetic content or *capital* for culture with a capital "C". It is through this standard of Italian high culture that Italian American culture would judge itself and attempt to emulate for many years. Yet, when it came to returning home to Italy, sadly the conditions were not always right for many Italians. This is applicable to the smaller, less well-off geographic locations around the states linked to non-skilled and semi-skill labour and far removed from Atlantic ports. On the other hand, all throughout the different periods of Italian migration there have been those "birds of passage" who have made the back-and-forth journeys between both countries developing and maintaining bonds between them, a trend that would become the norm in contemporary times and would form a semiotic filament connecting both cultures through text. As Gardaphé notes:

Those immigrants were guided by the myth that American streets were paved with gold and then bring it back to Italy. These "birds of passage," who did just that, returned to Italy with stories that exaggerated their successes, fueling the desires of peasants who longed for a better life. The stories of those who remained in America, their voyages, their troubles, their failures and successes, became the building materials for early Italian American fiction. (1996: 55)

On one hand, while the immigrant is placed in a constant state of flux, there are larger forces that often do not take into consideration the subjective existence of said immigrant. As a product and attribute of human interaction, culture can be

greatly affected by governmental policy and a changing political climate. These changes have far-reaching consequences both semiotically and linguistically:

Immigrants more acutely felt the need to become fully acculturated English-speaking citizens after the McCarran-Walters Act of 1924 closed the Golden Door through which hundreds of thousands of Italians had been passing each year, placing a real barrier to return migration. This event blocked the circulation of travelers, “birds of passage,” who had moved back and forth freely between communities of labouring poor in Italy and the United States alike. This turn of events would accelerate the acceptance of English as the main language — and, with it, acceptance of U.S. democracy as the dominant political ideology — in Italian America. (Viscusi, 2006: 13)

Here a connection is made between larger synchronic forces exerting influence on the Italians in America linguistically, and by extension artistically, as well as ideologically towards the United States as centre while placing Italy in the periphery. It is at this crucial point where many of the lesser-known diasporic Italian American “colonies” would integrate even further into their adopted lands yet still retain the signs that connect them to Italy.

As previously stated, Italians in the periphery do continue to dialogue with Italy as a centre, yet in the case of Italian Americans these centres are two, operating not on a binary system but a continuum oscillating depending on the signs they encounter in the spaces in which they reside. Ethnicity, in the USA, is a fluid experience modulating based on the physical space and material objects the diasporic subject encounters. It is in these symbolic, coded spaces such as

“ethnic theme parks” (Gabaccia, 1977; Krase, 2007) and restaurants that the homeland is reinvented, reinterpreted, integrated into the host culture and maintained through memory. Places such as churches and social clubs were the predominant manifestations of culture but now the destruction of many of the old neighborhoods and the movement out of city centres for the exurban and suburban areas, i.e., white flight, have rendered these ethnocommunal relationships tenuous at best. More often than not it is the mass media that becomes a connecting force to ethnic identity.

Shifting the focus now from the ontological attributes of diasporic identification and moving towards conceptions and problematisations of personal and communal perception of self, Stuart Hall refers to the “identity of self” as dislocating and de-centering individuals (1998: 597), which, added to Safran’s typology, rounds out the spatio-temporal nature of diaspora. In the discussion on the spatio-temporal frameworks of diaspora, Eleni Sideri explains:

Time and space are the most important ingredients in the formation, but also the evocation of diasporas. The two dimensions shape the horizon upon which diasporas conceive themselves as communities, emerge as alternative national Others and rise in everyday discourses as part of the ways people perceive them past and future. The discussion of the latter involves expectations and memories, desires and losses. (2008: 33)

Although the Italian case for diaspora status, other more classical examples of diaspora are the Exodus of Jews out of Egypt, the dispersion through bondage of

African slaves to the new world colonies in the Americas through “Middle Passage”, the Irish suffering during the “potato famine” and subsequent immigration to North America to name only a few of the more popular western European and African examples. The Italians leaving *en masse* from Southern peninsular and insular Italy after Italian Unification is increasingly considered relevant both historically and synchronically. Although, a lack of interest or non-recognition of Italians as diasporic subjects may be why there has not been a trickle “over” effect between Post-colonial Studies and Italian Studies, a field that arrived late to Italy. Lombardi-Diop and Romeo (2012) explain that Post-Colonial Studies happened late in Italy as most of the formative texts were only translated into Italian in the late 1990s. This is not to say that the English speaking, or at least English reading academics and scholars were not aware of PCS. One answer may lie in the fact that Italy has never been considered a “colonised” country. In the history of the Italian peninsula and insular locus, successive waves of peoples, countries, kingdoms, and condottieri have assaulted and invade, or laid claim to the area since the fall of the bifurcated Late Roman empire so much so that we can quite possibly considered Italy to be the de facto original colony of modern Europe. However, for a short time Italy was actually a colonizing country even though this was a disastrous endeavour if there was ever one for the modern state or “the most ambitious and bloody of Italy’s dreams of glory” (Viscusi, 2006: 12-13) that culminating in the destruction of Italy during and after WWII.

In fact, one could contend that we do not in fact live in post-colonial times, but in a neo-colonial world permeated with signs contending for dominance. Moreover, often it is multinational corporations taking up the mantle and colonising geographical spaces and utilising the pre-existing ex-colonial structures. This perspective comes across very strongly in Chapters 5 and 6, in which the cultural production of Youngstown's Italian community and world-wide phenomena of *cultural appropriation* of Italian rituals and customs are discussed with reference to specific TV broadcasts and artistic productions. These signs are brought to our collective consciousness through cultural vectors called memes. Whereas in the past, colonisers-built simulacra-like infrastructural projects intended to display hegemony and recreate a copy of the colonisers home world were the predominant memes, nowadays the simulacra are more often than not ephemeral and media-based, oscillating back and forth through time in a nexus of texts, verbal expressions, and memory. These activities create a new hierarchy supplanting the pre-existing order over, to extend and amplify the term, indigenous peoples. Simultaneously, these structures and texts operate as metaphorical cultural Wi-Fi systems signalling identity and reminding people of who they are in the absence of their native material cultures. In reality, these attributes operate as clusters of codes in the form of language/linguistic exchanges, architecture, social spaces, and semiotic environments continuously creating meaning through unlimited semiosis (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43).

Inversely, under the weight of a new cultural hegemon, the subjugated populace undergoes a new epistemological paradigm shift through social instruction whether it be through social interaction such as education and public events or else through mass media in the form of radio and television. Although this is problematic in itself, what one considers indigenous or authentic may, in fact, have also been imposed onto a colonising culture at a distant movement in time. These ubiquitous impositions make deciding who is a cultural hegemon difficult since one power supplants another, picking and choosing which signs to incorporate into the “new” culture.

An example from classical antiquity would be the westward expansion from the Peloponnese into contemporary Italy or *Magna Grecia*. With its (Doric) Greek cultural influences as well as numerous other examples in the Mediterranean basin, the ancient Dorian migrants set about building a new hybrid culture. In these new symbiotic clusters, a Fibonacci sequence spirals and offered a potential glimpse into the underlying structure of culture as an evolving, hybrid phenomena.

Nowadays, however, in the age of digital landscapes and social media, data can be harvested as the principle immaterial resource creating an ephemeral world of wealth. In the case of the cultural commodification of Italian signs, culture is presented as authentic in inauthentic spaces. These spaces then pass into Jean Baudrillard’s (1981; 1994) “three orders of simulacra” rendering some of the diasporic spaces a second order experience. Therefore, a sign, or signs may allude to the authenticity of something, but said signs have very low fidelity and

more often than not will not leave the spaces where they make up a defining aesthetic feature. The Venetian hotel and casino in Las Vegas, Nevada is one banal example of a commercial simulacra-like experience full of Italian signs yet devoid of *italianità*. Another more diffused experience in the American capitalist system is the Olive Garden. Again, a social space full of texts that may contain Italians signs of a second order. Moreover, with all their heritage and customs inducing signs, “Little Italies” at time operate on the same field of simulacra. The main opposition between the two is that diasporic enclaves have a certain truth competent to their existence while commodified spaces are wholly synthetic. It is the subtle and less overt insidiousness of commodification of ethnic culture in the periphery as well as its accumulative effect of manipulating and transforming culture synthetically rather than organically that becomes a major factor in the assimilation process.

Through the process of time, chiefly due to geographical and logistical constraints and Taun’s “space and place” as mythical locations and locations of meaning (1977; 2007), people and their cultures were formed due to settling in diverse loci where the land and climate imparted in them a unique *cultural terroir*. Due to this people locked into their geography, cultural devolvement around the world was sporadic, slow paced, and seasonal before the advent of mass communication mobility caused by the industrial revolution. In contrast, due to the nature of the fast-paced and interconnected world, in modern times the transnational migrant, or “transmigrant” has the option to remain closer to the cultural centre of their home country. Many transmigrants can continually

“connect” to their cultural system via a sort of metaphorical Wi-Fi through the actual World Wide Web. In fact, as Schiller et al. points out: Contemporary immigrants cannot be characterized as the “uprooted”. Many are trans-migrants, becoming firmly rooted in their new country but maintaining multiple linkages to their homeland (1995: 48). It is this new state of continuous connection to the centre that is a fundamental epistemological difference between the mass European migration and contemporary Italian immigration to the US, this difference renders the latter not part of a “Italian diaspora” but part of the ongoing migration out of Italy. Yet, it would appear that the Italian is normally not considered a diasporic subject in academia but a lesser failed colonial power (Lombardo-Diop, 2012). While this is certainly true due to fascist Italy’s failed colonial conquests, culturally the Italians did leave a mark on the cultures of North Africa and the Horn of Africa, notably Italian fascist architectural works in these areas to demonstrate their strength and control over the local populace. Linguistically, in the case of Somalia, Italian was a language of colonial forces, therefore not a language of wanted, but of *rejected* identity.

Historically, the master narrative of the Italian immigrant experience in the USA has typical and established features. More often than not, these features have been displayed and recounted through creative works, collected in anthologies (Tamburri, Giordano & Gardaphé, 1991; Tonelli, 2003; and Durante, Viscusi, Tamburri & Perriconi, 2014. Connell & Pugliese, 2017). A sense of longing towards a homeland, pride in struggling against “the odds”, and climbing a social ladder – a, opportunity not readily available or permitted in

Italy. In the case of the Italians from predominantly southern regions, there was also a diaspora due to extreme poverty.

One such notion is the idea that traveling to the US would be a temporary situation and not a permanent condition. Italian immigrants often believed that they would be returning to the home country following a short period of time abroad, usually after earning enough money to improve their social status and living condition of the family in Italy. Most immigrants were looking to gather enough money to buy property and/or establish a business with a new acquired trade while abroad. Unfortunately, many of these “birds of passage” flew so far that what they found in the New World – for the purposes here the United States – was (or appeared to be) much more conducive to social mobility and progress and for the first time allowed these peninsular and insular Italian immigrants a modicum of respect and relative stability in their temporal existence. In a place such as Youngstown in the Mahoning Valley of the North-eastern/Midwestern United States, de facto economic refugees from predominantly Southern Italy were also afforded something that cannot be understated: land. To people coming from a country that was 70% mountainous or hilly, large expanses of tractable land would be liberating. Back in Italy, more often than not land was controlled by either the Catholic church or wealthy – often absentee – property barons. One should also take into consideration that it was cultivatable land. This would prove to be another classic sign of Italian culture in the US: the family vegetable plot or *orto*. To add to familial stability, the average Italian immigrant

family, though poor, was still able to afford to live in a single-family home, often having extended family members lodge there as well.

Prior to the discovery of bitumen coal – colloquially known as Brier Hill block – deposits in and around the Tod homestead and more north of the city in both Coalburg and Churchill, Youngstown and the surrounding biome was fertile (Lariccia & Tucciarone, 2019). In the past and at that time agriculture was a mainstay. Much of this changed with coal and the subsequent development of the first pig iron and then steel production as well as the concurrent growth of ancillary industries downstream of heavy steel production. Due to its economic strength at this point in history, Youngstown was a powerhouse in industrial production, which also made it a beacon for immigrants escaping the trials and tribulations of Europe due to industry needing cheap and plentiful labour. Here, Youngstown has much in common with Robert Orsi's depiction on labour in the Italian Harlem section of Manhattan:

The story of Italian Harlem begins in work – or in the realities of work as these were experienced in the burgeoning period of American capitalism at the end of the nineteenth century. The first Italians arrived in northern Manhattan in the 1870s. They were brought there from Italy and from the Italian colony in lower Manhattan by an Irish American contractor, J. D. Crimmins, as strikebreakers to work on the First Avenue trolley tracks. An Italian workers' shanty town developed along the East River on 106th Street in an area called Jones Woods, once used as a picnic ground... (2010: 14)

As was happening all over the US at that time, labor stratification was taking place with Italian immigrants being on the lower end of the pyramid. Meanwhile, west of Appalachia in the Mahoning Valley, Brier Hill was one of the city's entry points for immigrants going back to the mid 1880's, when it was populated by Welsh miners instead of Irish contractors, working the various coal deposits in the area. In fact, a little distance North of Brier Hill on the Todd¹⁹ homestead were some of the first anthracite coal deposits were found in the valley. The coal was even colloquially named "Brier Hill block" (Lariccia & Tucciarone, 2019) in a nod to the location. The discovery of coal in the valley enabled the area to grow into first iron then steel production. This industry became one of the largest steel-producing areas in the United States until the rapid decline after the Second World War. During its heyday and because of this industry it was important to have a cheap, plentiful labour pool from which to draw on a regular basis. This was the central reason for which many, if not most, of the Italian immigrants made their way to the Mahoning Valley. Many other European and non-European immigrants went to the Mahoning valley but in limiting the scope of this study the focus here is on Italians. Some, but not many local authors have produced both scholarly and lay works on the various ethnic groups. A good starting point is consulting the Mahoning Valley Historical Society's on-line resource at Youngstown State University's Maag Library (http://www.maag.ysu.edu/oralhistory/oral_hist.html). Whereas one may also

¹⁹ David Todd, governor of Ohio from 1862-1864.

find many of these small press publications locally in the Mahoning Valley or through the Web, another good resource is *La Gazzetta Italiana* published out of Cleveland, Ohio which often publishes journalistic articles by Youngstown IA natives.

Attempting to round up their self-description and depiction of identity was and is no small feat if we contrast the East coast cities of New York and, for example, Boston with their closely built, densely packed tenement (see Gans, 1962). A number of poets have drawn from their experiences in tenements (Tamburri, Giordano & Gardaphé, 2000; Tonelli, 2003; and it is also worth mentioning Gabaccia, 1977). These (social) spaces and most often shared places were made famous in the American collective conscious through popular culture by way of Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather films, specifically *The Godfather, Part II* (1974). In many sequences of the film, we can observe a young Vito Corleone, his family, and *malavita* associates inhabiting small, dark, and confined spaces. Here they live or more precisely survive, plan, and progress through an early 20th century narrative created over and over again by American and Italian American popular culture. Due to the influence of The Godfather film franchise on Italian Americans (and the US population in general), many IAs see this text a fundamental to the Americans experience as it is one of the most referenced and quoted text in American popular culture and as such sometimes the only visual

text that makes it west of Appalachia²⁰ to Youngstown and into the Midwestern United States.

Due to the visual and textual narratives, these sequences have also the added effect of perpetuating a sepia toned world akin to the one that the Italian immigrants left behind in Italy. Owing to this sepia-toning in the collective consciousness, created and perpetuated through various media, Italy as a sign remains at times stuck in a pre-modern or early modern state. For example, Americans lacking an understanding of modern Italy may see the country through an aesthetic frame and not through the lens of social science, thus neglecting a more nuanced semiotic reading of the country and its cultural history, past and present. While this may in fact seem inconsequential, there are far-reaching implications both economically, politically, and culturally. These impressions of an idyllic — yet not to be taken seriously — country, one would contend are framed through sepia toned preconceptions of Italy created and generated as a remnant of the great migration to north America, i.e., the Italian immigrant meme. This meme in reality becomes a truth about diasporic Italians and forms the bases for preconceptions about group identity.

These spaces and how the immigrants lived in real terms began to draw specific interest by sociologists looking to better understand a fundamental

²⁰ “West of Appalachia” here refers to the Appalachian mountain chain and adjacent plateaus, one of which is where the Mahoning Valley is found. Mahoning County itself is technically considered to be a county in the Appalachian statistical region (Northern) according to the Appalachian Regional Council: <https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>

aspect of American culture: immigration. Herbert Gans's practical and groundbreaking ethnographical study of the Italians of Boston's North End, *The Urban Villagers* (1962), sought to document and understand the social dynamics at play amongst immigrants in their ethnic enclave, while learning how they viewed themselves and constructed a world within the hegemonic American cultural landscape. Out of this study came the concept of "symbolic ethnicity" (1972), which would go beyond the Italian immigrant paradigm and offer a better understanding of the effects of immigration on a specific cohort that could be applied to ethnic groups and their assimilation or lack thereof in American society. Yet while the Italians of Youngstown are different from those of Boston, symbolic ethnicity is wholly applicable to not only Italians, but every other immigrant ethnic group cut off by distance and technology from their countries of origin. Awash in the simulacra of the American experiment, people develop strategies to stay connected with their home countries. Usually this is done with food, rituals, and any other codified behaviour that draws on their collective memory (meme-ory) or personal experience. In doing so, diasporic Italians began to reformulate their new surroundings in the host country in an effort to survive, if not for themselves at least for their children's sake. Quite presciently, Gans may have inadvertently touched on something that would happen many years later as the US Midwest began the long and steady process of deindustrialization. He states:

If a long-term national economic crisis resulted in widespread downward mobility among third-generation ethnics and a return to working-class

status, some might also return to the ethnic cultures that have survived in working-class communities. (1962: 237)

Here, Gans posited that perhaps during a time of social and economic distress, symbolic ethnicity could turn into a “genuine ethnic revival” (1962: 237). Fifteen years after publishing *The Urban Villagers*, he would be proven right. On 19 September 1977 news was given that Youngstown’s Sheet & Tube would begin closing steel product plants and ancillary facilities:

Youngstown Sheet & Tube announced it was shuttering its Campbell Works, at the time the larger of the now-defunct company’s two mills in Northeast Ohio’s Mahoning Valley, putting some 5,000 people out of work and signalling the end of an era for Youngstown, Ohio. It was a devastating blow to a city that had become synonymous with the steel industry and has since become synonymous with deindustrialization and its accompanying urban decline. At its height, in the mid-20th century, Youngstown’s population was well north of 150,000, with above average wages and one of the highest homeownership rates in the country. Today, the population of Youngstown – now one of the poorest cities in Ohio – has fallen below 65,000. (Guerrieri in *Belt Magazine*, 2017)

This meant that thousands of workers were laid off en masse. A trend that would continue to last for decades. The steel mills did not come back. This is perhaps the most significant event to happen to the city in its history. The human toll would be much higher. What happened in Youngstown fell right in line with what Ganz posited. Out of the economic downturn “unemployment would reach over 20 percent and remain in double digits for more than a decade” with many

people looking to their local parishes for support (Linkon & Russo, 2002: 131). Many of the city's annual festivals became locations to commiserate during hard times. It could also be said that the ethnic paraphernalia and realia (see section 5.3) that would become popular during the next twenty years could have been spurred by the economic downturn. Inversely, of further interest is the fact that Gans also posited the rise in anti-foreigner sentiment amongst working-class ethnics. He goes on to say:

if the economic crisis encouraged a search for scapegoats, parts of the white Protestant majority could revive still-existing (sic) but relatively dormant anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and anti-ethnic beliefs. This could, in turn, encourage some of the scapegoated to move back toward the ethnic group as a defense mechanism. (1962: 237)

Again, one of this study's purposes is to use the diasporic Italian experience as one way to inquire into the multifaceted issues related to the culture of the multi-ethnic United States; a window into the larger structures exerting force on people, place, and material objects.

Returning to master narratives of the American dream mythos such as the "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" passage from The United States Declaration of Independence, we can see how powerful narratives of hope are on people from the outside. The Italian immigrant having the possibility to acquire land would have been a net positive. It should also be noted that at the time Youngstown was not a city close to a major international port. It is located in a valley between the major cities of Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

with access to a great lake such as Cleveland on the shores of Lake Erie and Pittsburgh at the confluence of the Allegheny, Monongahela, and Ohio rivers. Though these are important domestic bodies of water in the USA, they have little to do with international travel with the exception of Canada. It would have taken a person a considerable amount of time, money, and energy to make the trek to New York City from these cities, town, and hamlets, where they would then be able to take a steamer back to Italy. The same connection cannot be said for the previously mentioned bodies of water. Though these enclaves have been erased from many for these places for a myriad of reasons, the memory has remained in creative literary texts and oral histories which could potentially provide a new life for these shared histories. Although, many if not most of these experiences west of the Appalachia have been essential cut-off from any current contemporary Italian migration patterns into the USA. Due to this separation, many of these lesser-known historic Italian enclaves exist only in text or memory and draw off of a circular aesthetic more American than Italian or what the inhabitants believe to be /Italian/. Therefore, the ethnic cultural experience, though “real” in its own right, is mainly nostalgic for older IA communities outside more affluent cities mainly in coastal areas. One interesting aspect of the 2016 US presidential election was that the voting demographics have a correlation to areas that lack any sort of influx of immigrations due to declines or the elimination of heavy industry and manufacturing which intern decimated incomes and tax revenues. Ironically, many of the same areas that in the past

offered opportunities to immigrants, and their descendants, tacitly began to be anti-immigrant both during the run up to and after that election (Moyers, 2019).

Many of the Italians who made it to Youngstown and the surrounding area would end up staying there and because of this, one can posit that this was the reason there were far less “birds of passage” in the Mahoning Valley compared to the east coast cities. BOP is a term used to denote the migratory nature of early Italian immigration into the USA as a back-and-forth process between the two countries. For a good explanation of this phenomena see *The Italian Americans* (2015) documentary, specifically the episode ‘Birds of Passage’. Yet are the features of this “settlement due to poverty” still applicable? Or is the “movement back home” only nostalgic now? In many cases, if we follow Gans’s lead it is in fact nostalgic even if the desire to engage in such symbolic activities genuine and honest. Adding to the nostalgia are the places that Italian Americans frequent often themselves simulacra of social spaces and landscapes. It is worth mentioning that though the sun has set on the historic period of Italian immigration to the US, there is a new movement of Italians to the US with exponentially more agency than their past counterparts. No one is trekking very far anymore to make the trip to Italy as airline travel, and the relatively low cost of intercontinental travel has created a new class of transmigrant. This applies to all variations of Italian in the US. Yet *il sogno Americano* or “the American Dream”, was just that, *un sogno*:

In the US, unlike many other societies, the cultural goal of economic success – the “American Dream” of social mobility, meaningful work, home ownership, material comforts, and easeful retirement – is held up as a legitimate expectation for all members of society, not just for a fraction of them. Doctrinally, this culturally defined goal is achievable through socially approved avenues that are held to be equally available to all. In reality, however, that ideal has never been achieved. While it may have exhibited extraordinary strides, US society still restricts or closes access to these avenues of opportunity for significant portions of the population; at the same time, it places heavy emphasis on the achievement of success. (Garfield, 1987: 186-90)

While there was this implicated idea that you could achieve anything and everything you wanted in the US, the reality, for most, was quite different. Yet, what the Italian immigrants found in Youngstown, was in many ways, much better than the places they left in Italy.

It can be taken for granted that great empires leave lasting marks on their people and the material world. Yet, when faced with economic decline, people tend to fall back on family, religion, and as in the cases of many American ethnic communities, nostalgia doused with a large helping of simulacra (Baudrillard 1994; Krase 2017). Ethnicity, as well as identity through occupation are two such factors (Linkon & Russo 2002). When faced with an uncertain future, or an unhappy present, one might also fall into a “golden age thinking” posture, believing that the best time in life or history has already passed. These activities can prolong the collective memory of a social group and pass it on to subsequent generations. It is here that material objects and memory go through a sepia toned

transformation fixing Italian signs to a specific temporal moment and remaining there. Often this is due to the lack of new P/I data or influence into less economically successful areas of the US such as the Rust Belt where Youngstown is located. Even many years and generations later, the strength of *italianità* can still be observed in Italian American communities albeit often in different hybrid forms (Stierston & Wilson 126; Hall 1990; Bhabha 1994). These manifestations, transformations and mutations of semiotic content continue to be recognizable to the in-group who decode them but after extended time in a periphery they are no longer exclusive to the original sign generators.

2.1.1 Diaspora as semiotic experience

In the manifestations of Italian culture by the Italian American communities, we discuss a notion of diaspora that cuts across different artistic media and languages. Hence, diaspora is a multimodal (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2001) and intersemiotic (Bakhtin, 1981; Jakobson, 1959) cohesive, epistemological system. Diaspora complements a variety of other fields of inquiry spanning the humanities and the social sciences. Due to diaspora's multipolar nature, under the aegis of Diaspora Studies the study of Italian immigration finds its best source of comprehension. Yet when and where does the actual diaspora begin and end? In the real world, or on the page? In this case it may perhaps be both. Diaspora, by its very nature, is a traumatic struggle as well as a contentious state. Through this conflict of cultural "contact points and borders" create new realities (Clifford, 1994: 2-3). Through this struggle, a hybrid culture emerges (Hall, 1990; Young,

1994), creating and establishing discourse, i.e., interaction (Papastergiadis, 2000), between cultures: an intercultural and intersemiotic symphony of meaning. In this interaction, identity is influenced by deeply embedded cultural value systems operating as memes that are continuously decoded and encoded by members and non-members alike, while often located in discourse surrounding popular vs. local culture — the aforementioned centre vs periphery — and communicated via mass and “minor” media. I contend that these intersemiotic features and the attributes that the discourse has, justify a discussion of Italian American texts from the memetic perspective, as argued in section 3.2.6 below and more generally in Chapter 3 as a whole.

Diaspora Studies has been fraught with lacunae and could be said to suffer from not having a “place” of its own. The proverbial Ulysses of the academy, usually studies regarding human diaspora have been strewn across the academic constellation and Italian American Studies often has difficulty finding a “port” of its own. Due to its multipolar nature, one can find courses and scholars formally working on diasporic themes, while in non-academic venues we see a majority of independent scholars working either atomically or associated with cultural institutions (<https://www.italianamericanstudies.net/cpages/programs>). Both positions are valid orientations for inquiry into a sub-field gaining critical mass. In fact, while William Safran (1991) wrote that there had been a dearth in the scholarly discussion of diaspora when considering the dispersion of distinct populations around the globe, this is no longer the case. We can say that the notion of diaspora has been extended to encompass more and more groups that

are living in the periphery, recognized as still being connected to a cultural centre. Yet, in the years since, this would appear to have changed, or at least is changing due to the ethnic studies revival in the 1970s, as well as the emergence of post-colonial studies. As mentioned above, there is a terminological debate. However, while at times the controversial positions did not explicitly state that the focus was attributable to other works referred to as “Diaspora Studies”, scholars of Italian Americana have been stitching together complementary ontologies through interdisciplinary research across the following disciplines: critical/literary studies (Bona, 1989, 2003; Gardaphé, 1996, 2006, 2011; Tamburri, 2003; Viscusi, 1989, 2006), ethnic studies (Boelhower, 1987), semiotics (Gardaphé, 1996; Krase, 2007, 2017; Tamburri, 1991, 2018), history/migration (Connell, 2010, 2018; Fiore, 2017; Iorizzo & Mondello, 1980; Pugliese, 2018; Ruberto & Sciorra, 2018; Mangione & Morreale, 1992; Gabaccia, 1977, 1984, 2000), folklore (Del Giudice, 2009), film/media (Calabretta-Sadjer, 2018; Tamburri, 2011), and subaltern/post-colonial studies (Lombardi-Diop & Romeo, 2012; Verdicchio, 1995; 2016). These positions de facto contributed much needed recognition to the complexity of the discourse focused on general Italian diaspora studies and its location in the history of Italian immigration towards the United States of America. Inquiry into the nature of diaspora from an IA positionality offers critical frameworks creating and maintaining a contemporary discourse on the nature of *italianità* outside of Italy as centre of Italian culture as well as on what it means to be Italian while residing out of Italy in the periphery.

In the search for meaning in hybrid communities of which diaspora communities belong, the above-mentioned liminal space and state of “in-betweenness” (Bhabha, 1994) emerges much more organically. This state encompasses both origination and points of arrival interacting and communicating where people negotiate cultural identities while in the periphery. Diasporic Italians rest in what Homi Bhabha refers to as a “Third Space”, i.e., a place between competing ontological poles and realities continuously in flux (1994).

Through shifting epistemologies regarding the notion of diaspora and the further expansion and present critical mass of the field/subfield, we can say that the “Italians” are returning home, both metaphorically and ontologically. Yet what are the principal attributes (memes) that project culture and can a framework be applied to other Diasporic groups? Paradoxically, Diasporic people often have more in common with other diasporic peoples from different origination points, rather than with people actually from the diasporic person’s point of origin, as the shared experience is a common bond. Perhaps this is due to what Robin Cohen points to as the “difficult circumstances surrounding their departure from their places of origin and as a result their limited acceptance in their places of settlement” (Cohen, 2018). In a rapidly declining (European) multi-ethnic country such as the United States, the immigration myth still provides solidarity between all classes of Americans. One could say that, along with American nationalism, it may be the only history and shared experience Americans recognize as transcending all socio-cultural barriers. This inter-ethnic

solidarity is just one way the immigrant origin narrative manifests itself, but, unfortunately, it appears more symbolic than literal.

When looking back from our current spatial-temporal vantage point in the second decade of the 21st century, it would be difficult to disprove the fact that the Italian peninsular and insular regions have provided fertile ground for a de facto economic exodus which has facilitated the diffusion of not only the Italian people but of their culture and to a lesser extent, language, throughout the globe. Robin Cohen lists Italy as having undergone a “labour diaspora” (Cohen in Stierstorfer & Wilson, 2018: 20). Other cultures that Cohen lists as “labour” include those closer to Italy such as the Turks and North Africans while further afield Cohen cites Japanese and Chinese in this grouping (ibid). However, if one were to consider the Italian diaspora as beginning in 1880s, then its historical dimension glosses over the cultural and ethnic division of the north and south. For example, successive national governments used immigration out of Italy to North and South America as a “pressure valve” (Finkelstein, 1988; Stahl, 2010) alleviating the perceived burden that the country’s South, or *il mezzogiorno*, had on the overall economic structure of the republic. This pressure valve of immigration, as a direct consequence of both historical circumstances and governmental policy, released a dispersion of people and customs the world over, which would go on to create Italian colonial enclaves with strong peninsular and insular traditions that created an ethnic identity. Moreover, this economic reality was exacerbated by post-unification free trade policies in a geographical location that levied tariffs to protect trade in the past. In relation to

the liberalization that was sought by the Italian government headed by Cavour, these early globalist policies would benefit both the wealthy landowners or *latifondi* of the North and South to the detriment to the less fortunate. Here we can see the emergent class-based antagonism that would lead to mass immigration out of Italy and with-it labour radicalism. Interestingly, even though Italy at that time had some of the lowest tariffs in Europe, the country still felt the stress of modernizing its economy:

Such a liberal stance was entirely typical in the context of the period. It could also have been expected in a largely agricultural economy, with net exports of agricultural goods and a powerful landowning class. However, manufacturers in a variety of industries, especially in the South (which had been heavily protected before Unification) lost as a result of this abrupt shift to what almost amounted to free trade, and it was predictable that they would seek to redress matters. (James & O'Rourke, 2011: 7)

Here, in the economic and cultural generator of a modernizing Italy we can see the conditions that would go on to create the selection pressures making Italian mass immigration possible. Also, within this incubator, we can also see the beginning of modern globalism and its relationship to transnational economic migration.

Italianità, or the feeling and way of being *Italian*, in its various manifestations, can be found in many places throughout the Americas. This makes sense, as these two continents absorbed much of the 19th and 20th century socioeconomic turmoil in the nascent, tumultuous Italian republic and provided

the mostly Southern immigrants (though their origins varied as did their destinations in relation to their point of origin) with sufficient work, land, and the social security that come from steady employment, even if this idealistic view of immigration was not always the case. Moreover, on a practical level the two continents' need for massive amounts of semi- and unskilled labour to build both modern infrastructure and industry (including agriculture) was more pragmatic than ideological.

Due to the internal problems of what Metternich referred to as a "geographical expression" (Astarita, 2000: 264) more than a cohesive country and with successive governments often finding it difficult to control the land mass and organize its people and institutions effectively from the Unification up until the rise of Fascism, Italians, predominantly from *il mezzogiorno* and the islands of Sicily and Sardinia were forced to abandon their villages, towns, and cities in order to improve their living conditions. Therefore, during this period Italy was more of a metaphorical entity than a concrete reality. As the industrial age was steaming along, the United States, with its vast terrain dotted with numerous industrialized cities, was in need of labour. This fact coupled with relatively easy passage, provided the opportunity for social improvement thus offering the Italian immigrants low wages and relatively consistent employment. Even though the working conditions were harsh, and the awaking of organized labour movements still some time off, this *Inferno-esque* landscape was a new soot-filled world of industrialisation.

Often through chain migration, Italians would move to specific areas of the United States and settle in areas that had readily available work or else use the train system to move from historic immigration centres into peripheries such as Youngstown, OH. In one example from an interview of a one Amedeo Chiovetti conducted by Frank Mancini and belonging to the Ohio Oral History collection at Youngstown States University's Maag library, Chiovetti recounts:

Mancini: Did somebody come and pick you up?

Chiovetti: Oh, yes. I had two uncles from Youngstown, Ohio, who came to New York to meet me. We spent two days in New York because we had more relatives there. He put us on a train, which took us all night, and he brought us to Youngstown, Ohio. (Chiovetti, 1988: 9-10)

Again, through chain migration family, extended family, and friends in specific regions of Italy would maintain connections in a new land thorough the old bonds of language, culture, and recreate a sort of *campanalismo* i.e., "church bell tower", that is the sense of belonging by identify with a unique geographical locus related using the bell tower as a semiotic anchoring device. Often newly arrived Italians would end up in cities and towns where family members, as in Chiovetti's case, had already settled. Though the concept of chain migration is ancient, or in Chiovetti's case *train-migration*, in modern US immigration it has been a fundamental feature of the ethnic and social development of the geographical country and nation as political entity. Essentially, it is through "primary social relationships with previous migrants" (MacDonald &

MacDonald, 1964: 82) that newer migrants tap into familial networks giving them an advantage in a new land. Moreover, Scott Garfing writing for the Georgetown University School of Law (USA) law review states that “Under the Immigration and Nationality Act (INA), U.S. citizens and LPR’s (Lawful Permanent Residents) may petition U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to sponsor a qualifying relative. If the sponsor can establish the proper familial relationship and has enough assets to support that person, they will be eligible to receive LPR status” “(Georgetown Law Review, 2018).

Another aspect of this transition is the change in the actual relationship Italians would have with their former homes and the expanded nature of “virtual” community when people have been moved from their ancestral lands. The concept of being an Italian and not say *Abruzzese* or *Siciliano* would merge under the umbrella of Italian in the US bringing people together both culturally and linguistically that would have been separated back on the peninsular and islands. In the USA as opposed to Italy, the allegiance shifted to region rather than a specific city, town, or village. Moreover, we can surmise that this new world *campanalismo* would have made the recently arrived weary travelers feel more secure and welcomed in a land dominated by non-Latin-based peoples where the predominate religion was Protestantism and the majority language was English.

In terms of the Italian regional demographic, it should be stated that the majority of Italians that settled in Youngstown area were from the regions of Abruzzo, Molise, Calabria and Campania. This had a visual influence on the

Italians in the area as well as the non-Italian peoples in culinary matters. Even today one can still recognise Italian culinary culture in the form of pizza shops and Italian restaurants that dot the American landscape. While these may not in fact be considered “high culture” they nonetheless amount to culture and with it the inherent capital is created through the ethnic attachment to the signs many of the spaces contain. Consumption choices then take on an ethnic dimension as this may be the only way to reengage in a dialectic with Italy.

Yet, through this diffusion of peninsular and insular people, Italian culture has been able to manifest and propagate throughout the world. Not only succeeding in integrating into other cultures, *italianità* has been able to affect the adopted cultures’ literature and media via mass communication. On a more pragmatic level, culture, a form of human cooperation, is a prime generator of meaning. Furthermore, meaning is created, and “cultural judgment” (Bourdieu, 1979) made at every level of culture and is not relegated to only the “high”, elite circles or wealth (1979). Low or mass culture has the tendency to get less attention but overall has a larger impact on a society since it has the ability to reach larger numbers of social agents who are themselves memetic vectors:

Aesthetic standards of low culture stress substance, form and being totally subservient; there is no explicit concern with abstract ideas or even with fictional forms of contemporary social problems and issues. [...] Low culture emphasizes morality but limits itself to familial and individual problems and [the] values, which apply to such problems. Low culture is content to depict traditional working-class values winning out over the

temptation to give into conflicting impulses and behavior patterns. (Gans, 1999: 115)

The overarching superstructure of meaning is created through texts and the sign systems working in unison as memeplexes. A memeplex is “a set of mutually-assisting memes which have co-evolved a symbiotic relationship. Religious and political dogmas, social movements, artistic styles, traditions and customs, chain letters, paradigms, languages, etc. are memeplexes” (Kazlev, 2001). Similar terms include meme complex, and scheme. (Dawkins, 2006: 197-9; Blackmore, 1999: 19-20; Tyler, 2011: 274). This mechanism encodes Italian culture and is how it is transmitted to new loci. Moreover, it is in the interpretation and reinterpretation of texts, and the signs found within said texts, that IAs actively and passively construct their identities in Diasporic Italian culture regardless of high or low cultural aesthetics (Gans, 1999: 7).

Taking into consideration the global phenomenon of modern immigration, Italians have had a particularly large impact on the United States and specifically the Eastern seaboard, pockets of the Midwest and Great Lakes region (i.e., The Rust Belt) and to a lesser extent the South and South West. Yet, this is not always the case and by no means meant to downplay the influence Sicilian immigrants had on New Orleans and other Southern enclaves. The larger collective conscience of the Italian American experience is rooted in the industrial cities of the New York/New Jersey region, but there are still an unknown and potentially unlimited number of stories to discover in some of these lesser-known IA communities. Sometimes, these larger centres of culture act as influential *poli*,

in the United States to create a sort of metaphorical rain shadow leaving many of these undiscovered countries dry. Coming from a country of origin such as Italy, with its language, culture and history, it is easy to believe that the people of the land that incubated the precursor to and created the structure of the modern civil society, the Roman empire, and crucible of artistic cultural birthing what could arguably be the most important cultural movement in modern history, the Italian Renaissance, would not have a difficult time contributing to a host country. And that many years and generations later the strength of *italianità* still can be observed – albeit in different and sometimes drastically transmuted forms – but nonetheless recognizable to those members of the in-group or who identify themselves whether officially or symbolically as “Italian” and want to be considered part of the in group sometimes going to great pains to appear “more Italian than the Pope” and conform more to a group’s desires and less to the individual’s (Bently et al., 2011).

It would be simplistic to not consider the rather heavy symbolic and historical baggage brought from the “Old World” into the new one. The inability to speak the Italian language by IAs continues to be problematic for accessing source material in Italian language and to even just communicate with people when traveling to Italy. This is also a source of considerable shame among many younger generations of IAs. Perhaps one reason for the lack of IAs Italian language abilities lies in both the perceived uselessness of speaking Italian and a desire to fit in and assimilate in the US mass culture coupled with the inheritance of WWII and the status of many Italian residents being labelled as potential

enemies. Many IAs at that time felt that *il Duce* had put Italy on the “right track” and were enthusiastic about his ability to lead. This enthusiasm went all the way to some members of the United States Federal government showing public support while the publication *Time* magazine had Mussolini on its cover multiple times. Yet, when it was clear that the U.S. would be fighting against the Italians in the war, many IAs immediately joined the U.S military in protest of Italy’s decision. During this time, Italians were encouraged to not “Speak the Enemy’s Language”, which could be argued forever changed the linguistic future and culture of IAs, the effects of linguistic hegemony coming front and centre in the inter- and post-war years:

Posters...declaring “Don’t Speak The (sic) Enemy’s Language! Speak American!” appeared. The implication of the graphic: to speak Italian was not simply to be identified with Mussolini but more importantly with the very essence of evil – Hitler. Again, Italian Americans showed their loyalty to America and willingness to comply. All across the country immigrants stopped using Italian in public. But, (sic) the final act of loyalty to America and the death of Italian language in America came from the children of the immigrants. Coming back from the war and out of the war factories they began raising their own families – the so called “Post War Baby Boom.” Although they were fluent speakers of Italian, they refused to teach it to their children. By the 1960s the Italian language in America was dead. It was not spoken in the homes or taught in the schools. (Verso, 2007)

This was an act of both linguistic and cultural suppression that is still noticed today. Aside from the de facto language policies of the United States government targeting non-native speakers of English or speakers of English as an Additional

Language (EALs), foreign-born Americans of German, Italian, and Japanese ethnic groups were also placed in internment camps during WWII (DiStasi, 2001). This Other has also had a detrimental effect, yet one that has remained a sort of American “dirty little secret” about the Greatest Generation and their policies towards their fellow and future citizens. Here, we can also learn a valuable lesson of acceptance in the United States of America.

2.1.2 Italian American Critical Frame

At the time of writing, IA Studies is going through a very dynamic phase. The reason for this dynamism is due to the successive generations of IA scholars building on the works of the recent and remote past. Gardaphé’s incorporation and combination of the recent and remote past in *Italian Signs, America Streets* (1996) laying out what exactly was happening with IA literary culture in the United States. By developing his own framework for the reading of IA texts, Gardaphé drew inspiration from the works of two Italian thinkers, one peninsular and one insular: *il Napolitano* Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and *il Sardo* Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937). This framework, and approach was an important development in IA Studies, because it enables Italian American writers and artists to unmoor themselves from the prevailing hegemony, a Gramscian concept, of White Anglo-Saxony Protestant, i.e., English canonical dominance that relegated IA literature to outsider status and situate themselves within the larger discourse on Italian culture from both a diaspora and global position. Yet not all IA literature was relegated to outsider status even if inside the academy it

was. Mario Puzo's works were well-known but, as so often happens when a film amplifies a source text, they had the stigma of coming to a larger audience after the *Godfather* films, therefore relegating them to textual expression of popular culture and not the coveted place of a critical literary expression. Though their works more often fall into the domain of popular culture, one could make the claim that, in modern times, no other textual expression has been as successful as the collaboration between Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola. Their work successful created a new paradigm for Italian and American culture, anchoring both in a new space of mediatic influence still creating ripples in the metaphorical fabric of time and space via diverse forms of media. Therefore, it is my contention that diasporic Italians of North America, specifically the circa 25,000 predominantly from *il mezzogiorno*, Italy's Southern regions, who in one way or another made Youngstown their home, are connected to Italian culture and constitute a distinct manifestation of the Italian diaspora that has propagated and been preserved through their texts. As already discussed in the introduction, while it is difficult to state exactly how many Italian immigrants went to and stayed in the Youngstown regional area, Trolino (2001) states that the figure at one time in the 1950s was around 25,000, although he does not provide support for his claim. Furthermore, the memes and signs decoded from these texts still resonate with *Youngstalians* today and keep them connected, albeit loosely, to modern Italy. For the purposes of this study, Italians who left Italy will continue to be considered /Italian/ in one way or another and do not constitute the first generation. They are in a sense, to borrow and extend a term from Language Acquisition (LA) and

apply it to the realm of cultural and migration studies, “false beginners” on their path towards L2, L3, and in some cases L4 language competency and cultural hybridity. In LA, a “false beginner” is a pupil or person who starts studying a language again but from the beginning, hence the “false” start of the term. They will also have knowledge of the language from previous study, but the production of the language will prove difficult or impossible at the outset. Students such as these will move through the initial phases more quickly than actual beginners. In the spirit of universality, it should be stated that this notion of a subject being a false beginner at their ingress into a host country could also apply to many non-Italian immigrants, migrants, and refugees. Furthermore, especially today – as alluded to previously – the mass media will allow Italians to always remain close to the centre, albeit, as in the case of intercontinental subjects, often in a virtual capacity, while those Italians that live within Europe will always be, at most, two to four hours away from Italy. Modern internet infrastructure, smartphone applications such as WhatsApp and Apple’s Facetime have all but flattened and made instantaneous communication possible, allowing people today to remain much more fixed in their linguistic and cultural identities than in the past or “Just a phone call away”. Additionally, with the modern mass media system, many contemporary migrants already have an a priori understanding of the nations they choose or find themselves having to live in. Here another problem is evident: the misunderstanding of language and culture due to the manipulative forms of media and audiovisual translation. The 1991 Albanian refugee situation in Southern Italy is a good example of people

having a mediatic understanding of a country due to close geographical proximity and access to the airwaves but perhaps lacking sufficient linguistic and cultural skills to deal with their new temporal state²¹.

2.2 Static signs and moving memes: hermeneutical implications

Memetic code clusters (section 4.2) provide an ontological framework applied to *Youngstalian* texts. It is this framework that provides understanding of the sign systems and memeplexes that go into creating, reinforcing, and propagating Italian American identity in the diasporic Italians of Youngstown. Texts play a crucial role in this process as they encode in readers what the parameters of being */Italian/* are to *Youngstalians* (Gardaphé, 1996; Hall, 1990).

At the macro level, of particular interest is the transformation of Italian peninsular/insular culture, what we shall refer to as transformative culture, and how it has influenced cultures outside of Italy, specifically the US. One particularly interesting facet in this inquiry is the ability of diasporic Italians to concurrently hold two opposing viewpoints of their identity, both Italian and American depending on where they are at and who they interact with in a certain space – examples of which can be found in section 3.2.2. While functioning quite efficiently in the US, dissonance can potentially arise when the diasporic Italian encounters a peninsular/insular Italian either in the US or in Italy proper.

²¹ For a review of this event see Campani, 1992 and for issues related to Albania being closed off for forty years and the “explosion of claustrophobia” that came after exodus (Colafato, 1992).

At the micro level, the aforementioned texts amount to an omnibus of lingua-cultural information that the members of this group use to exercise, preserve, and propagate their ethnic identity in the United States and in doing so affect Italian American and non-Italian peoples alike. As a testament to their versatility, these texts also function as ethnographies by recounting first person information about the authors and the community's past and preserving geographical-historical specific data. Through the analysis of texts and expressions of communication (memes, signs, food, rituals), I believe we can better understand the state of Italian Diasporic culture as well as the success of *italianità* outside of peninsular and insular Italy. Some of the more noticeable examples of IA memes that are generated and flow throughout American culture often appear in such diverse texts as film, television, radio and advertisements, which are perceived as positive, negative, and neutral.

It should be stated that for the purposes of this study, the focus is on the Italian Americans of Youngstown i.e., *Youngstalians*. However, future applications and interests may lie in other English, Spanish, or Portuguese speaking diasporic Italian groups in North and South America where there are sizable cohorts of subjects with Italian ancestry. Furthermore, countries closer to Italy as centre rather than the USA - where Italy becomes a cultural periphery in contrast to American cultural hegemony - may also be of interest. Yet, as already mentioned, due to the relative ease of travel cohorts closer to Italy will undoubtedly remain closer to Italy, both linguistically and culturally.

2.2.1 *Novum populum*

Historically, IA culture has been written about in different ways. It is through the combination of historical and mythical narratives that new forms of culture emerge. What follows is a brief synthesis of some core concepts of which scholars have written in the context of the DI/IA experience, as they represent the substratum against which any discourse of Italian American and diasporic Italian identity needs to be measured. These positions, introduced in the next section, acknowledge “controversies” and the continued re-organization of the field. Furthermore, the difficulty of definition, self-definition, and recognition of identity that these communities face regularly is a constant theme. Against the backdrop of controversies, this dissertation will show the recognizable, permeating, and all-encompassing dimension of identity that is conveyed in the artistic works of Italian American self-published and known writers, as this dimension, combined with that of popular and almost stereotypical manifestations, make up the composite multiplex of memes that defines the Italian American culture in the Youngstown area.

As stated before, the Italian in America can be considered the quintessential 19th century immigrant story:

After 1900, Italians became emblems of the new immigration. First, because of their number: between 1881-1890 they accounted for 5 percent of the arrivals in the U.S., up to 26 percent in 1911 and in 1915. At the beginning there was a substantial balance of immigrants coming from the North, Center, and South of Italy, while in the years of maximum

intensity, four out of every five left from the five southern regions that once formed the Bourbon Kingdom: Calabria, Campania, Abruzzo, Molise, and Sicily. Regions with a lower migration rate at the time, such as Lazio, Puglia, Basilicata, and Umbria, also showed a clear preference for U.S. destinations. (Osborne & Battaglia, 2013: 75)

While it is fair to say that immigration has affected the whole world, the notion of the romantic frame that is created around the Italian immigrant is a story embedded with the master “rags to riches” or “carboard suitcase” narrative. Osborne & Battaglia (2013) posit mass Italian immigration coinciding with the rise of photography as one possible reason for the Italian becoming the iconic image it was and continues to be in the US collective consciousness as well as in other countries where there was and continues to be a sizable Italian population²² (75). Yet tragically, contained in this kernel we find a position of fatalistic resignation in the sense that the loss of homeland was a moral failure compounded with life in the host country fraught with ethical dilemmas. Moreover, the process of assimilation in the “melting pot” society was continuously exerting pressure by tearing down and stripping immigrants of their language and culture in order to build a new idealized citizen: the American. Furthermore, much of the reason that IAs do not possess Italian language skills today can be traced back to this position of US domestic cultural hegemony coupled with the WWII “Don’t Speak the Enemy’s Language”

²² For more on the shifting nature of the representations of Italians that help to illuminate the connection between political history and narratives see Bonsaver, Bond & Faloppa (2015).

campaigns during the 1940s (Carnevale, 2003; Verso, 2007). This lack of Italian further cuts-off Americans of Italian descent from Italy as centre pulling them to the new centre – itself a former periphery – in the spaces they reside.

2.2.2 Nostalgia and Golden Age Thinking

One of the commonplace feelings associated with the self-definition of non-main language communities that have been long attempting social inclusion as well as social recognition as different, but not dangerous, is that of nostalgia. Nostalgia is embedded in many if not most of the group social function that diasporic Italians participate in. In a multi-ethnic culture, however, it is not only one ethnic group that is present, but within each specific ethnicity's social function there is a hierarchy that is present. The outwardly production of signs that ethnic subjects demonstrate builds ingroup solidarity and reconnects to a cultural centre while in the periphery. Those on the outside are participants but experience it differently, almost as if watching it on television; all are involved in a performative act, but it is only those that understand the codes of Italian culture that gain meaning. Another good example would be gaming, since the activity is interactive, but each player would read the signs of the game differently. Yet, most of these cultural productions exist in the present but are firmly rooted in the past with no real sense of a future even though the case can be made that these small-town events are keep many historic ethnic communities alive. Still, one can surmise that at each and every one of these festive occasions there is a sense that this year may be the last. However, nostalgia does pose its own

problems. Psychologist George Rosen has characterised the state as a “forgotten” psychological disorder:

Nostalgia, a psychopathological condition affecting individuals who are uprooted, whose social contacts are fragmented, who are isolated and who feel totally frustrated and alienated, was first described in the 17th century and was a problem of considerable interest to physicians in the 18th and 19th centuries. By the 20th century it seemed to have disappeared, [sic] but reappeared under other labels. (2009: 340)

The search for social inclusion via assimilation, language acquisition, and acceptance of host country cultural norms comes at the price of leaving behind all of those features and cultural customs of the culture of ‘the other’ that came with the community. Nostalgia often plays just as much of a role, and often a more significant one for a diasporic subject than any actual history of the origins of said diasporic people. This may in fact be a reaction to being the “Other” not only in the host country but after a certain amount of time in diasporic, in the country of origin as well. One of nostalgia’s common manifestations is termed “Golden Age thinking” or syndrome, which is defined as “an idyllic, often imaginary past time of peace, prosperity, and happiness” (OED, 1995: 2108). Golden Age thinking is the position or — keeping within the lexicon of the “epistemological crisis” (Huff, 2016) we are experiencing in our times — *feeling* that the past was better and contemporary times, including the future, are in a continuous state of decline.

Plato indicated that the term should be interpreted as metaphorical and not literal as it pertained to a “Golden race” (Boys-Stones, 2010). References to the ages being described as “metallic” date back to antiquity with many of them using the term Golden Age. Hesiod entered the term into usage in *Works and Days* describing the period when men were created directly by the gods and lived-in harmony with the world they inhabited. Virgil, on the other hand, used the concept to describe a time for the end and beginning of a new cycle as well as the entry of a new iteration of *celestial* homo sapiens:

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculorum nascitur ordo:
iam redit et Virgo, redeunt Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies caelo demittitur alto.

Now the last age by Cumae's Sibyl sung
Has come and gone, and the majestic roll
Of circling centuries begins anew:
Astraea returns,
Returns old Saturn's reign,
With a new breed of men sent down from heaven. (Melville, ix)

Again, we have the use of “return” to signify change, a sentiment in line with Hesiod’s intended meaning. Another example can be found in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*:

The Golden Age was first; when Man, yet new,
No rule but uncorrupted Reason knew:

And, with a native bent, did good pursue.
Unforc'd by punishment, un-aw'd by fear.
His words were simple, and his soul sincere;
Needless was written law, where none opprest:
The law of Man was written in his breast.

Loss and the call for a return to an idyllic past are common threads throughout the text, and one that permeates notions of diaspora (section 2.1). While all three of these poet-authors mainly draw attention to the metallic quality of gold, it is clear that the term, as Plato recounts, was intended to be used as a metaphor. This transcendent metaphor is also a succinct description of positions held simultaneously by Italians entering into the US and Americans already there.

When we consider that the Other as scapegoat has historically been used as a sign to connote negative change, bad faith actors have used immigrants for political gain and the creation of social cohesion in host countries and not the Golden Age that Greek and Roman poets evoked. Whereas host countries imply negativity, in our example here the dislocated Italians look at the diasporic state both optimistically and negatively. A further example of Golden Age thinking from contemporary American popular culture was provided by Woody Allen in *Midnight in Paris* (2011):

Nostalgia is denial. Denial of the painful present. The name for this denial is Golden Age thinking - the erroneous notion that a different time period is better than the one one's living in - it's a flaw in the romantic imagination of those people who find it difficult to cope with the present.

In fact, demonstrating that this is neither a past nor contemporary occurrence, it would appear that much of the thinking that permeates the United States at the present moment is framed in the country being better off in the past – the exact manifestation of Golden Age thinking. Ironically, the adherents of the “Make America Great Again” or MAGA cultural position take many of their cue from former Trump advisor Steven K. Bannon who in turn based some of his reasoning on the works of Julius Evola (1898-1974), a lesser-known influence on Benito Mussolini (Heer, 2017). The urge to fall back on or into Golden Age thinking is perhaps due to many Americans finding the present too “difficult to cope” with and seeking comfort in both the MAGA rhetoric and the scapegoating of immigrants and refugees today as it was in the past when Italian were also considered “unassimilable” (Massey & Pren, 2012: 1); a position not uncommon in much of the world and especially virulent in the European Union (Rustenbach, 2010; Kentmen-Cin & Erisen, 2017). On the one hand, Italian immigrants left in pursuit of the mythical “American Dream” and all that that narrative implied, i.e., that work, accumulation of material wealth, and the American concept of “freedom” in the pursuit of happiness would fill all of the void that a person was in need or in search of in their lives. On the other, it was a loss of their language and culture, i.e., identity. In this new linguistic and semiotic environment, concrete signs of material culture, such as architecture and all other forms of meaning-creating structures no longer applied. In this void, they would bring signs with them memetically and reproduce them in a new semiotic environment; these last two processes being done subconsciously. Applied to

diasporic Italians' past, these GAT narratives may or may not have actually occurred and are often politically based narratives utilised for specific ends. Another more benign and positive interpretation describes and recounts the transitioning from Italian to American. Then again, the process of assimilation is often seen as a negative, eventual process that inevitably happens to dislocated subjects out of their historic centres while in the periphery.

What follows is a description of some of the most important themes in Italian American/Diasporic Italian Studies. Whereas these narratives are both coagulant within the in-group communities and risk becoming obstacles to better social interactions, in the broader context the rigorous academic inquiries have always aimed at legitimizing the Italian American experience for its uniqueness. There is in these studies a search for the recognizable, identifiable, and at times quantifiable and measurable traits of culture that allow such legitimizing process to happen. Moreover, IA Studies offer insights into, but not limited to, working-class narratives based on workers' lives and shared experience whether as artisans and skilled or unskilled labourer. Some examples of where working-class narratives come from are the following: the steel mill workers of the Mahoning Valley and other Rust Belt cities/towns; the masonry workers in the Tri-State area of New Jersey, New York, and Connecticut; the agricultural works of the South; the vinicultural workers in California and the West. It should go without saying that this also includes domestic workers such mothers and daughters. This last topic being an underrepresented thread that runs through the patchwork of Italian American "colonies" all over the United States.

The poetic aesthetics of diasporic Italian dislocation and seizing the experiences of the “New World” while reformulating them into the peninsular and insular poetic traditions created a new poetic tradition all its own. In the past, Italians did not yet focus on being Italian American per se or even recognizing it as a distinct variation of American culture. This is mainly due to diasporic Italians being stripped of a sort of identity as a “Latin” people, both from outside and inside the subgroup. It should be noted that the term “Latin” or “Latino” is never ascribed to diasporic Italian Americans even though the Italian peninsula is technically the “Latin” peninsular while Spain is the “Iberian” peninsular. Moreover, in the future more scholarship will eventually be focused on aspects such as the early discrimination of Italians and lynchings that took place in the US (DeLucia, 2003; Gambino, 2000; Nelli, 1976; Russell, 2010; Smith, 2007), the discrimination of Italians faced during WWII and their internment (Brooke, 1997; DiStasi, 2001), and the struggles that Italian Americans have faced in the academy. In fact, it took an official US governmental Act (Wartime Violation of Italian American Civil Liberties Act) to recognise Italian internment and:

to provide for the preparation of a Government report detailing injustices suffered by Italian Americans during World War II, and a formal acknowledgment of such injustices by the President. (H.R. 2442 - 07.11.2000)

One of the more well-known cases took place at the City University of New York (CUNY), a precedent that led to the founding of the John D. Calandra Institute of Italian American Studies. (*We The Italians*, 2015). Many of these points

have often been overlooked or downplayed in the past, perhaps due to Italian Americans being classified as white Caucasians or “white ethnic” (Anagnostou, 2009) and benefiting from institutional hegemony. We can also say that the high profile and status in film and on television that Italian Americans enjoy could in fact be a doubled-edged weapon, creating a false sense of acceptance in the mediasphere. Often, the opposite is true when considering the percentage of Italian Americans, either controlling or operating in power structures, notably in government and academic administration, and the arrival of new Italians into the United States with drastically different socio-cultural profiles (Egmont, 2014). This last point inevitably leads back to the above recognition that diasporic Italians reside in a liminal space. Moreover, it could be argued that what has in fact held back Italian Americans is a lack of social and class solidarity with other Latin-based identities and cultures, such as Latino and Hispanic Americans²³

Concerning “classical texts” in Italian American stage productions and how they are interpreted in their “afterlife” Jonathan Cavallero states:

there is a great deal of diversity within the Italian-American community historically, and as scholars who concern ourselves with Italian-American ethnicity, we need to strive to speak about Italian-American experiences rather than the Italian-American experience. Otherwise, we may perpetuate a very narrow definition of Italian American. (2015: 27-28)

²³ Surprising if we consider these groups’ linguistic histories/origins (Romance languages), religious orientation (catholic), and food cultures (seasonal agrarian).

Cavallero expresses a problem that often occurs when cultural history is flattened for the sake of homogeneity: this leads to the belief that there exists one essential, archetypal form of a people and that by following the established master narrative of it one can understand the phenomena. This problem then eventually leads to forms of Essentialism, which this study attempts to run counter of by showing that while there may exist distinguishing characteristics and attributes that classify a people taxonomically, they in no way dictate reality as a social construct and should only be used to offer further insights. In showing the variations of the diasporic Italian experience in the US by focusing on one subset, we shall steer clear of perpetuating, as Cavallero states, a “narrow definition of Italian American”. By expanding and delineating new metaphysical boundaries on the discussion surrounding Italians around world, we shall expand the current understanding of lesser-known Italian diasporic communities.

2.3 The Question of Culture

The ubiquity of the term “culture” has had a long and contentious past, beginning with its early modern usage defined by Norbert Elias as “Kultur” in *The Civilizing Process* (1939; 2000). Cultural theorist and philosopher Kwame Appiah recounts that Elias’s culture was the “possession of a *Volk*”, desiring and perhaps requiring authenticity (2005: 119). While the case can surely be debated, of all the arguments that have had the most staying power the search for cultural authenticity is one that our current time desires and, as often is the case with the commodification of ethnic culture within the capitalist system of the United

States, requires. Whether it is through ethnic clothing or cuisine, the notion of authenticity and by extension, authentic *experiences* reign supreme. Further taking us through the different definitions of culture, Appiah goes on to state that the normally accepted definition of culture is Sir Edward Burnett's position that culture "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (2005: 119-120). Moving on into more contemporary times, the notion of culture began to pass through its ethnographical and anthropological frames to penetrate the domain of linguistics by focusing on the description of structure and codification of processes. Appiah refers to this as culture's "postmodern turn" (2005: 120) in the sense that interpretations would be another form of understanding culture. This is a position to which Appiah himself refers as "just another cultural practice". Yet he does leave the door open for the role of material objects and linguistic expressions such as poems and by extension, storytelling (ibid). This last activity complements Gardaphé's notion of the "Poetic mode" (Chapter 6) in Italian American narrative storytelling (1996: 24).

Yet, what is special about culture and are we "hardwired" for it? Evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel posits that we developed "cultural survival vehicles" (2012: 12) by cooperating together and passing on knowledge in order to survive. If we extend this interpretation, we can say that Italians outside of Italy also broke the *campanalismo* of peninsular/insular Italian culture and then re-grouped based on a new *national* /Italian/ denotata — as opposed to a

regional one — placed upon them by American officialdom²⁴. This is to say that while in Italy people were grouped based on their town or regional affiliation, in the maze of the US's bursting ethnic and immigrant environment, people would have congregated based on their national affiliation as well as regional one due to linguistic and cultural sensibilities. This would constitute a flattening of the distinct, ancient spaces and microclimates of Italy that were fundamental in creating multiple variations of Italians, their hamlets, villages, towns, and cities in the relatively confined geographical locus of Italy. Arriving in the US, Italians would be outsiders or the *Other* for a period of time that it took to understand the new world that they were inhabiting. But as culture is a two-way street, it also provides an interesting intersection with other ethnic immigrant cultures. Jewish people and their culture were also living in their own Diasporic condition and were considered as outsiders even more than the Italians, yet both had their own distinct and codified culture upon arriving in America:

When Jews from the shtetl and Italians from the villaggio arrived at Ellis Island, they brought with them a rich brew of what we call culture. They brought a language and stories and songs and sayings in it; they transplanted a religion with specific ritual, beliefs, and traditions, a cuisine of a certain hearty peasant quality, and distinctive modes of dress; and they came with particular ideas about family life. It was often reasonable for their new neighbours to ask what these first-generation immigrants were doing, and why; and a sensible answer would frequently have been,

²⁴ Here I am alluding to the practice of changing or Anglicizing an Italian name or surname upon arrival in the US. This can be considered a first level of either chosen or forced assimilation.

“It’s an Italian thing,” “It’s a Jewish thing,” or, simply, “It’s their culture.”
(Appiah, 2005: 114)

Rather than looking at Italian culture as a top-down pyramidal structure beaming one version of itself around the world, it would be beneficial to interpret the culture of Italy as a non-hierarchical, holonic²⁵ structure existing simultaneously as a part and a whole²⁶. What Alfred Koestler described as holarchical systems (1967, 1978) applied to cultural enquiry provides a whole new way to experience *italianità* through the frame of a global Italian diaspora connecting the peripheries with the Italian centre. Namely that there is no absolute top or bottom but an equal relationship between the parts and the whole. Fractals are another more evident example of holarchical structure. By casually and critically viewing culture as a holonic system and with each unit of culture²⁷ – the meme or narreme – new insights become available for interpretation and open up many new possibilities for cultural inquiry (Velikovsky, 2016). Whether it be passively through film, television, and general mass media or actively through community events and written texts there is an abundance of memetic expressions of culture that continue to actively propagate through society to varying degrees; they are in fact unlimited and only becoming limited through economic forces. The people

²⁵ Holonic here refers to something that is simultaneously a part and whole of an entity. As it is decentralized, it runs counter to a hierarchy. This conception is helpful in understanding the duality of culture with liminal spaces.

²⁶ While for the purposes here “holonic” is applied to Italian American culture, the holonic structure is applicable to all culture.

²⁷ Specifically, the Holon-Parton particle (Velikovsky, 2016).

and their communities operating therein are awash in signs of culture. However, this is not a guarantee that they will be able to either recognize or decode them owing to various factors such as cultural assimilation, language attrition, and often general apathy and ambivalence towards personal and ethnic history.

Some cultures appear to be stronger due to a matrix of political, economic, and mediatic strength. Such is the case of English-speaking countries like the United States and to a lesser extent the United Kingdom. When we take into consideration the enormous strength and reach of powerful mediatic institutions, it is wise to remember that while hegemony is ephemeral, the memes that carry interpretable signs persist long past the cultures that produced them and can become dominant even when they are part of the periphery of the audiences that receive them. Media possess the possibility of spreading sign systems to a more diffused audience through the cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971: 12-13) while culture itself becomes a commodified value system and form of Bourdieu's (1977) "symbolic" cultural capital. In this perspective, hegemony has the insidious effect of supplanting local culture by relegating it to the role of a binary opposition, in which it often becomes looked down upon and seen as old-fashioned. Though the works of both Gramsci and Bourdieu have been cited, a longer discussion of their work is beyond the scope of this section²⁸. Of these conceptualizations, what becomes relevant and particularly interesting is how both Italy, Italian, and non-

²⁸ For the discourse on hegemony see Gramsci, 1971, specifically pgs. 12-13, 216, 261, 271, and 404 of the Hoare translation into English. For the discourse on symbolic capital see Bourdieu, 1977, particularly pgs. 159 - 197 in the Nice English translation.

Italian peoples represent the culture of Italy outside the origination point of Italian culture and how it pertains to, for example, foodways as well as the effect this has on a current locus.

2.3.1 Operational Definition of *Youngstalian*

Since lesser-known diasporic Italian enclaves tend to get overlooked, for our purposes here it would be helpful to give a distinct name to the subject of the discussion. This necessitates a brief explanation of *Youngstalian* culture. Keeping in mind Hall's conception of cultural identity as symbols, meaning, and values, the diasporic Italian Americans of the Mahoning Valley i.e., the *Youngstalians*, this dissertation specific neologism or rather protologism, is meant to denote the uniqueness of a regional variation of Italian Americans in the US. They are the descendants of Italians that immigrated to the US, and retroactively the immigrants themselves, making the valley their home. The identity is linked to vocation as an upwardly mobile historically working-class person that could expect their children to become educated. This formally educated next generation would then have the agency to progress up the social ladder while retaining the customs of the previous immigrant generation. Generally speaking, following in their parents' footsteps would be a choice rather than an obligation due to their socio-economic position. In terms of linguistic ability with regards to the Italian language, most *Youngstalians* do not possess Italian as an EAL, L1, L2, or L3²⁹.

²⁹ EAL (English as an additional language; L1 (first language or mother tongue); L2 (second language); L3 (third language).

They are L1 American English speakers and rarely, if ever, possess an L2. Though most have the option to study a foreign language at the secondary school level, very little of those foreign language skills will be put to use outside of the educational setting. Most uses of Italian to denote in-group membership but there is no real bi-lingual capacity in most *Youngstalians*. Interestingly, Italian is often used in daily salutations and holidays ex: Buon Natale, Buon Anno. The wishing of Good Luck or “Buona Fortuna” — as a literal translation — rather than the standard Italian phrase “in bocca al lupo” is frequent amongst members and is a clue to the utterer’s familiarity with Italian language and competency. In his essay on the type of culture Italian Americans needed to develop, specifically regarding L2, L3 competency, in the section “Language” of Robert Viscusi’s essay “Breaking the silence” he states:

Some may not reflect how much residual Italian remains in the conversation of even those United States citizens of Italian descent who think of themselves monoglot speakers of English. Even these persons will have a large repertory of Italian words and expressions - lasagne, Sorrento, Madonna! - and will routinely use some of these as markers when engaged in conversation with another person of Italian descent. (1989, 1990: 06)

The underlying linguistic critique is subtle yet poignant. While it is true that many Italian Americans still retain some “residual Italian” many diasporic Italian Americans have lulled themselves into a false sense of ethnicity that requires the

bare minimum to maintain and really is of little consequence in daily life. Viscusi further states:

Of course such a use of decontextualized fragments hardly constitutes bilingualism, and indeed is one of the clearest signs of the discursive impotence we mean to overcome, but it does suggest that even after several generations, there remains a base of linguistic desire upon which to build, that Italian Americans often still recognize some lost strength in the lost language they mildly invoke. (idem)

Outside of a traditional linguistic centre of Italian, it becomes much more difficult to maintain linguistic competency in the periphery. What is left is a piecemeal acquisition of language. What are the decentred subjects left with then? While stereotypical representations of Italians as comedic trope are still prevalent in the media, Italians in America have been relatively unscathed in recent decades owing to their “full membership” in the white hegemony of the US. In fact, at times they have even been lauded due to the popularity of programming based in Italian Americana. Mario Batali, Giada De Laurentiis, Joe and Lidia Bastianich and family are some of the more notable American examples while Italy itself and an aesthetic figured into many episodes of shows hosted by Anthony Bourdain. It has only been with the relatively recent arrive of Fiat Chrysler’s 500 entering into the US market have American audiences been able to see and hear peninsular and insular Italians on a mass scale – a trend that seems to be continuing for the foreseeable future. Most of the commercials Fiat has produced

have had subtitles for the English-speaking audience. This is another potential area of further inquiry regarding inter-linguistic and cross-cultural exchanges.

Taking Viscusi's lead, and drilling down past the linguistic layer of culture, it should be noted that one of the reasons this study chose to focus on the semiotic level was precisely because diasporic Italian Americans lack the linguistic ability to speak Italian yet still retain and identify signs of *italianità*. Due to this, even without possessing the language to articulate the connection - Viscusi's et al. goal - diasporic Italian in America are connected to a larger transnational Italian culture but not through the Italian language. The fault lies in many subjects having gone through language attrition and/or being metaphorically stripped of their minority language and culture over the host nations language for no other reason than cultural hegemony or lack of public policy regarding multiple languages. Here I am referring to countries that have specific policies regarding linguistic plurality. A case can be made for Canada as a good example in the North American context as many Italo-Canadians still retain their ancestral mother tongues due to the state's lack of linguistic hegemony and, in the case of Quebec, enforced linguistic plurality of English and Quebecoise. Yet, like throwing something away which seemed at the time to not have much intrinsic value, it is the contention here that the desire to integrate into the host culture pushed many *Youngstaliens* to leave behind the linguistic dimension of Italian culture, or what we can call "Gardaphé's bargain" i.e., giving up one's language and culture outside the home for the benefits of the American dream while trying to maintain them inside the home. In "Beyond the

Basement: A Manifesto for Italian American Studies,” Gardaphé makes a metaphorical and literal call to arms for diasporic Italian Americans to leave their basements. He states:

Now is the time to move beyond the basements of yesterday and out into the streets of today. The romance and tragedy of early 20th century immigration can no longer serve as models for identity. The key to creating a meaningful sense of Italian/American culture that means something to today’s youth is to first ensure that they have access to histories, of their families and of their communities, then we must provide them with historical and contemporary models in the areas of arts, business, and education, that they can study, emulate and transcend. (<http://www.italianstudies.org/iam/manifesto>, n.d.)

On a semiotic level though, the signs that generate meaning can still be interpreted visually with relatively little effort via peritextual interpretation (section 4.5) and the remaining memes found in locus. Yet this is not to say that there should be little focus on the Italian language instruction. Therefore, diasporic Italian Americans need to leave their metaphorical basements where they have been watching a steady stream of texts, images and consuming memes that reflect the American interpretation of what is considered “Italian”. Similar to science fiction, American *Italian* culture tells us more at times about *American* culture than it does Italian culture (section 4.4). The question of *italianità* or “Italianness” is a question that has been debated in both Italian American and Italian Studies leaving both sides with competing and often antagonizing views of what, and who exactly is “Italian” and what *italianità*, a notoriously difficulty

conceptualization of culture, means. Cultural, Diaspora, and Post-Colonial Studies along with sociology offer a more objective discourse regarding identity therefore these positions will be considered. The continuous *Italian* sign is most often treated as a prize to win, bequeath, or impose upon someone or something. In substance, an argument can be made that there are many versions and iterations of the signifier “Italian” that often creates tension between the various interpretation. Much of the tension that exists is due to the desire for authenticity, control and lack thereof image, and power dynamics that seek to present a unified cultural narrative were none has existed.

Lastly, *Youngstalian* as an operation definition is a neologism for any person of Italian ancestry that was born, from, or lives, or lived in Youngstown or the Greater Mahoning Valley of Ohio and identifies with a sense of *italianità* specific to North eastern Ohio to Western Pennsylvania whether quantifiable or not. For an excellent pictorial collection see *The Italians of the Greater Mahoning Valley* by DeBlasio & Pallante (2015). How the person sees him/herself/there self is also of importance to identity construction. Whether they perceive themselves to be Italian by expressing themselves verbally as being *Italian* often results in the use of the morpheme /Italian/ as a standalone noun or as an adjective modifying the noun *American*. Therefore, while the signifier /Italian/ has a clear meaning to peninsular and insular Italians, the signifier /Italian/ is less clear or *fuzzy* in the IA critical frame. The question of identity also brings about another situation or what could be referred to as a question of loyalty in the US. By choosing to hyphenate one’s descriptive noun they choose to establish an opposition with

other ethnic groups and a dichotomy with the larger national culture. For our purposes here, *opposition* is only used to denote some qualitative and quantifiable state of otherness to different ethnic groups in locus and should not be considered antagonistic.

Anthony Julian Tamburri, writing in *To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate* (1991) describes how the Italian American writer Jay Parini used “Italian elements of his upbringing...to regain aspects of his heritage” (20) with his second fictional novel *The Patch Boys* (1986). It is through this action of alignment that a subject becomes closer to the target culture – as centre – they identify with at a particular time and place. At other times, textual choices are also influenced by ethnicity or else a desire to inquire into a certain subculture. Therefore, the use of specific targeted language is an important part in both maintaining identity and communal bonds as well as recovery of lost cultural practices. The use of loanwords serves to reoriented Diasporic Italians back into the larger dialectal space of the Italian diaspora.

In this chapter, we have discussed the general antecedents and history of the concept of diaspora and its effect of migration. Also discussed was the meaning and state of diaspora as well as its formal study in conjunction with and applied to Italian American studies while contextualizing the concept of the Italian person in diaspora. Lastly, operational definitions were discussed as a follow up and augmentation to the glossary. Now that we have established the importance of diaspora in the critical analysis of Italian American, and by extension *Youngstalian* culture, moving forward into the next chapter we will

shift to the discussion of the underlying critical and contextual frameworks applied throughout this cultural inquiry.

3 Primary Contextual and Theoretical Considerations

In this chapter, we shall discuss the contextual and theoretical underpinnings of the thesis formulating in greater detail the hypotheses outlined in the introduction and the method used to analyse the textual and multimodal data respectively. Spanning over to bridge the two parts, the first section covers culture and narrative and their connection to physical space, while section two combines semiotics and memetics, which will form the basis for the memetic code clusters. The rationale for selecting the chosen types of textual and multimodal samples used to engage with the research hypotheses is also discussed.

Italian American culture's perception of itself, and by extension notions of Italian identity, often has more in common with a dream or a "dreamscape" (Bondella, 2001) or oneiric/oneiroid states - "a state of abnormal consciousness in which dream-like experiences and hallucinations happen while awake" (Pascuzzi & Cracchiolo, 2015: xi; Kaptzan et al., 2000: 278) than anything that corresponds to a mutually agreed upon reality among the various manifestations of Italian peoples. Yet, since multiple realities do exist, it would be legitimate to ask, "what is the method of cultural transmission that continues to influence these activities?" Memes and the signs contained within and interpreted from them can offer insight into these phenomena while at the same time provide an epistemological base from which to inquiry into the nature of the Italian in

diaspora. This is the tenet of the present study and this chapter intends to explain how this assumption is demonstrated through the high- and low-brow cultural productions of Italo-American artists, gradually focusing on those based in Youngstown.

The process of communicating cultural information transmitted between and from generation to generation through orality, texts, and visual imagery in the periphery have the potential to influence immigrant or diasporic cultures just as much as the host culture. We shall use the phrase “have the potential” to make clear that this is not a guarantee that a particular meme will go viral, or that a semiotic element of *italianità* will be maintained in perpetuity. It should be understood that there is only the potential of cultural transmission if both the (semiotic) environmental conditions are favourable and the human component is receptive.

The US based National Community Reinvestment Coalition considers cultural displacement as a distinguishing feature of gentrification that “results when the tastes, norms, and desires of newcomers supplant and replace those of the incumbent residents and can also entail the loss of historically and culturally significant institutions for a community” (NCRA case study, 2019: 4). Furthermore, the effect class has on both language and culture also contributes to the resurgence or decline of minority languages. Generally speaking, as affluence in the form of gentrification enters an historically “ethnic” area prices move in an upward trend. This trend then makes the affordability of housing a

central issue leading to the decline of ethnics and working-class peoples³⁰, as well as their languages and cultures. As cultural critical mass is then diminished in a concentrated area through the dispersion via cultural displacement of cultural agents as meme vectors, so too are the influences that language and culture have on both the people from inside the community and outside. What happens next is not so much an erasure of the preceding culture's material production, which can also happen in the case of Brier Hill (see section 6.2.1), but a revisioning of it absent those who created it in the first place – if at all. What is left is a “simulation” (Baudrillard, 2012: 50) simulacra-like or “simulacritic” representation of a formerly ethnic enclave still possessing authentic signs yet lacking the original interactions through shared and lived experience — what Jerome Krase (2007; 2017) has designated as “ethnic theme parks”. These physical spaces lose the identity they once had based on the ethnic communities that inhabited, shaped and modified, and imbued them with meaning. This process of creation and destruction then re-creations has the potential to continue in perpetuity under the right social and economic conditions.

In many cases, these social spaces become venues for recreation that develop into a new authenticity with regards to material culture. In the case of gentrification, formerly ethnic enclaves become a shell of their former self or a copy of it. A useful analogy of how a piece of cultural content can change through

³⁰ For a discussion on delineating and reassessing the spaces within the critical discourse surrounding who is and who isn't in the working-class as well as the usage of lexicon to describe it see Metzger, 2010.

the distribution cycle is the children's game, or language acquisition game "Telephone". In the game, a group of children or students form a line. One person, or a teacher, provides a phrase to a pupil who then goes on to whisper the phrase to the pupil adjacent to them until the phrase arrives at the end of the line similar to how two people speak through a telephone. After the phrase passes from one pupil to the end, what inevitably happens is the original message degrades to a point of incomprehensibility therefore rendering the transmission of verbal data ineffective, or one would think so in a proscriptive world. Yet, the world is also a place of meaning, a "palace" of description whereby subjects continuously generate and regenerate meaning. What also happens is that a new phrase is created. This phrase often evokes humour, but not always. Here, within this new verbal phrase one can discern various pieces of the original text. It is these signs that render the incomprehensible compressible when the receiver is searching for the original phrase. We can posit that the same mechanism is operating on the successive generations of diasporic Italians born and raised in the periphery. In this analogy, the "phrase of *italianità*" arrives at the end receiver but as it moves its way through generations it can be incomprehensible from a cultural "syntax" point of view. Yet from the semiotic point of view, *italianità* is still easily recognizable and transmittable. This, in and of itself becomes a core position and distinguishing feature or aesthetic value of the diasporic Italian perception and experience.

3.1 Triangulating Culture

While there are many ways to understand cultural phenomena, it is this study's position that Peircean triadic semiotic methods of interpretation combined with memetic analysis offers a complete understanding of the complexity of Italian and American signs within diasporic texts, discourse, and spaces where we find these signs in the multimodal *worlds* diasporic people inhabit. Here the objective is to discover new insights into cultural dynamics from a culturological perspective and taxonomically identify the macro structure of signs and memes Italian Americans use as vehicles for lingua-cultural data transmission outside a locus of origin as it pertains to identity construction, cultural propagation and by extension, textual interpretation. Developed from the Moscow-Tartu semiotic tradition, *culturology* is the study of culture as a system within a scientific-structural rather than on the ideological focus in contrast to the Western tradition of Cultural Studies. It is particularly significant here to explain such dynamics therefore this study pivots around the assumption that meme theory in conjunction with sign analysis can clarify cultural hybridisation as it pertains to diasporic Italian communities. Looking at objects that are ephemeral expressions of material culture in the form of t-shirts and memorabilia as signs demonstrates how fecund a specific memeplex is in a certain area and at a certain time. These expressions of vernacular and popular culture contain signs that can be encoded with semiotic content which then gets decoded by interpreters as individuals or as groups. They should not be discounted due to their "low" aesthetic status or else one ignores pop culture at their own peril as it is the low or vernacular

culture that is in fact a dominate form of meaning creation in many communities. Often, trends can be interpreted and understood through the lens of culture. The modes in which people consume them often reveal an underlying system of value that is often either overlooked, misunderstood, or as is often the case, minimized due to an object's perceived low status.

In the post-Gutenberg modern world of printed texts, much of the information that populations consume comes either through print media as semi-permanent, limited in reach "time-based" media or more ephemeral, wider reaching "space-based" audiovisual media (Innis, 2007). These two modes of communication provide the source texts for narratives and by extension, the conversations that are generated from their consumption. While the Digital Age — with the World Wide Web (WWW) and Internet communication practices that developed with it — has had a major impact on how humans communicate, here we shall concern ourselves with the written and audiovisual texts of diasporic Italian culture and those from within and outside the culture including those that have an appreciation or affinity for these texts, the Italophile or *filoitaliani*. This is not to discount the influence of the WWW, social media applications, and the platforms that have been generated from it, or to imply that they do not have immense importance on how we propagate and consume media, it is solely a choice in limiting the scope of the study. In any case, much if not all the content that finds its way into the digital space, originates in human minds. In a certain sense, this seems to run counter to the Pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus of Ephesus's maxim concerning "flux"; that everything is in a state of continual

change but in certain cases change happens at such an unobservable rate a thing appears static. Think of a mountain or a coastline. Unless there is a catastrophic event, we hardly notice a change. On the other hand, while perhaps there may in fact be nothing “new under the sun”, the same can be said for information collected by news services that is then transferred into hypertext links that then connect one headline of text to an enormous aggregate of codified information on the web. It is not the news as *content* that has changed but the *form* of the technology that is transmitting it (see McLuhan, 1967).

Inhabitants of the Italian peninsula have undoubtedly been traveling the seas long before there was even a conceptualization of Italian as a unified subject. Moreover, the mass historic immigration to the United States signalled the beginning of one immense semiotic and memetic event that would affect the metaphorical face and consciousness of the entire country specifically in the loci that would have large populations. Since each ethnic group influenced the sum total of American (USA) culture in some way, to varying degrees, we can say that this mechanism of influence can be scaled and applied to other ethnic groups past, present, and future. In these areas, communities were born that we could consider colonies. While it may not have seemed that the influence of peninsular and insular, and diasporic culture, and the ephemeral and more concrete material attributes generated from the culture, there are signs all-round the areas that claim large populations of Italians and their descendants. In fact, these locations may prove useful to newer generations of Italians coming to the US as

they may *sfrutare* or take advantage of these metaphorical intercultural and intersemiotic “trading routes”.

In the past, Italian language periodicals used to be much more prevalent in the USA, but this has changed considerably and has left diasporic Italians — and their descendants — at a linguistic disadvantage (Carnevale, 2003, 2009). Here we can add another factor in the disconnected of contemporary Italian Americans while in the past this was not the case. Even during WW II, many diasporic Italians kept abreast of events in Europe and the propaganda that could be found in Italian language newspapers regarding the fascists that were ruling Italy even going so far as collecting funds, in many cases, even gold jewellery was solicited and donated to the Italian colonial cause:

Italian Americans’ support for fascism and their sense of national pride reached a climax when Italy invaded Ethiopia in October 1935 and established its own colonial empire in May 1936. At that time, many Italian Americans made a point of challenging the economic sanctions that the League of Nations had passed against Mussolini’s government. During the seven months of the Italo-Ethiopian War, Italian Americans raised money for the Italian Red Cross (which was nothing more than an ingenious way of funding the Duce’s military machinery under a humanitarian cover-up) and donated their wedding rings and other gold objects to the Fascist war chest. Such financial contributions amounted to \$700,000 in New York City, nearly \$65,000 in Philadelphia, about \$40,000 in San Francisco, and over \$37,000 in Providence, while roughly 100,000 gold rings were sent to Rome from New England, New York State, and New Jersey. (Luconi, 2003: 95)

Here we can see the transnational connection and support of the Italian homeland as a point of origin by its diasporic people; the periphery connecting to the centre again.

In New York City, one of the (new) centres of the diasporic Italian American world, Generoso Pope's *Il Progresso* even went so far as having two diametrically opposed views; one view published in Italian and the other in English. Yet, in the Mahoning Valley, many Italians and their American born children still got some information from sources other than letters in the form the Italian language periodicals. Even in Youngtown, attitudes were confused and contradictory with *Il Cittadino Italo-Americano* offering insights in events that bore little consequence to those inhabitants of the valley with Italian parentage even though they appeared to be unhappy with fascism on ethical grounds:

For those living in and around Youngstown, Ohio between 1922 and 1924, the answer was ambivalence. A study of the local Italian language newspaper [...] shows that while Italian Americans approached Fascism and Mussolini's government with an open mind, they were also hesitant to provide even partial support due to the system's violent methods during its early years. The question for the community was not primarily one of ideology; a real assessment for those in Youngstown was whether the means could ever justify the end. Italian Americans wanted political stability and a strong Italy, ideals at the heart of Fascism. However, they also could not condone the unnecessary repression that seemed permanently linked to the Fascist Party members. (Antonucci, 2016: 134)

Here, in the early years of the fascist state, diasporic Italians were able to connect in some small way to, at that time, contemporary Italy through language. This decade before the war would prove to be the beginning of the end for Italian (dialects) language in the Mahoning Valley and the pull further away from the metaphorical centre of Italy. Admittedly, data on the number of Italian language speakers in the valley are scarce due to 1. there being no standard “Italian” at that time and 2. Italian while spoken amongst the *paisani* was kept to the home. These two cases serve as further examples of the transnational connectivity that the centre exerted on the periphery.

Taken as a method for the spread of information, Italian language newspapers were an efficient way to generate thoughts and ideas. This form however would give way to more American-centric methods of mass cultural formation such as the radio and television and their ability to homogenize society. This, coupled with the nascent ability to accumulate modest sums of capital, helped many Italian American families leave where they first settled for parts in and around the Mahoning Valley. Known as “white flight” this was not an exclusive Italian situation as it cut across multicultural Youngstown. In reality, it was an indication of social class, and those who would be able to benefit from upward mobility and the burgeoning middle-class experience effecting aesthetics and tastes had the best chance of transitioning into the suburbs.

Going back to the analogy of the “cultural telephone”, a mythical ideal of an immigrant past emerges even though the new Italian immigrants wanted only to get their families out of the soot choked hills adjacent to polluted steel mill

industrial parks lining the Mahoning river. What is left out in these new suburban environments devoid of the original diasporic social spaces often becomes an aesthetic attribute transitioning into the memetic realm as signs encoded into semi-ephemeral material objects. Regarding ephemeral material objects, “The Original Trolio’s print shop” (section 6.2.3) is a great example of a DIY meme generator in a community and a semi-ephemeral connection to a historical immigrant past as well as a connection to Italy and the American interpretations of Italy through the lens of Italian Americana (section 4.1, 6.2). Trolio’s, as a meme generator, is a good example of what Blackmore refers to as a *meme machine* i.e., someone who generates and propagates memes via manipulation of material objects and space in this case clothing, fashion, and entertainment (Blackmore, 2000; Dawkins, 1989). In this sense, due to Trolio owning a location to produce memes he in a sense seized the memes of production to keep Youngstown’s Italian American culture alive through the creation of texts, clothing, and cultural events that had the potential to encode signs of *italianità* into the population. Therefore, Trolio’s inadvertent use of both form and content blend to reflect McLuhan position that “the medium is the message” (1964). In the case of *Youngstalians*, both medium and message were united on a street level pushing forward the inevitable decline of diasporic Italian immigrant culture by a generation or two before it becomes fully symbolic deriving influence from more mediatic expressions of *italianità*.

The interdisciplinary framework applied in this study incorporates concepts from semiotics while memetics plays a key role in explaining the

transmission and distribution process of semiotic content. Moreover, memetics drawing from Dawkin's original theory (1989) of cultural evolution via what he coined as a meme is another crucial potential explanation of how Italian signs diffused throughout the world and continue to be transmitted and shared.

As people live longer, established cultural centres sometimes move on to create new centres and with them new peripheries emerge. This was the main reason that Brier Hill ceased to be a diasporic Italian enclave. Yet we should not be under the illusion that only Italians lived in Brier Hill. Youngstown, like many other mid-size post-industrial American cities, was in the precarious situation of being between two centres: Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. These post-industrial cities, along with manufacturing, made the Steel Belt an area of the US with a relatively high standard of living. Due to this economic success the multi-ethnic culture of the area also benefited from the development of social capital seen in the festivals all around the Mahoning Valley. Subsequently, this heavy industry and manufacturing base began to steadily decline due to numerous internal and external factors in the years following WWII. Aging, neglected, and out-dated infrastructure, corporate mergers, and foreign competition all came to the Youngstown's logical post-industrial conclusion on 19 September 1977 aka "Black Monday" (Linkon & Russo, 2002). On that day, Youngstown Sheet & Tube (Lukes Corporation) began announcing major layoffs and plant closures. This day in particular, through a culmination of many decisions, sealed the fate of the Mahoning Valley, Northeast Ohio, and

subsequently over the succeeding years radically altered both Youngstown and the culture that was developing in and around the city:

While “Black Monday” in September 1977 stands out as the major historical marker of deindustrialization in Youngstown, the steel industry had begun to decline years before. Following a series of strikes in the 1940s and 1950s, Youngstown mills were consistently the last to restart production, owing largely to their landlocked position. ...the geographical location that had once been Youngstown’s advantage was now an obstacle to reinvestment. In the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. steelmakers began to divest in their steel operations and diversify into other industries. As a result (sic) they did not invest significantly in new steel technologies and lost their productivity leadership. (Linkon & Russo, 2002: 48)

Deprived of economic agency the people of a once thriving city were thrown into turmoil. At one point, even a group referred to as the Ecumenical Committee launched a failed effort to buy the defunct Campbell steel works in order to keep people employed (2002: 49-51). Most of the city’s leaders, including then Mayor Jack Hunter, knew full well that if this revenue base disappeared so would the fortunes of the whole region. This is exactly what happened. Black Monday also signified a major paradigm shift and process of cultural and economic decline culminating in the destruction of previous metaphors that Youngstowners of all stripes employed as organizing principles for their lives: work, family, progress. These all became precarious as they were mostly dependent on work and the capital and material wealth generated from it. Once this was gone people were at the mercy of union halls and the unemployment offices. The American Dream

became a living nightmare. As the harsh reality Youngstowners and *Youngstalians* faced became more evident, each and every layer and level of society was in turn effected by US Steel's decision to shutter the remaining mills and ancillary factories in the Mahoning Valley. Black Monday evolved into what we could in all fairness call the "dark eighties" and was actually referred to as "the Great Disruption" (Fukuyama, 1999: 55).

In 1999, Francis Fukuyama wrote a piece in *The Atlantic* entitled "The Great Disruption," highlighting the changes taking place in the American economy at the time. He succinctly explained the socio-cultural implications of the decline in large scale heavy industry and the effects of mass unemployment on the cities and towns of the American Rust Belt:

People associate the information age with the advent of the Internet in the 1990s but the shift from the industrial era started more than a generation earlier, with the deindustrialization of the Rust Belt in the United States and comparable movements away from manufacturing in other industrialized countries. This period, roughly the mid-1960s to the early 1990s was also marked by seriously deteriorating social conditions in most of the industrialized world. (1999: 55)

In the piece, Fukuyama further states that these economic forces would have serious consequences to the fundamental, underlying structures of life that held people together:

the decline of kinship as a social institution, which has been going on for more than 200 years, accelerated sharply in the second half of the

twentieth century. ... These changes were dramatic; they occurred over a wide range of similar countries; and they all appeared at roughly the same period in history. As such, they constituted a Great Disruption in the social values that had prevailed in the industrial-age society of the mid twentieth century. It is very unusual for social indicators to move together so rapidly; even without knowing why they did so, we have cause to suspect that the reasons might be related. (1999: 60)

Due to the perceived causal link between a shifting economic decline and prosperity, diasporic Italian Americans would also feel this pressure. They would no longer benefit from the language and culture of new cohorts of peninsular/insular Italians who kept arriving in the more thriving metropolises of the coastal regions of the USA thereby being further cut off from Italy as centre. Therefore, while the pressure valve of immigration out of Italy remained somewhat open, the direction of Italian people would shift to other more prosperous areas, bringing with them updated ideas from mainland Italy. *Youngstalians* on the other hand, and many other diasporic Italian communities of varying size in Rust Belt cities would only have their historic pasts to remember and their local shared narratives to recount. If and when they encountered, shall we say modern expressions of *italianità* — whether they be human or material — it would come through the filter of mass media or else in unfiltered trips to Italy that, for most, lack the context that language competency demands. In many ways, when the diasporic Italian, cut off from Italy as centre for long periods of time, encounters the centre, the interpretation is influenced more by the hegemony of the host culture in diaspora than the culture of the

centre from which the people originated. This state can cause both linguistic and cultural tension due to epistemological confusion on the part of the diasporic subject.

One dynamic of the USA being a net immigration country throughout its history was the fact that people went to various geographical locations in the country either through chain migration, as many Italians did, and/or because they were recruited for labour. All over the US, ethnic enclaves were created because there was a need for cheap and plentiful labour. And since many of these ethnics stayed in an area because they were able to make a living and either start or make families, when the main source of employment is eliminated, an economic and cultural vacuum is created. Without capital in the hands of workers many succumbed to a sort of culture "death" because they were no longer permitted to participate in the American (capitalist) way. Many family's standards of living plummeted and inevitably fell apart. When an area loses its ability and primary font to generate wealth and subsequent material accumulation, in the American capitalistic paradigm, these societies fall apart or else like John Steinbeck's Tom Joad and family hit the road and headed West.

During the first quarter of the 20th century, many Americans built and maintained lives in the breadbasket, central section of the US until the soil became untenable and drought wrought havoc on the agricultural sector:

During the worst years of the Great Depression, large areas of the North American Great Plains experienced severe, multi-year droughts that led to soil erosion, dust storms, farm abandonments, personal hardships, and

distress migration on scales not previously seen. Known colloquially as the “Dirty Thirties” or “the Dust Bowl years,” they captured an important place in wider popular memory through John Steinbeck’s *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) and the iconic images of US Farm Security Administration photographers. (McLeman et al., 2014: 418)

It should be noted that even though soil erosion due to generational agricultural practices were a major contributing factor, there is still some debate as to the Dust Bowl being a “manufactured” crisis. Many of these internally displaced people or “Okies” – short for Oklahomans – travelled to California and the Pacific Northwest in the search for a better life, although, what these internally displaced migrants often found poorly were paid short-term jobs as unskilled farm labour. This internal migration could be considered analogous the great internal migration that would take place in Italy twenty years later. This better life, or transformation, as well as self-reliance and individualism are common themes in American narratives. But what happens to people who had been uprooted from Europe through migration to the US generations before only to have that relative stability upended again? A state of ephemeral rootlessness is the only thing that takes hold and people are left with only their memories and the small material objects that have memories encoded in them. As Steinbeck poignantly asks “How can we live without our lives? How will we know it’s us without our past? No. Leave it. Burn it” (1939: 120).

Here we see the recognition of the importance of material objects in context and the power they have in both shaping and maintaining memory. The

paradigmatic shift of the steel industry leaving Youngstown was a similar event to the Dust Bowl. In fact, due to the closing of mills and them being left derelict, the moniker Rust Belt would be synonymous with many Great Lakes cities of the Midwest region. It is as if the dust had turned to rust and with it the winds of change ushered in an epoch of social and cultural precariousness due to the collapse of industry and beginning of the Post-industrial Age.

As industry and job opportunities dwindled and the area declined in population, there was no longer any use or reason for influxes of Southern Europeans. In the period from 1950 to 1970, Italy was going through its own post-war “Economic Miracle” (Toniolo, 2012; Garofoli, 2016) that not only modernized production domestically but also integrated the Italian economy into the larger European Economic Community or “Common Market”:

The period 1950-1970 was a golden age for international trade. At that time trade in manufactured goods increased sixfold; the degree of economic integration of the major industrial countries reached new heights; and mass production for mass markets, both internal and external, produced an unprecedented level of prosperity. (Ginsborg, 1990: 212-213)

This prosperity was both on an international and national level. This period also saw Italy become part of the club of “developed” nations. While domestically, as opposed to the past, there was a massive shift both socially and demographically. The change was nothing less than radical:

In less than two decades Italy ceased to be a peasant country and became one of the major industrial nations of the West. The very landscape of the country as well as its inhabitants' place of abode and ways of life changed profoundly. (1990: 212).

Many of the immigrants from the predominantly rural agrarian *mezzogiorno* who in the past would leave the confines of the country, chose instead to migrate internally or else to other European countries such Germany, Switzerland, and to a lesser extent Belgium in order to seek, again, a better life. This would be accomplished by finding work and building another life in the new cultural centres of Italy's "industrial triangle" (Turin-Milan-Genoa). This internal immigration would change the face of Italy for years to come. Moreover, due to this great internal "diaspora" many families are now mixed with members being from different regions, often from both the North and South. Previously these novel ethnic combinations would be more prevalent in the cities of North and South America and a feature of diasporic Italians. Due to this internal demographic shift, peninsular and insular Italian would "catch up" in a certain sense to the reality diasporic Italians had face decades before during their exodus out of Italy. Furthermore, due to this new temporal state of being and interpretive position, questions such as who is, and what is /Italian/? This, perhaps more than any other, will be "the" question or cultural equation to ponder over the next decades.

3.1.1 Cultural and Linguistic Updates

If and when Italians did in fact immigrate to North America and other places west, they were more often than not heading to the larger, thriving cities of the US and Canada and not places like Youngstown. Although, the lack of an influx of post WWII and subsequent new generations of P/I Italians that would bring newer memes with them in a form of standard Italian language and with-it ideas, contemporary Italian peninsular and insular culture that had evolved in ways different from the time previous generations left Italy. Metaphorically speaking, one should think of this as a diasporic group's inability in the periphery to culturally download necessary updates regarding culture from the centre. The "updates" in question are modifications to Italian signs. If a diasporic person, or persons are not privy to these updates then they run the risk of maintaining the old, archaic signs of Italian culture. Here we can also call back to the nostalgia aspect of culture in the sense that the old signs anchor the dialectic in the past while the newer update signs bring the diasporic subject closer to Italy as cultural centre and therefore create what is often regarded as the "authentic" version of *italianità*. Yet, that can also be problematic due to the changing nature of cultures.

3.1.2 Narrative Power

It is through the establishment and re-establishment of master narratives that societies maintain control and order. At the same time, and on a more primary or primal level it is the constant evolution of myths and stories through time which keeps those that make up a society connected to something beyond the realm of

the material world. The immigrant as outsider, as the Other, circumvents the established order by virtue of not being part of it and being beyond it much the same as the Jungian archetypal figure, the trickster (Radin, Kerényi, and Jung, 1956). Due to this positionality, we have a fertile sign for narrative construction both from within and outside the immigrant cohort. Moreover, the problematisation of the Italian American diasporic experience in Italian studies has been rooted at times in notions of the immigrant experience being predominantly a “southern” Italian phenomenon, which in reality was never the case, as immigration out of Italy was much more evenly spread across the North, Central, and Southern regions (Vecioli, 1995: 114; Gabbaccia, 2000). In essence it was a massive shift of Italian people not only out of Italy but inside the country as well. In this master narrative, this established discourse focuses on Italian American immigration as being one of the poor, “illiterate” Southern Italians making their way to the new world, crossing into New York harbour, glancing up at the statue of liberty and beginning a new life in the land of milk and honey. Moreover, attached to any migration out of Italy would be a discussion of the reasons for the mass exodus and “Southern Question” - the coexistence of an underdeveloped predominantly agrarian South with a more industrialized North (Gramsci, 1971; 70-74; Piccone, 1974: 3; Verdicchio, 2016: 1-7).

In the above, we can extend Herman and Chomsky’s (1988) “Propaganda Model,” particularly the use of messaging and controlling narratives. Often the poor Italian immigrant success story is utilized and continually used by Italian American *prominente* culture as a form of propaganda that seeks to downplay the

discrimination Italian immigrants were subjected to before their assimilation. We can suppose the reason for this is that recognizing these shared pasts of discrimination would, in a certain sense, close the power distance between Italian Americans and other minority groups in the USA. In doing this, IAs would theoretically be relinquishing some of their power as a “white” ethnic and in doing so de-realigning with the majority white hegemonic culture of which Italian Americans have benefited greatly. Though there is some truth to this narrative, it neglects or disregards culture with a lower case “c”, i.e., vernacular culture. This vernacular culture is that of the working-class, poor, and Italian peoples outside of major centres of American culture, industry, and influence. One problem with this narrative, is that it virtually eliminates the creation of any form of inter-ethnic solidarity with other American ethnic groups.

Yet as the original narrative of the late 19th and early 20th centuries went more from a diasporic Italian one with the typical attributes of loss and being out of place, which was reflected in the correspondence and literature of earlier generations, over the course of the 20th century and in the 21st century the narrative shifted towards a more “American” one reflecting the “American dream” master narrative. Perhaps this may continue to be the case outside of more in-depth scholarly endeavours. The established Italian American master narrative, that the Italians left Italy, came to the United States, worked hard and desired to become Americans is anchored in politics of signification rather than any kind of rigorous scholarship. In reality, the opposing interpretation of the diasporic Italian immigrant should supersede or at least become recognized and

visible, lays IAs alongside the established master narrative. If another more factually accurate and consistent group narrative does not continue to emerge, Italian American culture will continue down the road of propaganda, lost in a sea of nondelineated simulacratic experience pretending to know some sort of objective truth, an orientation that continuously nourishes the same exact images that the *prominenti* — powerful and influential cultural gatekeepers and powerbrokers — decried for decades (Mencken, 1921). Part of the fault also lies with those in the community and inside the culture group who must maintain certain narratives until they are no longer beneficial to the group. This was the case with how Mussolini was viewed by IAs before and during WWII especially through the propaganda efforts of Generoso Pope (1891- 1950), the infamous editor-in-chief of *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*. (Cannistraro and Meyer, 2003: 23, 30-32; Vitek, 2008; 296).

3.1.3 Centre vs Periphery

As explained in Chapter 2, centres and peripheries are necessary components of any analysis of the ways people construct their world and the influences that have shaped their perception of it. Due to the relationship between spaces absent of signification and places that have been encoded with meaning — through manipulation of the materials that construct it by whomever — then the interpretation of said place through language and the texts generated through human interaction continues this interplay between centres and peripheries. As people leave centres, they sometimes move on to create new centres and with

them new peripheries emerge. The new centres become systems in and of themselves. The interplay among them creates what Itamar Even-Zohar (1978; 1990; 2005) refers to as a “Polysystem” which is a literary theory based entirely on the principle of shifting concepts from peripheral to central position or:

a multiple system, a system of various systems which intersect with each other and partly overlap, using concurrently different options, yet functioning as one structured whole, whose members are interdependent. (2005: 40)

Therefore, within the polysystemic frame, each diasporic Italian community is connected to the other diasporic Italian communities as well as to the centre. The connection, and intersecting points are the signs while the memes keep spreading the signs. It is *italianità* that provides the underlying aesthetic which transcends the spatio- temporal. Yet, like the emphasis that peninsular and insular Italians are the “real” Italians, Evan-Zohar specifies that the diverse systems are not “equal but hierarchized with the polysystem” (2005: 42).

Youngstown, like many other mid-size post-industrial American cities, had the precarious situation of being between Cleveland, Ohio and Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania — each polysystem with their own diasporic population. Due to this, we can posit that Youngstown’s Italian Americans have been less heard of in the larger narrative of Italian America yet still connected to it. On a micro scale, though not unique, these lesser-known Italian American communities, histories, and subcultures are quickly receding into the past of the collective discourse on

American immigration. On a macro scale, there are diasporic Italian communities in many parts of the world with similar histories. These Italian American subcultures are also receding into the past, their symbolic ethnicity fading like sunlight as the sun sinks down under the horizon or as Richard Alba called it, the “twilight of ethnicity”, (Alba, 1985: 86. Yet is this Italian as temporal state i.e., the passage further into the American temporal state an inevitable process of cultural assimilation then further annihilation of one’s immigrant and “otherness” past? As previously stated, Italians in the periphery have never been closer to Italy as centre. The onus then, so to speak, is on them to recover, engage, and maintain their Italian language and cultural abilities. Participating in community, and regional based cultural activities and associations is one way to keep these metaphorical Italian “colonies” alive and thriving beyond weekend, festival, or Sunday dinner occurrences. Advances in mass communication has also made this a reality that previous generations of immigrants could only dream of and generations further back would think is magic. And now, coordinated correctly, events can take place simultaneously across the globe. This allows diasporic Italians the opportunity to regain reasons to recover lost Italian language skills thus accessing a whole new way of interpreting their world(s). Of course, there are often forces that preclude people from engaging in cultural activities, time and money being the major factors. In Youngstown, during its industrial decline from 1977 onwards, when people lost their livelihoods — Pietro Di Donato’s “Job” (1993 [1939]: 26-97) — and material wealth that came with it, the area’s inhabitants often went back to the religious and social

institutions that their ancestors counted on for help or what was known as the mutual aid society or *mutuo soccorso*. In short, while Alba's sun may be going down on certain western European ethnics in the US, like the sunrise, it will inevitably return at a certain point in time as there are large cultural gravitational forces acting on subjects but unlike the physical force of gravity, humanistic cultural gravitation forces can be affected by people themselves. Perhaps the response to Alba's critique on the end of ethnicity, its "twilight" can be found in the English translation of his surname *Alba*: sunrise.

3.1.4 A Society Consumes Itself from the Inside Out

Much of what the United States is going through at the present moment might be rooted in what was sewn long ago into the sociological soil of a place like the Mahoning Valley. The continuing negative outlook and socio-economic condition is not an anomaly in the hyper-capitalistic consumer economy of the country, but the standard. The country first consumed its natural resources while it now consumes its "human" resources. Much of the strife that grew out of the economic and cultural decline can fall under the label of "social anomie" and is the direct consequence of people and places no longer supported by structures that formally supporting the creation of meaning in people's lives; space no longer supports or has meaning to its inhabitants leading to cultural decline and social precariousness. Sociologist Émile Durkheim's theory of social anomie (1951), and the further interpretations and development of the theory by Robert Merton (1968) comes closest to providing us the tools for better understanding

the condition many inhabitants of the Mahoning Valley faced in the aftermath of de-industrialisation and now post-industrialisation. Of those that remained, many went through a process of economic and cultural decline akin to a “suicide” (Durkheim, 1951). This social anomie developed out of a disintegration of the overarching social structures that providing meaning that were in turn supported and maintained by mass employment and the possibility to accumulate capital.

Without occupations to create an identity, *Youngstalians* fell back on religion and ethnicity—each parish having a certain ethnic profile due to the immigrant groups that founded, built, and maintained them. This was not just an Italian thing, it was the efforts of the parishes that proved instrumental in persevering traditional ethnic foods whether they be perogies or more diasporic Italian creations unique to Youngstown: Brier Hill style pizza (Trolio, 2001: 103-108) and “Wedding soup”. The *Angels and Friends. Favorite recipes (1981-2003)* cookbook, its 12th printing, was very popular in the Mahoning Valley and coincided with the area’s economic decline. The cookbook was created as a donation drive to support the Youngstown Easter Seals Center on the city’s Southside. Specializing in support for the disabled, the cookbook could also be classified as a “virtuous” text as all the proceeds went to the Easter Seal center—a centre that offered assistance for health and disability services. Moreover, a case can be made that this text could be linked to the tradition of the mutual aid societies that were prevalent in Italy and recreated by Italian immigrants in the Mahoning valley to offer their co-nationals support in times of need. Yet, what

was different in the context of Youngstown was that many older Italians and their American born children were still alive. The story of immigration had not yet become history. Although, Gans seems to suggest that a state of symbolic ethnicity could develop even further to the point of nothingness in third, fourth and subsequent generations. This may be due to the fact that these generations had and have no real first-hand experience of peninsular/insular or even diasporic Italians' culture but are left to engage with only the simulacritic experience of later iterations and the abstract understating of what it meant to be "Italian", i.e., Italian American.

One "positive" aspect was that since Youngstown was in the periphery, they immediately felt the existential pain of mill closures and the steady loss of fair paying employment. As previously stated, the immigrant experience was still very much real since many of the people that made the migration from Italy were still alive and well. Whereas in larger urban centres, smaller cities in the hinterland like Youngstown felt the pain more sharply. Like the contents of a time capsule, Youngstown's ethnics would hold antiquated views of the European countries their ancestors, mothers or fathers came from before settling in the Mahoning valley. It is this "break" that becomes more apparent as time progresses. Moreover, it could be said that this break also contributes to the development of Gans symbolic ethnicity that goes on to feed into Kruse's Little Italy as ethnic theme park renders newer manifestations of simulacra.

3.1.5 The Road from Somewhere to Somewhere Else

Though the human component is fundamental to the development of a city, town, village the geographical component, whether it be topographical or architectural, is also a factor in the transformation of culture. Cars and trucks, which led to the deemphasis of public transportation was just another unintended consequence of the US automotive industry which ushered in a transportation paradigm shift. And with it came the restructuring or all-out destruction of poor, more economically unstable neighbourhoods. The destabilizing of these communities changed the face of many American cities in the 70s and 80s. Add the “Highway revolts” of the 1960s and 70s³¹ to this equation and it is no surprise that many working- and middle-class families are now just as dispossessed as those de-located through immigration; most Americans are now guests in their own country; a country were many, if not most, *own* nothing but owe quite a bit in terms of personal debt. In a certain, metaphorical sense, everyone is, or has the potential to be, if their main source of income disappears, a migrant, a Tom Joad, in the United States of America.

³¹ The “Freeway revolts” in the United States started in American cities in the 1960s through to the early 1970s due to the state and federal highway engineers having complete control over freeway route locations. This caused many low-income, ethnic and minority enclaves to be destroyed as freeways and city bypasses were often planned and routed through these neighbourhoods. Many sections of Youngstown were destroyed due to these public works included the enclave of Brier Hill.

Yet, in the absence of work, how do people go on to create meaning in their lives? As Sherry Linkon and John Russo (2002) recount in *Steeltown U.S.A.: Work and Memory in Youngstown*:

During the heyday of the steel industry in Youngstown, representations defined work as a source of identity for the community, as well as an activity that created individual identities and a sense of belonging. Work represented virtue, expertise, power, and conflict. (2002: 132-133)

Without the social orienting structure of the steel mills as not only an economic machine but also a cultural centre, many were left in both an economic and spiritual void:

For the first time, Youngstown and its workers had to ask themselves what their community and their lives might mean without the steel mills. The tensions that emerged during this period no longer focused so clearly on conflict based in class and race [...]. Rather, the conflict began to focus on questions of how to define Youngstown and what it meant to be a steelworker, both in the past and in the present, when the job no longer existed. (2002: 133)

While this last rhetorical question is valid on many levels, what is striking is just how much this example of steelworkers losing their identity maps onto the plight of Italians losing — whether actively or passively — their Italianness as they assimilated into the centre of American culture. Furthermore, in an effort to “Americanize” foreign born workers, language courses were offered at the city’s YMCA (2002: 36), while the Youngstown Federation of Women’s Clubs provided

naturalization classes" (2002: 74). But still, they were the human cultural ore that was melted down by the American economic system and then left as semi-finished surplus, abandoned on the hills surrounding the Mahoning river.

One effect of industrial collapse and mass unemployment is that people began to fall back on the social and ethnic spheres of their local neighbours and parishes which provided cultural and spiritual guidance. Even if the ethnic concentration were declining (Bruno, 1999: 32-36) the improvement of wages due to collective bargaining (Linkon & Russo, 2002: 42) helped people improve the material conditions of their lives but also had the inverse effect of seeing many families move out of the traditional ethnic enclaves – including the Italian enclave of Brier Hill. Many of these places had been created through a relatively rigid class system from 1910 into the 1950s:

While neighborhoods often reflected an ethnic concentration, ethnicity was not the primary determinant of residence. Income level and housing costs tied to occupation were the most important determinant of where workers lived. The existence of ethnic and racially demarcated working-class neighborhoods was a result of industrial labor recruitment. (Bruno, 1999: 29)

In the wake of these economic and cultural selection pressures coupled with the progression of Italian immigrant families into American culture, a revival of Italian as ethnic experience began to emerge in the valley as a push back to cultural assimilation - unique to not only Italian immigrant families, other immigrant groups also travelled the same path. But by this time, many of the

ethnic groups had moved out into the suburbs. Due to this movement out of the “old neighbourhoods”, an ethnic experience became traveling into Youngstown to attend St. Anthony church or, later on, going to the Brier Hill festival (2002: 74). Due to mill closures, ethnicity would be decoupled from land/place in the Mahoning Valley.

Though the Italian American experience has been consistently written about and documented for many years now in media and literature, Youngstown’s Italian Americans have been less heard from in the larger narrative of Italian Americana. This lacuna amounts to a literary and cultural “rain shadow effect³²” that has always left lesser-known IA communities – west of the Appalachian Mountains but not exclusively – to a disadvantage in the US in the critical discourse in Italian American studies and diasporic Italian studies.

3.2 Semiotics and the Interpretation of Culture

Each school within semiotics offers a plethora of definitions to discuss, argue, and elaborate on. However, the aim of this project is not to engage with a revision of semiotic terminology focusing on its core concepts, but rather to bridge semiotics with memetics by ascertaining their visibility within certain manifestations of cultural artefacts of the Youngstown Italo-American traditions(s). This section will therefore briefly elaborate on general semiotic theory then move on to offer an operational definition of signs given in virtue of

³² This is an extension of the meteorological phenomena where the leeward side of a mountainous barrier which receives less annual precipitation than the windward side thus creating a dry area.

its rigorous conceptualization as much as of its characteristics as an instrument of analysis and interpretation.

Much has been written on signs from de Saussure and his lectures that developed the formal language of semiology (Harris, 1987; Saussure, 1945; [2011]) and their meaning in, and relationship to society. It has been posited that the sign as form has its antecedents in ancient Greece with Aristotle and what Eco (1979) refers to as the Aristotelian, figuratively speaking, term “power and act” (1979: 4). It is the power over a social group that a culture possesses in conjunction with signification created through material objects that create and infinite loop of “unlimited semiosis” (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43). In the modern period, Eco goes on to isolate three signification modes in Peirce’s trichotomy: symbols, indices, and icons (1979: 5). While Saussure’s collected lectures and dyadic, or dual model, are usually considered the official starting point of what was referred to as semiology it was in fact the Peircean trichotomy that proved a more complete model of sign interpretation and communication. Crucial to the evolution of semiotic inquiry was, but not limited to, the addition of the interpretant sign which opened the door for an even more nuanced analysis of Italian America. Therefore, with regards to an operational definition if “nothing is a sign unless it is interpreted as a sign” (Peirce, 1931-58: 2.172) we shall reason that nothing is an /Italian/ sign unless it is interpreted as an /Italian/ sign regardless of the interpreter. Moreover, for the purposes of this study, our interpretation of a sign is further anchored in the distinction between “signification” and “communication” or a “semiotics of

signification entails a theory of codes, while a semiotics of communication entails a theory of production” (1979: 4). Applied to this study, this bifurcation is analogous in form to the two samples drawn from audio visual and literary texts (see sections 5.2, 6.3). The memetic code clusters act as symbols of *italianità* and are determined by the object, the thing, or event to which they are associated. They are fundamental to the creation and transmission of meaning whether it be encoded in material objects or else an ephemeral oral or semi-ephemeral written text. Therefore, in order to aid in the analysis of Italian peoples and create interpretive spaces for all manifestations for them, a distinction has been made between Peninsular, Insular, and Diasporic Italians. This decision was made to address the problematisation of specific lexical and terminological positions regarding nomenclature. In a search to find common ground between what could be characterized as warring perceptions from different interpretive postures of what it means to be Italian or to possess Italianness, the tripartite or triadic distinction was made. The former two terms — peninsular and insular — refer to Italian nationals from the country of Italy proper while diasporans are those descendants from the Italians who migrated out of Italy. An ulterior motive for this was also to settle debate and move on from arguments regarding who is a “real” Italian. These three epistemological positions or classifications now provide each variation and manifestation of Italians a dynamic, complex, and multivalent space of their own within the dialectic of *italianità*.

Building off what Umberto Eco refers to as “super-signs” (1975: 256); all three categories operate as “fuzzy” signs (*ibidem*) permitting a certain amount of

flexibility in their interpretation due to lack of opposition between them. Rather, Eco believed that these signs were not straightforward and existed on a continuum providing *gradations* between them (ibidem).

Moreover, the current migration phenomenon *towards* Italy also adds to the epistemological confusion regarding who is and is not “Italian” and at what point does someone cease being Italian and no longer recognized as such. It should also be said that with the advent of telecommunications, proliferation of applications for video chat, texting, and economical modes of mass transit, one could also posit that the ancestors of diasporic Italians, specifically in the US, make up a unique sub-group of Italians in the USA.

3.2.1 IA Semiotic Turn

With regards to the dialectic of signified expressions of diasporic Italian culture, it should be stated that the fundamental importance of what could be called the semiotic “turn” in Italian American and Italian diaspora studies can be credited to three academics/writers Anthony Julian Tamburri, Fred Gardaphé and Robert Viscusi. This turn recognized the importance of signs of *italianità* in the creation of texts over the linguistic elements shaping culture. While the Italian language and its role in the creation of Italian American identity is important, equally if not more important in the *Youngstalian* case, signs and their vector the meme, have played more of a role in the signification process. Though due to the influx of native Italian speakers I to the USA, specifically the larger more productive cities, this may in fact change in the future. Furthermore, this orientation towards

the future intersects with Bakhtin's position that all discourse is in essence "unfinalizable" and oriented towards the future (Emerson & Holquist, 1986).

Often it is these signs that create and inform people on what it means to be Italian in the US. This turn can be considered fruit of the 1970s US revival of the study of ethnicity and refocus on the US as a pluralistic multi-ethnic society as well as a rich semiotic environment. Some notable cases that stand out are Gardaphé's *Italian Signs, American Streets. The Evolution of Italian American Narrative* (1996), Tamburri's *A Semiotic of Ethnicity: In (re)cognition of the Italian/American* (1998) and Viscusi's *Buried Caesars* (2006). Among their contributions to literary criticism from within the Italian frame and field of meaning, these authors put a target squarely on the sign as being fundamental to the communitive processes amongst diasporic Italians in the USA. Moreover, due to making the interpreter or "interpretant sign" a central position, the critical approach moves closer to a phenomenological view of experience in literature and culture, thereby firmly establishing what we can call the *Viscusian dialectic* as central to any discourse in IA studies whether it be domestic in the United States or transnational in scope.

3.2.2 *Italica ex machina*

Yet what happens when diasporic Italians in the United States, who more often than not do not in fact possess Italian language skills other than basic salutations, loan words, catch phrases, clagues, and transformed dialectal-lexical markers still retain the visual/textual comprehension of specific Italian signs in America?

Is a subjective interpretation from their position as interpretant equally valid as that of a peninsular/insular Italian when deciphering signs of *italianità*? It is my contention that yes, their interpretations are just as valid, even equal not because they have the same relative experience of being “Italian” – a rather subjective and shifting phenomenological concept – but because they have the ability to interpret the signs of *italianità*. Moreover, it is common knowledge that Italy, while a unified nation, is also at the same time a collection of former kingdoms and republics. Many citizens lay claim to an identity not only linked to the Italian republic but also to their regions and by extension regional identities emerge. Italians then, are already operating in a de facto liminal space between two poles of meaning creation: one being the modern Italian state and the other a regional identity as strong if not stronger than the state or national identity. Anecdotally, if one is to ask a P/I Italian “where are you from?”, they most probably will give you an answer based on who is uttering the query. If a foreigner, perhaps the response will be “I am Italian” as is customary when being asked this question. If a fellow P/I Italian would ask the same query, the answer may be their region identity i.e., “Romagnolo”, etc., because two people speaking the same language of a smaller country will most probably know that the person who they are talking to is a conational as opposed to a foreigner even if the two speakers in the conversation are both descendants of Italians. To someone from their region, their answer may be their hometown and so on and so forth. This anecdote serves as an example to demonstrate that if P/I Italians slide through their own identity and claim lineage to multiple geographical and temporal spaces concurrently,

why shouldn't diasporic Italians not operate in the same manner regarding their ethnic identity and belonging? If Italians inside the country possess a dual Italian identity based on the binary of national and region allegiance, then one must also concede that the diasporic Italian must also possess this duality. Socio-cultural anthropologists give evidence not only suggesting but demonstrating that affiliation through kinship creates a bind that traverses the spatio-temporal boundary of our observable space (Evans-Pritchard, 1940; Shandy, 2016).

Yet how these signs arrive in the places where they are interpreted, and reinterpreted is usually taken for granted and overlooked as an ancillary attribute of the immigrant experience and in the case of Italians, the diasporic Italian experience. Often so much time and energy are spent on debating authenticity that the signs get overlooked, and again taken for granted. Therein lies the paradox: immigrant groups and their descendants — which could in a certain sense be considered “dependents” — place enormous stock and derive substantial cultural capital from signs. Often these signs are in fact simulacra that in turn become the “authentic” representation thereby expanding the distance between the interpretation of a sign.

In the science fiction film *Ex Machina* (2015), one of the protagonists — Nathan — explains that the search engine he created provided the impetus to the creation of artificial intelligence. Said search engine provided the raw material for Nathan's eureka moment when he figures out that the World Wide Web is not so much WHAT we are thinking but HOW we are thinking. This being McLuhan's (1967) “form over content” argument. This information proves

fundamental to the development of Nathan's artificial intelligence model. The "what" here is semiotic while the "how" is memetic. Linking these two ontologies provides a useful epistemological framework for interpreting culture as we move through the next sections.

3.2.3 Signs as Codes

If we posit that that all communication is done through a series of codes with varying meanings due to specific factors and positionality, then it stands to reason that the encoding and decoding of texts is fundamental to the comprehension of communication. Culture is a complex communicative system of signs continuously in transformation encoding and decoding by a certain cohort with the requisite comprehension to interpret them. The difference between the two is more than hermeneutic: encoding is the act of transforming a piece of information, data, text from one perceivable and recognizable form to another. The agents that perform the encoding can be anyone person or material object that is part of, but not limited to, a target culture while the decoder is the received that processes and applies the new information into their cultural system. Yet when there are many intersecting codes there needs to be a structure or way of knowing which is which and what their relationships are to each other. That is where the method of clustering can prove useful.

3.2.4 Code Clusters

Clustering (Krippendorff, 1980) has proven to be a valuable tool in creating taxonomies to not only categorize general to non-specific aspects of knowledge

thereby creating methodological frameworks with which to observe and analyse a phenomenon, but also providing researchers an opportunity to “step back” from a specific piece of observable data and make inferences. There is precedent to this method:

Clustering seeks to group or to lump together objects or variables that share some observed qualities or, alternatively, to partition or to divide a set of objects or variables into mutually exclusive classes whose boundaries reflect differences in the observed qualities of their members. Clustering thus extracts typologies from data which in turn represent a reduction of data complexity and may lead to conceptual simplifications. (Krippendorff, 1980: 259)

Building off a clustering methodology, the memetic code clusters that will be defined in section 4.2 provide a taxonomical foundation and a “grammar” for decoding texts. It is this ontological framework that provides understanding into the signs therein contained in memeplexes that go into 1. creating 2. reinforcing and 3. propagating Italian American culture and subsequently, identity in the diasporic Italians of the Mahoning Valley.

For the purposes here, the interpretation of American *italianità* often does not have the same exact meaning regarding Peninsular or Insular *italianità* and one should not expect it to. This is a matter of interpretation. However, it is nonetheless in the mind and culture of *Youngstalians* as well as, by extension, Italian Americans. Texts, as material objects, are an ideal way of observing a culture’s signs while the US mediatic system is often the most tangible reality due

to its hegemony in contemporary American society and pervasive in modern contemporary culture.

The texts considered in the present study demonstrate a literary and artistic evolution of the diasporic Italian experience in the United States of America by way of Italian immigrants and the signs they brought with themselves from Italy. The authors and their works are relatively unknown in the US and Italy — if at all; the case can be made that these textual expressions of diasporic Italian culture provide a semiotic framework for encoding and decoding signs regardless of geographical location. Furthermore, these texts provide a source of raw cultural material, material that has the potential of being cultural capital if it continues to propagate in the communities where it was created. Otherwise, like so many other small works of literary art it may be lost to the ether.

3.2.5 Cultural intertextuality

By utilizing a culturological approach we shall take into consideration the dialogic and how it is used to align with cultures out of place no longer connected through geography; this being the case of diasporic Italians. Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia (1981; 1986) factors into the culturological approach as it bridges the utterance of one group in the periphery and connects them to the discourse of the home country, far removed by time and space. As such, language can be messy, disorientating, and should be taken into consideration when analysing texts. Therefore, by extending the Bakhtinian view on narrative, we can then say

culture is an ongoing process of communication or a “dialogic expression that is unfinalizable, always incomplete, and productive of further chains of responses: meaning is never closed and always orientated toward the future” (Irvine, 2012). Therefore, all cultures that we observe must be in a continuous state of flux that constitute a never-ending *storia*. Moreover, the idea or argument that one can be better than another, or more authentic when we consider the tension that exists between peninsular/insular Italian culture and the cultures of diasporic Italian communities/expressions, is rendered moot or at minimum, an untestable and untenable position existing more in the aesthetic realm of the phenomenological rather than the analytical. Through these texts, a picture emerges as to the importance of Italian signs in *Youngstalian* culture and how culture is in a constant state of flux and cultural evolution. Determining whether or not the culture is becoming more or less “Italian” is not the purpose here as much as understanding the underlying mechanism and describing it. Through a semiotic analysis, memes and their relation to signs of *italianità* are assessed throughout these texts while locating them in an organizational structure via what we can refer to as code clustering.

When approaching a text, it can be helpful to analyse the signs and memes as code clusters that mark these expressions of what we can refer collectively as Italian American and the transmission of the culture (see section 3.2). One such example of an easily recognizable meme is Nino Rota’s *Godfather* theme as it conjures up images of darkly lit rooms inhabited by organized crime figures draped in period specific garb or a sepia toned bucolic Sicilian landscapes

harking back to the past or perhaps even a time that only existed in imaginary form³³. Moreover, the argument can be made that Italians were de facto refugees — albeit economic ones (Cohen, 2018: 17-21). Fear of refugees is something that was applicable to the Italian migrant experience and should not be discounted. Furthermore, after the large-scale destruction of the Italian nation during the post-war period, and into the 1950s, a case can be made that post 1950s Italian migrants were in fact refugees although I would contend that self-identify as one would be taboo to Italians. This, along with data on Italian illegal immigration to the US, and the *silenzio* surrounding it, are two areas of worthwhile future inquiry. Yet before moving further, an explanation will be useful in order to better comprehend the method and unit of *cultural transmission* and diffusion: the meme.

3.2.6 Meme Vectors and Sign Systems

The concept of the term meme was first posited and popularized by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins in his 1976 book *The Selfish Gene*. In it, Dawkins states that the discourse surrounding the spread of culture needed a term that conveyed “the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (Dawkins, 1976: 192). He also used the metaphor of human culture being a “soup” which works nicely with the now discredited concept of the “melting pot” (Novack, 1973), the long popular way when describing the interaction of immigrants assimilating

³³ For a current perspective on the “Physical Flows” of globalisation regarding tourism and refugees see Morrison, 2003.

into the larger cultural hegemony and broader capitalist economy of the United States. Although, Italian Americans would not be “lost in a fog of assimilation” (Gardaphé, 2016: 132) as was usually considered the case with *white* ethnics (ibid). Though the concept of meme was initially intended as a “rhetorical flourish intended to clarify a larger argument” (Burman, 2012: 77) through Dawkins, it has since taken on a life of its own. For the purposes here, meme’s intended meaning and usage will lie outside the biological sciences and in the interdisciplinary, liminal space that exists and bridges the social sciences and humanities. Like the iron ore that was melted in the open hearths that used to dot the Mahoning river, so too were the immigrants a metaphorical form of human ore rather than cultural capital. Ready to be tossed into the open hearth of the American industrial age economy, the steel mills were a sort of 20th century version of Dante’s Inferno. Yet instead of having the circles represent the various levels of sin, this version saw circles that contained various ethnicities and class configurations. Susan Blackmore has said that “inventions do not spring out of nowhere but depend on previous inventions” (1999). Culture, in its most basic sense is an invention that has been updated from a previous form and brought with and shared by human vectors.

Yet one lacuna that becomes event after reviewing the canon of the critical works in Italian America and Diaspora studies is the lack of focus on memes, i.e., memetics. Although there is a fair amount of scholarship (Finkelstein, 2008), both for (Dennett, 1991; 1996) and against (Sperber, 2000) the concept of meme, and memetics as a method of cultural inquiry, it still appears relegated to the

periphery of scholarship remaining in the realm of popular culture and media studies (Brodie, 2009; Shifman, 2014). Even when memes are mentioned, it is usually in passing regarding an *image marco*, a type of semi-ephemeral meme or a semi-ephemeral digital image with text superimposed on top it. Often, humorous in content they are vectors for the dissemination of information through the internet. Yet one does not need to venture further than the internet-based websites *Reddit* and *4Chan* to see just how influential memetic content has been and will continue to become in the future.

Even in the face of assimilation and integration into American society, Italians would maintain cultural signifiers by way of the memes, that would then be built into concrete ideations of these memes in the form of building, restaurants, and shopping plazas and shopping centres, i.e., the shopping mall. All these places and the spaces contained therein, would try to capture the city-centred living that Italians had engaged in for centuries and millennia. Although, according to social and cognitive scientist Dan Sperber “ideas spread from one place to another and from one person to another” (1990). While Sperber’s definition is not a notion entirely dissimilar to Dawkin’s position, Sperber does not consider the “meme model” (as he calls it) a good model for understanding culture because culture — like language — relies on pre-existing mental schema; Dawkin’s imitation and replication of concepts falls into a second order *a posteriori* process. Sperber cites Chomsky’s “Universal Grammar” or UG, as an example to discount the meme model:

Thus, the similarities between the grammar and lexicons internalized by different members of the same linguistic community owe little to copying and a lot to pre-existing linguistic, communicative, and conceptual evolved dispositions. (Sperber, 2000: 172)

Yet, from a theoretical point of view, Sperber does admit that while there are many limitations to the concept of meme as it appears almost too simple to say that imitation does it all, or is everything, he does go on to say that “the idea of a meme is a theoretically interesting one. Looking for the quote-on-quote grand “theory of everything” is a common pitfall to be avoided. It may still have, or suggest, some empirical applications” (2000: 173).

Memes, in a material sense, would help recreate components of their P/I Italian culture. Dawkins clarifies this new term by loosely defining the parameters of meme as:

A unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation. ‘Mimeme’ [sic] comes from a suitable Greek root, but I want a monosyllable that sounds a bit like ‘gene’... it could alternatively be thought of as being related to ‘memory’ or to the French word *même*.... Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes, fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation. (Dawkins, 1976: 192)

Since Dawkins first postulated the idea of meme, the concept has replicated coincidentally becoming a meme in and of itself. Due to the concept of meme

taking hold in academic circles it has taken on a life of its own morphing and adapting while following new pathways into cognitive understanding (for a debate on meme and its framing in academic discourse, see Burman, 2012). But of these new branches there has been many more debates and disagreements on meme. This research does not seek to enter into a discussion on the merits of the debates but instead it is proposed that we return to the initial words of Dawkins in his seminal work.

When looking at diasporic culture as a dynamic grouping of “coadapted stable set of mutually-assisted memes” (Dawkins, 1976; 2006: 197, 199) or “memplexes” (Speel, 1995; Blackmore, 1999: 19) constructed of symbiotic signs, the culture of modern homo sapiens, and the ideas that carry with them the signs that go on to propagate via their human vectors forming fundamental components of culture; these signs help culture to stabilise in order to evolve and in doing so become Pagel’s “cultural survival vehicles” (2012: 13). While this may sound antiseptic and cold, it offers the inquisitive observer of culture as well as interpreters of signs a chance to separate themselves and look at the phenomenon of human cultural transmission from one locus to another on a scientific level:

Cultural transmission is the process of acquisition of behaviours, attitudes, or “technologies through imprinting, conditioning, imitation, active teaching and learning, or combinations of these” (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982). Structurally speaking, a genetic population transmitting culture from one locus to another is what diaspora is; a scaled dispersion of human vectors expanding from one point of origin into another and taking with them their ideas, symbols, and signs

transmitted as memes. The subsequent signs that are interpreted then go on a new, distinct evolutionary pathway. These memes provide the raw cultural signs that go on to create meaning in diasporic Italians and signal behaviour. And while many memes are shared between peninsular/insular and diasporic Italians it is the latter that has the added component of new memes entering their meme pool (Dawkins, 1976; 2006: 193) by virtue of the diasporic Italians residing in a new locus devoid of many of the features of peninsular and insular Italian society in the form of passive signs that encode information i.e., art-architecture and infrastructure. It is the lack of these, shall we say, to extend the term, *indigenous* signs, in context that leave a vacuum that is then filled by American signs. The major differences are two: one being remote and the other less so. In antiquity, foreign influence usually entered through war or commerce. The former destroying or appropriating architecture for the ruling subjects' special *semiotic* purposes — usually religious and social command & control. Two excellent examples among many are the basilica di Sant'Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy and the basilica di Santa Sofia (Hagia Sophia) in Istanbul, Turkey. These places are useful examples of the permanence of these massive structures. We can understand that while the structures remain more or the less unaltered, the narratives, like those who govern and administer the structures, have changed. Commerce, on the other hand, was more of a "passive" semiotic experience. During the Venetian maritime republic, it was commonplace to dress in "Oriental" costume as fashion norms dictated this practice; ostentatiously *wearing* one's wealth was a noncoercive form of semiotic exploitation. Nowadays

though, the dynamic is different as content can be gleaned from and controlled by multiple technological spaces and are much less coercive in nature.

Further examples of this are the annual *feste* (festivals) which are re-enactments outside of their locus of origin yet remain essentially the same aside from materials and food stuffs that have been naturally modified to impart a cultural terroir. Yet, these diasporic churches and festivals achieve parity with their Italian cousins. This is accomplished due to consistency of ritual and intention of authenticity. Along the Mahoning river that winds through Northeastern Ohio into Pennsylvania, one can find no less than five major annual Italian themed festivals during the summer and many smaller events throughout the year: the Youngstown Mount Carmel Italian festival and the Lowellville Mt. Carmel Society festival in July, the Greater Youngstown Italian Fest, Brier Hill Fest, and just outside the county north of the city of Youngstown, the Warren Italian-American festival. These last three taking place in August.

These events or *rituali* (section 4.2.2) are opportunities for people to tap into and revisit their ethnic origins, history, and “show the flag” as green, white, and red permeate the social function (section 4.3). Modern day ritualistic events, these festivals encode/decode signs via memes in those diasporic Italians who may or may not have much, if any contact to Italy, the Italian language, and crucially peninsular and insular Italian people themselves.

Therefore, signs and their vehicle, the meme, offer an efficient explanation of how Italian culture has spread via Italian diasporic peoples who operate as vectors that retain an ethnic attachment to the culture of peninsular/insular Italy

and continue to spread memes – with varying degrees of fidelity outside of the “geographical expression” known as peninsular and insular Italy. These memes, working in unison form memeplexes that provide an interpretive semi-ephemeral object with which to perceive not only themselves but the world, or worlds they belong to in the host country.

Italy, as a memeplex, has generated influential /Italian/ memes that they have made their way into the minds of Italians and non-Italians alike. In many cases, specific words and phrases have all but lost their ethnic markers. One simple linguistic meme that is an accurate example of the memetic process of spreading form within a specific culture outward to another would be the Italian dialectal word *Capeesh* from the Italian verb “capire” or in the infinitive form “to understand” but more accurately “do you get it?”. Whereas “keep your friends close and your enemies closer” is another example of the folk wisdom that is often employed in reverence of power and cunning³⁴. For instance, television shows such as *The Sopranos* have helped popularize certain IA styles, expressions, and specific lexical choices that both Italian and non-Italic people use in everyday discourse and, often, formal/informal negotiations but mainly in an ironic or

³⁴ The original version is from *The Godfather* (1972) "My father taught me many things here – he taught me in this room. He taught me – keep your friends close but your enemies closer." Attributed to Mario Puzo and Francis Ford Coppola, there is some certainty to the phrase's exact origin. A relatively common concept in military strategy and political economy, keeping an enemy within a certain range, under observation has been a tactic written about by both Sun Tsu and Niccolò Machiavelli. Therefore, it is safe to say that the variation Puzo and Coppola used could well have been influenced by Western and Eastern thought.

comical way and not with the violent undertones and foreboding of a Don Vito *Corleonean* intentionality.

One could posit that all culture is a distortion, a transformation, a recombination, of other pre-existing cultural data. What we perceive to be authentic in this temporal moment, or what is casually referred to as real in the mediatic vernacular of modern, contemporary media and society is often a variation. Often culture, and the people who create it, are reduced to a continuum: real, and its more intellectual counterpart, authentic or else the binary, real vs fake. This reduction can be observed in relation to the perceived incongruity of diasporic Italian culture in the periphery and peninsular insular Italian culture in the centre. It is due to this perceived incongruity that often tension is created. The most notable examples being in the realm of food and the constant arguments surrounding the aesthetic of authenticity.

In the field of Translation Studies, there is also a growing trend to use memes as a category of analysis. When the conception of the meme is applied, however, this is done to delineate the categories of theories and trends in translation (Chesterman, 2016) and is not the study of memes and their effects on interlingual communication in and of itself. Nevertheless, this novel approach is effective in the categorization of translation theories, as they too carry forward at times stylised ideas of cultural behaviours and attitudes to the transfer of meaning, as do the memes analysed in the present study. Though recently there has been much talk in the mediasphere about memes as well as many admittedly

lay articles written concerning their influence in both the social and digital spaces, it is the practical application of memes by advanced applied sciences research centres –many of which draw funding for the United States government – that is relevant to the use of memes for research purposes. If anything, it is in the more technical realm that the concept of meme is adored more, shall we say, intellectual space. In his introduction to “A Memetics Compendium” Robert Finkelstein explains how memes, and the science of memetics has all been ignored:

In the more than 30 years since the meme was identified as an entity of interest, there has been almost no research to determine whether memetics can be placed on a scientific basis so that its phenomena and effects can be quantified, predicted, and controlled. Most of the research of memetics, such as it is, has been conducted in scattered efforts, often as personal projects on the part of dedicated academics, mostly outside the U.S. There have been no significant, coherent efforts until now, where DARPA is exploring whether a scientific framework can be established for memetics. (Finkelstein, 2008: 12)

Finkelstein clearly finds value in the application of memetics within the US's defence system as a whole. Currently, and into the future, the study and dissemination of core texts in the literature pertaining to memetics will continue to draw interest in both the hard, soft sciences as well and humanities. Memetics, offers two crucial points to this study: 1. as an interpretive method it allows for the tracking of particular signs through an information ecosystem, and 2. applied

to semiotics it allows an interpreter of signs to see track the dissemination, transformation, and influence of a particular system of culture.

With regards to vectors as memetic code clusters as vectors of content distributions, we must consider the role of human agency. Human culture, if we look at it as a dynamic grouping of memes working in unison as memeplexes - carry with them the signs that go on to propagate via their human vectors. A *semio*-memetic approach further offers the observers of culture a chance to separate themselves and look at the phenomenon of human cultural transmission from one locus to another in an objective manner (Cavalli-Sforza et al., 1982). It is through the memes, with no regard for human vectors, that we can observe the movement of cultural signs through diverse loci. Moreover, meme theory is more of an explanation of how ideas and concepts travel through time, space, and cognition rather than explanation of the memes themselves. It is also helpful to realize that the explanation of a specific meme, whether it be a book in this case should be left to semiotic interpretation.

Distribution is a key concept when looking at texts as memes. For example, linking to Sample II (see discussion in Section 6.4.), after the initial creation of *Rose Street*, the original book moved outside the Leone nuclear family as it was sold in various small and medium sized shops in and around the Youngstown area. Therefore, the chain of distribution was short, local, and completely do-it-yourself. It should be noted that in Sample II the two authors' four books were purchased in and around the Mahoning Valley *Rose Street* and *Rose Street: Revisited* were purchased from Dorian Books, an independent

bookseller, on the city's North side adjacent to Youngstown State University while copies of *Brier Hill, USA* and *Brier, USA the Sequel* were purchased directly from the author at Trolio's print shop.

Another example linking to Sample I is *Jimmy's Bakery & Deli* (see discussion in 5.8) that specializes in "Italian specialties". It is a "go to" place in Youngstown for peninsular, insular, and diasporic Italian products and foodstuffs. Again, the reconnection to culture through the purchasing and consumption of food will inevitably make its way to Robert Orsi's concept of the "domus":

The source of meaning and morals in Italian Harlem was the domus. Men and women in the community defined and determined who they were according to the standards of the domus. This is how they knew what was good and what was bad, how they defined the good life, how they understood what it meant to be human. An Italian American's most intimate perceptions about the nature of reality and about the bonds that exist among people originated in the domus. The people of Italian Harlem distinguished themselves from Americans with reference to the domus. (1985: 75-106)

When we consider the *form* culture takes, it is just as important as the *content* of culture, we move towards a unified understanding of its effects in the macro-cultural environment of diaspora. If we consider a codified collection of signs working together in unison that produces an intended or unintended outcome depending on the reader, then IA texts are memes in and of themselves. Since both the story as an idea or blend of concepts, i.e., "conceptual blending" (Lakoff,

1990; Nordquist, 2019; Turner & Fauconnier, 1995; Turner, 1996) connects with other cognitive attributes such as metaphors and the story itself, the actual text contained therein takes on a life of its own through three overlapping conceptual metaphors: orientational, ontological, and structural (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). Regardless of the version, the Christian Bible was the quintessential example of this metaphorical mechanism. There is the whole concept, or idea of the bible as a sacred religious text. Then there is the text itself, the encoded letters on the page. Beyond these two states there exists a multitude of interpretations of the text, and of course including the manipulated passages through time. All of these interpretations form the memeplex of the Christian Bible. Memes then, are the individual units that make up the syntax of a culture's discourse as narrative while a memeplex, is a collection of mutually assisting memes working as units of cultural information that elicit meaning and create value. These contextual elements are transmitted and understood by readers as agent/interpreters across time and space, increasing across technologically advanced platforms as well as integrate screens. These domain crossing and blending memeplexes create understanding for subsequent generations and inform the in-group on their identity through signs interpreted in texts frequently passes between both traditional textual and technological boundaries. This last point being one justification for including both traditional paper-based texts and newer audiovisual based texts. Moreover, though both samples possess a certain object permanence, they in fact are to varying degrees ephemeral textual expressions of culture due to their potential for a relatively short shelf life. Furthermore, in

typical memetic fashion, we cannot know which will go “viral” and we certainly cannot be sure as to which will have a long, influential shelf, and *digital* shelf life.

The categorization of the constituent elements of narratives has been a continuous feature of textual interpretation. Structuralist, Post-Structuralist, and Russian Formalist theorists have interpreted, categorized, and defined narrative structure and the symbolic meaning contained within them. With regards to interrupting human-generated textual expression of culture, folklorist Vladimir Prop’s “syntagmatic” analysis of Russian folktales (1928; 1984) contrasted anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’s “paradigmatic” analysis of culture. Levi-Strauss accomplished this “dividing the myth into sequences not always clearly indicated by the plot” (1979: 199) leading him to the discovery of what he defined as the “fundamental characteristics of a myth” (Ibid). These two methods would lead to a debate with the former criticising the latter for lack of “rigor” (Dundes, 1997). Although Prop would be criticized for a perceived excess of formalism (Ibid), a major feature of both positions was an interest in the underlying structure of narrative content with developing models effective for describing a discernible, knowable universal textual structure both from within and outside a target.

Structures that create and transcend meaning through texts as narrative vectors in what would seem a bid to probe the epistemological nature of narratives and, by extension, human nature. Moreover, keeping within classification models proposed by Levi-Strauss, this study also builds off of his

“four layers” i.e., geographic, sociological, economic, and cosmological (Levi-Strauss, 1984, 7-14) while expanding them across the domains to encompass both traditional text-narratives and audiovisual text-narratives (section 4.3 - 4.3.2).

Unfortunately, their models did not envision the full and often seamless integration of ephemeral texts operating in a back-and-forth interplay between material objects and continuously being updated and modified due to linguistic and geographical differences through technological advancements. This new reality has in turn developed into a media-ecosystem, a metaphorical living organism. Dawkin’s positionality as an evolutionary biologist, as opposed to those coming from the humanities or soft sciences, inadvertently contributed to a conceptualization of culture that integrates multiple fields of media in what Henry Jenkins defines as the concept of “convergence culture” (2006: 15-17) that itself grew out of participatory culture (2006: 3); a form of DIY culture in and of itself where agency is considered to be one of the prime motivators, and like we shall see in Sample II, altruism.

The phenomenon of *Game of Thrones* (2010-2019) proves the ideal example of a fully integrated convergence in the mediasphere. As there are multiple interpretations based on the actual media someone is consuming, texts in the expanded meaning of the term, are now fully integrated and seamless between symbols, language, and meaning globally — what Henry Jenkins refers to as “convergence culture” (Jenkins, 2006; 2013). These models, previously sufficient, are not applicable *in toto* because they do not take into consideration a synthesis between language, sign production, and the materiality of objects in

their sliding temporal states integrated, or “converged” with technological advancements. Today, in media, the dialectic is fluid drawing off of all available manifestations of texts in their various forms that signify and support fully integrated narrative structures. Transmedia storytelling is fundamentally “the new aesthetic that has emerged in response to media convergence — one that places new demands on consumers and depends on the active participation of knowledge communities” (Jenkins, 2007: 20-21). It has led to a paradigm shift in how we communicate globally. It would be logical to incorporate this into both the dialectic of Italian diaspora studies due to the way in which diasporic peoples communicate across the spatio-temporal with diverge modalities engaged to accomplish the communicative act. Furthermore, it can be said that the diasporic experience constitutes of form a of proto-transmedality. Moreover, Jenkins explains that:

transmedia stories are based not on individual characters or specific plots but rather complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories. This process of world-building encourages an encyclopedic impulse in both readers and writers. We are drawn to master what can be known about a world which always expands beyond our grasp. This is a very different pleasure than we associate with the closure found in most classically constructed narratives, where we expect to leave the theatre knowing everything that is required to make sense of a particular story. (henryjenkins.org, 2007)

Here again we can draw a parallel with diasporic Italians living in the periphery absorb paratextual and textual, often commodified, cultural information shaping

identity through perceived aesthetic qualities of Italian culture and value systems anchored in an aesthetic of *italianità* encoded in vernacular culture. With regards to the cultural evolution of a specific variation of diasporic Italians, a dichotomy of culture developed creating a new Italian memotype — a collection of mutually beneficial units operating in unison to transmit information through memetic and non-genetic means as in a genotype (Tyler, 2012: 275).

This schism could account for the friction between, what we could call old world vs new world Italians. Therefore, the idea of a methodological framework for understanding the do-it-yourself literature of *Youngstalians* was to look at diasporic Italian culture as containing fuzzy sets of attributes in the form of memeplexes containing “memetic code clusters” (section 4.2). This framework makes it possible to observe examples of complex signs of culture transferred from the original immigrants through the intermediaries then onto subsequent generations; and a way of tracking cultural attributes and connecting them to larger discourses thereby reconnecting the diverse Italian memotypes into the diasporic, peninsular and insular Italian dialectic. Lastly, in the confrontation with what is considered progress in the capitalistic paradigm, the role of intermediaries plays a subtle yet potentially significant role in the dialectic through the propagation of memes. Any subject that is either deceased or at an age where very little can be transferred to future generations due to age of the subject raises the possibility that information will be lost. Yet, as in the case of Joseph Sacchini we can see how cultural information can live beyond the creator of text. Through a personal interest in his own Italian familial history and that of

the city, Sacchini collected hundreds of names, brief biographies, and stories of diasporic Italian in Youngstown compiling them into a book. Therefore, these stories were and continue to be memes waiting to be discovered as they lay dormant in various Youngstown area public libraries waiting to be re-discovered. It should be noted that Sacchini's book *The Italians of Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley, Ohio* (1997) was another DIY endeavour. Sacchini gifted copies to many branches of the Mahoning Country Library as well as the Mahoning Valley Historical Society. More of a collection of biographies and personal information, it is well known in the Mahoning Valley as a text yet impossible to buy since the death of Sacchini. Copies do not come on the market frequently and are sold immediately. In fact, national chain printing companies, in this case Kinkos, will not make copies of the text borrowed from the public library or personal copies as it will run counter to copyright laws — though the actual laws are never explained in detail by the employees of the copy stores in question. Here we have another example of how rules in place to preserve author copyright may in fact be the defining act that renders their DIY works extinct. That is unless more people decide to make copies of their own private copies or borrowed copies which seems to be unlikely as the population of Italian Americans stays either the same or continues to drop. This is the fate of many of the small press, DIA texts that come of out smaller, lesser-known ethnic communities. Often the only hope is for the area to be mentioned in popular culture. Therefore, transference or cultural transmission (Cavalli-Sforza, 1981) can still take place, but it will compete with newer or more influential instances

of external information pertaining to culture, most likely to take the form of popular culture. Intermediaries, on the other hand, can still recount cultural information either orally or in a written form, but the validity and the success of this information could be compromised to the divide between generations. For example, *i nonni* or grandparents' stories are interesting but can seem "old" if grandchildren are not invested in the relationship. This can be a potential problem in American society as it lends more weight to contemporary concepts of knowledge. One needn't look further than consumer purchasing patterns among American citizens. In their race to have the newest material goods and services often older, more established options are discarded and or relegated to the sale bin of culture. In this case, we can consider the sale bin a metaphor for folklore, or "the old ways".

3.2.7 Culture as Frame

In substance, culture is a (sometimes novel) recombination of data. At times successful, sometime less, this data transmits, or rather diffuses itself, via meme. By using the word "itself", I do not intend that memes possess a conscience. In their original sense, memes are often referred to as "viruses of the mind" (Blackmore, 2003; Brodie, 1996; Dawkins, 1976; Dennett, 1990) moving from one host to another, continuing until they are no longer fit to spread, i.e., fitness. In a sense, they operate like water; they flow and change states. With this change of state, interpretations of a particular attribute can be radically different in the places where they settle. The constant being the fact that they still contain the

metaphorical water. In this metaphor one could posit that Italian food memes contain a transformed, often hybrid state when it is portrayed outside of Italy it what is arguably one of the best examples of cultural appropriation i.e., Italian cuisine. But who exactly is appropriating Italian food culture and propagating these memes? And by which media are they moving? It is clear that often, the form of media, and how they frame (Goffman, 1961) Italianness creates a floating signifier devoid of any meaning. These signs in question lose their ethnic component and are reduced to simulacra. This materiality of simulacraic objects then goes on to become the main source of meaning in the periphery which by virtue of isolation then becomes a new centre.

3.3 Concluding Remarks

This chapter provided the tools in which culture is interpreted through signs, how culture arrives by act of immigration/migration in turn spreading and integrating into new geographical loci. These principles provided the overarching justification for both epistemological and ontological decisions made throughout. The theories contained within were considered in order to triangulate diasporic Italian culture into a larger field of meaning for identity construction which in turn creates material objects and influences interpretation of the world. Peirce's semiotic interpretation of symbols, indices, and icons underpin the multimodal analysis of the texts throughout the study. This chapter also serves as contextual lead into the next by providing the overarching theoretical concepts and a semiotic interpretation of memetic code clusters as

well as centre vs periphery and its effect on intercultural multimodality that unpin the study. It also clarified and refined core concepts in semiotics as well as to rationalize memetics, narrative criticism, and aesthetics. The intent was to provide a broad overview of, or figurative connective tissue between, what would seem on the surface opposing domains: traditional book texts and audiovisual texts in the form of television programming. Keeping within Jenkin's "Convergence Culture" theory (2007), this section also provided the basic attributes used to probe, decipher, sequence contemporary media ecology and mass communication.

While the chapter was organized and presented sections it should not be implied that any sort of hierarchy emerges as to the importance of one section over another. Each section contains and deals with the connection between the use of language and culture and its connection to signs and their vehicle, the meme, as well as the linking up with through the meaning constructed through *clustering* around a central *kernel* of a specific element of culture. Another important factor that was considered was culture as a never-ending text that is in continuous flux, advancing and regressing in the spatio-temporal state held together through synthesis between meme vectors and sign systems the "semio-memetic". Lastly, how culture is used to frame and interpret the human condition and also people's daily existence was discussed leading to some notions of *italianità* as a cultural and ethnic identity marker.

In the next chapter, we shall see the specific organizing structure of the memetic code clusters and the aesthetic values that are placed upon them by

virtue of their evolving and transformative connections to *italianità*. Each Memetic Code Cluster will be discussed in detail so that both the text-narrative and visual semiotic, or sign-narrative components of each become apparent as linkage points to Italy as centre as well as the new centres that emerge in Italy's periphery constituting a continuous evolving, or "unlimited", dialectic.

4 The Study

In this chapter, we shall find an explanation of the study's design, evaluation, and analysis through the hybrid use of visual semiotics and memetics. This methodological framework will demonstrate that diasporic culture is a multimodal experience as well as a subjective spatio-temporal state. Through unlimited semiosis (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43), the state of diaspora enables diasporic groups to produce multiple interpretations of their cultural identity depending on subjective conditions. As such, it is always in a perpetual transitory state due to factors such as residing outside an origination point and the influences of hegemonic cultural forces.

Italianità, that is the state of being an Italian which consists of an association among the signifier /Italy/ (Tamburri, 2018), the Italian language or dialectal variations, and peninsular or insular culture, has been a topic of debate and discussed since before the concept of Italy existed. In a way, it is a lost cause because at the heart of this debate is a problematic that can never be answered due to the nature of identity as a transitory state and the notoriously subjective concept of aesthetics (Gronow, 1997). It is the embodiment of a spatio-temporal state that may appear fixed until it is acted upon by outside forces or selection pressures. Factors such as economic prosperity and decline, political economy leading to unity or disunity, social pressures changing the underlying structural

states of cognition can all exert a certain gravity effecting different interpretations from one moment to another. Therefore, while it did originate and initially develop in Italy, *italianità* is not a fixed attribute linked to one specific geographical locus. It is mobile and adaptive, strong and weak, transcending and connecting people to different cultural frameworks. Meaning, as a cultural unit, is a cultural convention and as such does not lend itself well to consistency and/or any sort of eternal permanence. Culture is notoriously ephemeral, modifying itself just as the Roman empire changed to encompass new lands and integrate new people each with their own languages, aesthetic and cultural values.

As a multimodal quality much the same as other ethnic groups in the United States of America or elsewhere, *italianità* possesses visual semiotic qualities, as well as language and culture, of an Italian person outside of Italy as cultural centre. Yet *italianità* in its various manifestations can be a “moving target”, a concept popularized by sociologist and humour scholar Christie Davies (2007). In Davies’ analysis of jokes, he concluded that jokes are in fact very good examples of moving targets as they continue to change due to different factors such as geographical locations and societal norms. These two concepts work well when analysing the culture of any diasporic people as they demonstrate that space and place plays an important role in the perception and intersubjectivity of “Self” and the contrasting “Other” (Husserl, 1931; Sartre, 1943; Saïd; 1978).

Being /Italian/ can mean one thing to peninsular and insular Italians yet have a rather different meaning(s) to others who claim Italian ancestry

throughout the world — specifically diasporic Italians in the USA. Some of the moving targets that most often occur and can cause confusion are material objects in the form of foodstuffs, signs such as colours, and in an increasingly commodified world, Italian eating establishments as simulacra.

The transnational nature, or in keeping with the cerebral metaphor established in Chapter 2, the trans-temporal nature of DI culture, has successfully transferred out of Italy (one lobe or hemisphere) and diffused itself over the entire globe much like, concentrated mainly in, but not limited to, North and South American countries (another lobe/hemisphere) where various rates of cultural integration and linguistic assimilation have all but absorbed DIs into the geographical areas that their “pioneer” ancestors brought them to. By *their*, I am referring to the successive generations of Diasporic Italians that inhabit these lands and new world ethos of opportunity and discovery that pervade most master narratives of IA history. Moreover, it was not only the biological data that the DIs brought from Italy; they also brought with them cultural data (Hypothesis 1 of this study). This cultural data can still be found today in the signs that are used inside and outside DI communities and the success with which they move or replicate *memetically*.

4.1 Parameters for Interpretation

Interdisciplinary in scope, the two interconnected samples classify and serve to illustrate two crucial influences on modern, contemporary culture: the media and literary texts - both halves intersecting in multiple, complementary ways. In film

and television, we see the disproportionate influence of the New York metropolitan area. If one has either encountered or viewed, audiovisual products about Italian Americans, chances are it has been about this group. From this mediatic exposure — one could argue over-exposure — an image emerged that more closely resembled a stereotype rather than an authentic image of the Italian Americans in the USA. Even though there is a kernel of relative truth in every stereotype, this one has continued and transformed time and time again to have little in common with present-day Italy and Italians, not to mention most Italian Americans and their culture.

The second sample considered the critical framework of Gardaphé's interpretation of Vico's *Stages of Man*. Originally applied to Italian American literature, Gardaphé's framework offers important insight into meaning production by Italian American writers of different backgrounds and experiences all unified in an ongoing and evolving dialectic with Italy. Due to the promulgation of perpetual stereotypes and tropic representations of Italians in America and a lack of interest in smaller ethnic Italian enclaves lacking socio-economic and cultural power with the larger Italian American landscape, a literary and cultural "rain shadow" has left a void as far as the representation of these other, lesser-known Italian American communities across the United States, not only in film and television but also in literature.

With regards to the paper-based texts themselves, a small sample was chosen due to the difficulty in finding and then obtaining texts in and around the Mahoning valley. This was due to the dearth of non-fiction and creative literature

written about Italians and Italian Americans by Italian Americans from the area. What emerged from this search was that books in this sample were found to possess a common theme: they all were self-published DIY texts with follow-up sequels. Therefore, it became an obvious choice to select these texts after reviewing them. In the review process it emerged that each text began to display elements that correlated with the previously mention memetic code clusters (section 4.2). Admittedly, one shortcoming of this sample size is the fact that it would be difficult to draw a definitive conclusion from it, although, since there does not exist a large quantity of these type of texts, the point is rendered moot.

4.1.1 Contrasting *Youngstalian* and IA Narratives

The sample of texts focuses on two books that were considered to engage with this approach. They are Carmen Leone's self-published novel *Rose Street* (1996), which was written as a Christmas gift to his family, and Tony Trolio's self-published genealogical road map to Youngstown's Italian enclave, *Brier Hill, USA* (2001). Both texts can be considered acts of altruism, i.e., altruistic texts. By applying Fred Gardaphé's interpretation of Giambattista Vico's notion of a culture's three ages in *The New Science*, *Youngstalian* texts find new life beyond the small, local, and quasi-anonymous space in which they are located. In *Italian Signs, American Streets* (1996), Gardaphé uses Vico's three stages: Age of Gods, Age of Heroes, Age of Men as the poetic, mythic, and philosophic stages respectively (1996: 15) to formulate a structure in which to evaluate, decipher, and interpret Diasporic Italian texts in the periphery and how they connect and

complement Italy as literary and culture centre to all *Italic* people. The first stage, the poetic, is based in oral narratives and early immigrant writings, which is but not limited to diaries and short stories passed down by word of mouth. They are characterised by either Italian and/or English and are often a blend constituting a hybrid of both. The sentence structure is simple, “utilitarian”, and serves to gather knowledge/information rather than encoding in complicated sentences. Trolio’s *Brier Hill, USA* can be considered an example of this stage due to the fact that, in reality, this book was for the most part a written collection of stories lacking any sort of plot structure beyond each story. Moreover, and importantly for the poetic mode, much of the book was dictated to Trolio’s friend/secretary Joyce Frattaroli. Herein lies what we can consider an essential feature of the books on *italianità*, that is, when Italians came to the USA, they had very little formal education and many could not read. Therefore, the only way they kept the “home” and memories alive was through an oral tradition or *vero narratio*, i.e., “telling it like it is” (1996: 13-16). Whether or not what “it” is like may or not in fact be what it is, is arguable. Nevertheless, as the case with narratives and fictionalised life-stories, often they have a mixture of fiction and reality. Yet, one should look at narratives in the Italian sense where the word for both “history” and “story” is the same, that is, *storia*. In this way, understanding the context of the utterance is crucial to which interpretation is applied.

Gardaphé’s *Mythic* mode, on the other hand, is divided into three parts, the *Early Mythic* being most applicable to the textual sample. The *Early Mythic* is focused on autobiography and auto-biographical fiction. Structure gains

complexity due to the children of the immigrant being educated in the USA as opposed to Italy therefore lacking fluency in the standard Italian language. These diasporic Italian Americans recorded their parents' and family histories, thus establishing the myths that would go on to lead and inform subsequent generations. Some of the early mythic qualities have gone on to become aesthetic markers, narrative devices, and tropes in both traditional and audiovisual texts later on. In a sense, we see the first textual representations recounting the hybrid nature of Italian American culture. Gardaphé states that:

during the 1930s, a new American-born generation would come of age to write the stories their parents could barely recount in English, to document the injustices faced by the immigrants, and to describe their own experience as new Americans. Through their writing they would create new myths; by recording reality, they would explain the differences between Italians and Americans and bridge Italian and American cultures, creating a synthesis... Italian American. (1996: 57)

Some questions emerge when considering this type of literature: can readers of successive generations within the "in" group *hear* the voice that the author is using? Can others from outside the group understand it too? Does the writing express fundamental attributes of the culture and are they easily recognizable? And finally, does it fit into the larger literary canon of literature based on certain criteria applied by experts in the field therefore this formula is indispensable when evaluating the canon of Italian/ American literature?

Specifically, there is difficulty in placing these local narratives within the model proposed by Gardaphé, due to the books' not keeping within traditional genres and shifting boundaries. For example, readers find themselves looking at books that are a blend of history, autobiography, fiction, and ethnographic study. Also, attention needs to be paid to the fundamentally different backgrounds and storytelling techniques utilized by the authors and to the implications that these have on their works.

This section will 1. probe the metaphorical and physical places in which DIY narratives place and move between the IA, American, and Italian literary canon and 2. conduct a multimodal semiotic analysis (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) of the signs (colour usage) contained in the texts. Some corollary questions arise from the analysis of the research hypotheses in connection with the definition of cultural identity. Among these, two questions are particularly significant: are the signs easily recognizable? And who can interpret their meaning? On the one hand, we should emphasize that a sign must correlate with the sets of customs, conventions or codes used to transmit an interpretation (Harris, 1987: 205, 215) linked to a specific cultural attribute in the form of the proto-code cluster or Eco's "sign-vehicle" (1979: 72). While on the other hand, Dawkins refers to a meme as a something "that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 1976; Blackmore, 1999; Tyler, 2011). These two concepts complement each other because signs have the potential to provide the opportunity for an interpreter to decode a specific cultural message, icon, etc. while memes provide an explanation of how signs

arrive to a specific geo-temporal location, outside of their loci of origination. When approaching these texts, it is important to focus on certain signs and memes that mark these as works or expressions of Italian Americana and by extension the transmission of Italian culture.

Thematic recognition and interpretation of the texts was achieved by a semiotic analysis of perspicuous elements found within the signs, which, when clustered, are considered memes, contained in the literature and media of diasporic Italian Americana. These signs encoded into *memetic code clusters* (MCC) listed below create what we can consider the DNA of Italian Americana. From this semio-memetic position a more precise picture emerges as to the nature of one variation of one culture in diaspora. Those within the group, whether by birth, marriage or proximity to Italian Americana, would not have too much trouble recognizing and interpreting the MCCs. It should be noted, however, that many of these are fundamental components of other ethnic groups, and so should not be considered exclusive to IA culture.

Memes are vehicles — vectors in memetic parlance — that offer an explanation for potentially understanding the success of the Italian signs as they move from P/I to the DI communities and then on to American culture as a whole. From generation to generation, meme replication of signs in IA culture continues to flourish while also leaping out of the ethnic origination point into the larger, mainstream American conscience or, American Experience. Moreover, this was accomplished through the diffusion of memes that crossed the sea and transmitted, or *infected*, other cultural systems via orality, text, and media

through either human vectors or through material objects. Memetic analysis thereby creates a methodological framework with which to read the texts of *Youngstalians* and interpreting specific signs and clustering memes contained therein. By incorporating these disciplines this study proposes an innovative framework through the application of a clustering model based on the recognizable signs in *Youngstalian* literature. Utilizing this model, readers and critics are able to gather the information necessary to determine if the signs in fact run through the various texts. On the one hand, in the case of audiovisual texts we can see a refining and consuming of identity through foodways. While on the other, through analysis of targeted memetic code clusters, we can see the movement of culture between different geographical loci thereby continuing a dialogue between cultures. In both cases, we see many instances of cultural transformation and hybridization as perceived and portrayed among communities of (partial) speakers of Italian and among Italian-origin communities who define their relationships with the new country and Italy through real and fictional cultural memes and in the process, refining the definition of Italian identity.

The schema can be broken down into what we shall call three spaces of temporal identity. As group and personal identity morph and change during both the collective existence of a specific group of humans and the individuals contained therein, one must look to the selection pressures that push and pull people one way or another through cultural gravitational forces.

4.2 Categories of Analysis

This section proposes a new approach to understanding self-published texts by utilizing memetic code clusters (MCCs). MCCs are specific lingua-cultural information that can be applied to the analysis of texts in order to better comprehend the act of transition and transformation in the human cultural experience, specifically that of *Youngstaliens*. They are memeplexes containing groupings of signs that an interpreter decodes. There is a certain requirement that the interpreter be coming from a position enabling them to understand the clusters or at least a position of affinity to Italian culture. This would entail a person having specific implicit knowledge due to either being raised in the target culture — in this case Italian or Italian American — or adjacently to the culture in question.

Contained within each of these “fuzzy sets” are non-mutually exclusive memeplexes containing individual memes as nodes coalescing around one of the core cluster concepts. They were mathematician L.A. Zadeh’s solution to the problem classes have in organizing different yet similar entities:

A fuzzy set is a class of objects with a continuum of grades of membership. Such a set is characterized by a membership (characteristic) function which assigns to each object a grade of membership ranging between zero and one. The notions of inclusion, union, intersection, complement, relation, convexity, etc., are extended to such sets, and various properties of these notions in the context of fuzzy sets are established. (1956: 338)

While a code cluster may reside in a specific categorical domain it can and will most often intersect with other categories. Since the attributes of culture are a complex grouping of symbolic rules and processes, often in transitive states, there is a necessity for the term “fuzzy set” or, by extending the term to encompass linguistics, “fuzzy relations” (De Cock, Bodenhofer & Kerre, 2000: 2). These are used as concise, non-fixed elements in the placement of observable signs. Moreover, due to these fuzzy sets, diasporic Italian culture can be understood and analysed through holarchical taxonomies in the form of categorized, intersecting sets. By combining both the systematic analysis of culture and the inherent inaccuracy of fuzzy sets, we can better understand the dynamics exerting force of diasporic peoples and how they create meaning in their lives, and by extension, their artistic expressions in the form of texts and material objects. Furthermore, sociolinguist Helen Spencer-Oatey defines culture as:

a fuzzy set of basic assumptions and values, orientations to life, beliefs, policies, procedures and behavioral conventions that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member’s behavior and his/her interpretations of the ‘meaning’ of other people’s behavior. (2008: 3)

It is within these fuzzy sets of culture that the importance of the group narrative becomes central to the creation of meaning. As a conceptual framework, it enables us to be able to modify our interpretation of diasporic Italian American life through the spatio-temporal. This allows for an unlimited number of

multimodal interpretations as we probe the nature of culture as complex systems of meaning-generating phenomena.

For practical reasons, and following the theoretical assumptions discussed in section 1.1, Table 4.1 shows a schematic set of what we can consider natural clusters around the concepts that the texts of *Youngstalians* use in order to create a sense of identity and meaning. These clusters were amassed first as visual semiotic elements observed through filmic texts and were used as a thematic guide for students of the Masters in Audiovisual translation at the University of Bologna's Department of Interpretation and Translation while students viewed multiple films in different genres. Furthermore, all the selected films shared and engaged in a dialectic using Italian signs as a "control". Each of the ten original thematic attributes were then combined into a more efficient system of interpretation or code clusters. For the purposes of this study, the clusters are intended to provide a framework for the analysis of a selection of sample texts. Through this analysis, the intention is to expand and connect said clusters to the dialectic between Italian/American studies with regards to texts from smaller, lesser-known Italian American communities and the cultures that have been created through the hybridisation of Italians and their new environment in the US.

All the following explanations in the figure below contain relevant general information that makes up the multiple nodes that surround the numerically listed "kernels". These kernels are the central core of meaning and most important part making up the core of the sign-meme or *semio-memetic* model. The

surrounding nodes are the themes that can be interpreted in samples I & II (section 5, 6) aiding the reading in how diasporic Italians create, re-create and continue this ascending and descending cycle of cultural production. A culture belongs to the people that are part of it as well as those who claim it. But we also belong to a culture whether we choose to not. Whether it is in private or public spaces, the acquisition, maintenance, fluctuation and transformation of culture, the semio-memetic code clusters in this study contain all the available data for a diasporic subject to access in the periphery. Family, history, stories, food, language, religion, ceremonies, marriage, baptism, communion, wakes as well as *morra, bocce*, and traditional music proved the aesthetics that continue a dialectic spanning time and space.

Through preliminary analysis and interpretation, evaluation, refinement of select texts, multimedia texts and images, seven clusters were developed, they are summarised in Table 4.1.

Cluster	Description
I. animus	Conception of self: ethnic and non-ethnic identity. Being Italian, being American.
II. ritus	Religion: baptism, communion, confirmation, Catholic parochial education.
III. moralis	Morality: vice, gangsters, criminal culture, violence.
IV. familiae	Family Affairs/Ceremonies: marriage, baptism, birth, divorce, and death.
V. linguae	Language: dialects, language attrition, transformation, instances of Italglish (past) and Italiense (present).
VI. historiae	History: traditional feste, music, stories, morra, and bocce.
VII. locus	Social spaces: the neighbourhood and its place in visual narrative.

Table 4.1. The clusters of memes

It should be stated that each of these overlapping code clusters can often be found in IA, DI texts and are not mutually exclusive. Based on the above code clusters,

what follows is the description of what each is and how they create an aesthetic of *italianità* that becomes the defining features of Italian diasporic culture.

4.2.1 Animus

The code cluster *animus* pertains to the conception of self as both Italian and American while negotiating that identity in the visual semiotic and literary space of the texts, *animus* can also encompass the encoding and decoding of cultural activities in the periphery. This also includes the perception of those outside of or removed from Italian culture in the USA, i.e., non-Italian family members brought into an Italian family through exogamy. Though the use of *animus* has taken on a negative connotation due to its meaning of holding on to anger about someone or something, its use here does not reflect this semantic shift but its more ancient meaning. *Animus*, a Latin-based word comes through English from the Italian *animo*: the centre of the spiritual and intellectual life. To the diasporic subject, these centres become bifurcated in the periphery as new ones emerge to replace and connect to the original source ones in the centre.

4.2.2 Ritus

The code cluster *ritus* pertains to codified customs encompassing faith, festivities, and the sociological importance of food consumption. Aspects of religion and the ancillary events and values surrounding Roman Catholicism, i.e., marriage and divorce, baptism, communion, conformation, pilgrimage and any other social events in the parish operates as another area of meaning creation — all of which fall under and within other MCCs according to fuzzy sets theory. Since food is a

de facto figurative “religion” in Italian culture, it would make sense to include it as a ritual due to the level of structure and understanding required to reproduce it. Although it does intersect with multiple MCCs.

4.2.2.1 Food and Ethnic Consumption Practices

In recent years, the popularity of Italian food in television cooking shows (Sample I) that utilize Italy as a fundamental aesthetic i.e., sign system is numerous and create both visual and cultural aesthetics all their own (Bencivenni, 2013: 124; Cinotto, 2013: 11, 55; 2014: 6; Parasecoli, 2013, Tricarico, 2013: 190). Due to the transnational popularity and appeal of these shows steeped in *italianità*, they often become the only exposure that audiences have to Italian and Italian American cuisine, culture, and less so, language. These programs as simulacra of traditional Italian family meals often become the only representation of an “encoding social event” (Douglass, 1971: 61) where people have the opportunity to encounter in the USA/UK. Consumption practices around the table as altar, and what it *means* to really eat, is quite possibly the quintessential semio-memetic experience. We consume foods that have been prepared by either following texts, memories, or a combination of both. In a memetic frame, recipes are the memes that have travelled from Italy as centre to each and every periphery while diasporic Italians, but in fact all human culture, have been seizing these memes of culinary production to recreate a familiar transcendent experience, thereby creating and spreading meaning via encoding and decoding the domestic and public event. Food, in the lay society, has been a “symbol of collective identity for Italian Americans throughout memoirs, literature, poetry, and the visual arts”

(Cinotto, 2013: 2). But it has also been looked at critically, so much so that scholars have observed the consumption of Italian food as “an act of self-identification and pride for Italians and an occasion for asserting cultural and political claims” (Ibid).

The importance of the table as a communal place in the *domus* is a way in which Italians continue to exercise *italianità*, and in the case of North Americans, American *italianità*. Fundamental to Italian families, *la tavola* acts symbolically as a domestic altar where generations of families have eaten, exchanged emotions and ideas. The table as altar, as a religious experience, and the food culture that encompasses it, is a memetic data-transmission platform helping to continue a connection between diasporic, peninsular, and insular Italian communities. Often with mixed results, that which is placed upon the table becomes a discussion in and of itself, for example in terms of what constitutes real Italian food/cooking and whether their manifestations are in fact authentic. Food consumption and food in general serves as the connective tissue of the family body keeping diverse parts continually functioning together. This metaphorical tissue keeps the component parts moving in unison as well as at times, working together to actually prepare the food; from times past and into the future, an intergenerational dialectic continues by way of food consumption.

Texts and audiovisual programmes offer an interpretation of the use of food as facilitator in the Italian family which thus became an ideological framework which “shaped and “transmitted” (Cinotto, 2013: 3) the notion of the Italian family as a class-based system. This system would be the social safety net

for the immigrant in America but would go on to cause problems for subsequent generations who, while being Italian in the home, were living in a non-Italian world outside of it. Or in other words, food and the table as a domestic ritual provided the context for codification of *italianità* while in the periphery. Interestingly, it was through immigration that food culture, and some dialects, were preserved. In the Mahoning Valley, for example, many southern Italian food traditions still exist. The *pizzelle*, Italian wedding soup “*minestra maritata*” (Jones, 2004), and Brier Hill pizza (Trolio, 2001: 105-108) all have Italian *regional* histories that survive and continue into today. These foods as ritual signify an authentic expression of *Italianità* in the periphery.

Ethnic and religious festivals, i.e., *feste*, as ritualistic behaviour operate as a re-contextualisation of social practices originating in Italy and continuing in the periphery albeit in a transmuted form owing to the shedding of certain foreign attributes and acquiring new domestic ones as well as the re-emergence of dormant ones. For example, during one of the many annual Italian festivals many types of Italian games are played, and food is served but there will also be the addition of popular American foods as well. Therefore, foods such as *pizzelle* and *cannoli* – to name only a few – and games that are no longer played, e.g., *bocce* and *morra* that may have been localised to one specific region in Italy (i.e., *morra* in the *mezzogiorno* in general and on the island of Sardegna) will now be considered “Italian” in general and lose their regional moniker. The merger of these signs in an IA *festa* leads IAs to believe that they are de facto “Italian”. Due to this, a new semiotic syntagma emerges. This new reality or reading then

creates a new historical narrative as it feeds back into the receiver's comprehension of rituals practiced in the community thereby adding new nodes to the ritual memeplex.

Lastly, the decisions to compare the Italian American tradition of broadcasting about Italian cuisine, against two strong, but different, broadcasting phenomena in Anglophone countries, Canada and the UK, which are equally experiencing definitions and self-definitions of *italianità* through the use of Italian cuisine, was a pragmatic choice. The decision was made based on the availability of programs to Italian audiences during the period of research for this study (2013-2018).

4.2.2.2 Game as Ethnic Marker

As previously mentioned, another important aspect of *Youngstalian* culture, is that there is still a game specific to *Youngstalian* culture and the prevalence of it in the Mahoning Valley is a defining cultural aesthetic of *italianità*: the ancient numerical hand game, *morra*. Another Italian specific peculiarity, this hand game purportedly goes back thousands of years to ancient Roman and Greek times (Carcopino, Rowell, & Beard, 2003). While much of the information regarding the game's origins is anecdotal, the name and description of the game itself is listed and defined in the catalogue of the *Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze* as:

Antico gioco popolare in cui due giocatori, posti l'uno di fronte all'altro, abbassano simultaneamente e velocemente uno o più dita della mano,

gridando un numero da due a dieci per indovinare la quantità complessiva delle dita distese. (1999-2005)

[Ancient folk game in which two players, facing each other, simultaneously and quickly lower one or more fingers, shouting a number from two to ten to guess the total amount of extended fingers. (author's translation)]

While game playing in society serves many purposes (Gluckman, 1949; Robert & Kaplan, 1962; 1968), in *Youngstalian* culture it serves a symbolic role connecting Italian Americans to both actual and imagined ancestors in Italy and how they would have lived their lives. This imaged narrative adds value to life and an orientating force in how one is supposed to live life according to /Italian/ ideal and traditions.

Like *bocce*, *morra* is a way to act out being Italian in the periphery yet, for all intents and purposes, in an authentic way as the game itself has not gone through much change since it was always and continues to only need a minimum of three to four players using only their hands and fingers. Often, it is one of the only times in the public sphere where participants will use – with varying degrees of language fluency – the Italian language in a predominate role, this last feature intersecting with MCC *linguae* (section 4.2.5).

As a general rule, *morra* requires players to use only numerical values from 1 to 10 but spoken in the Italian language often with a dialectal pronunciation. Moreover, screaming and overtly aggressive male posturing is used to intimidate opponents (Gardaphé, 2000: 108-115). This becomes a humorous and witty

strategy in and of itself (ibid). Furthermore, this implicit release of energy or “controlled” release of energy fits into an anthropologic frame of how humans use games in organized rituals. Often there are multiple motives for these functions, chief amongst which is in-group bond, joking through the application of humour and wit, and providing a “safety valve in promoting harmonious social relations” (Norbeck, 1974: 6). One last important detail of *morra* that intersects with multimodality (section 3.2), paratexts (section 4.3), and ethnic humour is the use of colourful team jerseys emblazoned with the *tricolore* and comical sayings both in Italian and English (Davies, 1990; 2011). Echoed in this intersection of language, culture, and social class (Sciorra & Ruberto, 2017: 18) was a study of another Italian (card) game, *briscola*. On the intersectional nature that games play in the daily lives of Italian Americans of various social strata, Anna De Fina states:

Linguistic strategies, particularly code-switching, are central in this construction, but their role becomes apparent only when language use is analyzed within significant practices in the life of the club. Code-switching into Italian is used as an important index of ethnic affiliation in socialization practices. (2007: 317)

All of these strategies build an authentic in-group experience continuing a dialogue with Italy as cultural discourse while simultaneously situating diasporic Italians into two simultaneously existing fields of meaning. This placement/re-placement is at the core of *italianità* and its aesthetic function to culture. Furthermore, we can see three MCCs converging: *ritus, linguae, historia*

as game provides an ideal environment or space to generate a critical mass where atomic elements come together and form new elemental features of *italianità*. While the MCCs may not share the exact same features as in the centre, due to their existence in the periphery they constitute a new, shared cultural identity thus influencing the construction of diasporic Italian identity, maintaining authenticity, and they keep the periphery connected to the centre.

Though examples of cultural memes — especially clothing and game — are not unique to diasporic Italian Americans, their significance, level of order, and how they influence identity creation appears to disproportionately influence Italian American culture. The fervour takes on ritualistic style while the fecundity of meme and frequency with which it is played maintains its place in the periphery. Here too we find another mark Anthony Trolio left on the area due to his founding of the Mahoning valley *morra* league (section 6.2). This league meets just outside Youngstown at the Georgetown banquet centre once a month to compete. There they share homemade wine, and often in a mixture of various Italian dialects, converse for around four hours while playing *morra* in what can be considered a ritualistic encounter. Though not an object in and of itself, the exercising of Italian identity through the playing of *morra* has enabled multiple generations of Italian Americans in Youngstown to continue engaging in a

cultural activity that is peninsular Italian in nature and thus boost their sense of *italianità*³⁵.

Lastly, *feste* are expressions of culture and as such may be viewed as a symbolic act of communication through encoding/decoding of certain activities. Participants at these *feste* may not appear to be encoding and decoding but they are in fact doing just that. Moreover, these *feste* operate as non-nuclear or biological family “reunions” but as community reunions as many people come from out of the area to re-encode old data and update new. Furthermore, IAs have the issue of nostalgia to deal with, so many times what they are actually re-encoding was a corrupted code in the first place. One place where this can easily be seen is in the hybridization of food at these events. Some of these foods are variations and corruptions of certain Italian recipes or else wholly invented. In summary, it can be said that as a defining aesthetic attribute *ritus* makes up one of the more influential MMC in the diasporic Italian cultural system.

4.2.3 *Moralis*

The code cluster *moralis* relates to thought, life, living an “Italian” life. “Morals are how you treat people you know. Ethics are how you treat people you don’t know” goes the old adage. Morality is another defining attribute to much of the Italian cultural system. Attitudes about vice, gangsters, criminal culture,

³⁵ For a deeper understanding of the meaning of *morra* as an authentic expression of diasporic Italian cultural, see Gardaphé’s “Morra/Amore” in *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* (2000: 108- 115.)

violence, and aggression all become recurring aspects of narratives. The in-group/out-group's dichotomy concept is also quite common in social groups and very strong in diasporic Italian communities. Conjecturally, the only caveat would be that the community must be able to obtain and maintain a critical mass of Italian culture whether through people and the signs generated by them in the community. Traditionally, this has been done through language, but due to the history and low priority of Italian as a language most often the mechanism which maintains Italian communities is through a series of signs that may or may not be wholly utilized by those of Italian descent. Moreover, World War II and Italy's status as enemy combatant against the United States led to programs that actively suppressed Italian as a second and foreign language publicly during war time, affecting not only DI's linguistic capacity but possibly their capacity to recognize Italian signs with the same interpretation as P/I Italians.

Adherence to a specific group whether it be ethnic, race, educational, or socio-economic positions and how people perceive themselves, rest at the core of this specific cluster. This cluster can include issues of masculinity and the concept of what it means to "be a man" in IA culture. Connected to this discourse is issues of sexuality and non-normative or traditional binary sexual preferences. Vice, in the form of depicting crime and criminal culture includes the concept of the gangster in IA culture (Gardaphé, 2006). Crime, as a perceived problem in the immigrant communities from the outside, developed critical mass due to the mainstream American press in the larger American cities of the Eastern seaboard.

This was a blatant attempt to inhibit the flow of immigrants into the USA going so far as alleging that:

hundreds of Italian criminals had entered the United States as a result of Italy's careless system for issuing passports, suggesting that the criminals were leading *mafiosi* and members of the *camorra*. It is doubtful, however, that these immigrants were anything more than petty criminals (abandoned-farm burglars, goat stealers), or former *banditi* whose "unorganized" crime in Italy had been a form of rebellion against an oppressive authority, part of which was made up of *mafiosi* and *cammoriste*. (Mangione & Morreale, 1992: 166)

Lastly, increasingly more relevant both in Italy and the USA is the action of violence in the form of domestic abuse, general treatment of women, and the disrespect of self in American society due to feeling outside of it.

4.2.4 Familiae

The code cluster *familiae* pertains to the family and all the attributes of family life, *familiae* is an essential component of IA culture. As an organizing principle, the family encompasses the nuclear and extended families and governs the order with which many IAs orientate their life. As a concept, it can be observed in many different manifestations and as a specific MCC spans and intersects with many, if not all, MCCs in the *semio-memetic* model. Often it is just taken for granted that immigrant families brought recipes with them when they left Italy. This presumption leads to a deep analysis of these recipes' texts. While there has been an ever-growing canon of critical studies, textual analysis, and intercultural

inquiry on this last point, what seems to be missed or at least overlooked is again, memes. This link that can add another dimension to methods of interdisciplinary cultural inquiry. Lastly, the concept of the family in Italian culture spans both space and time, permeates and embeds itself in most texts, whether in book or audiovisual form. It is a prime orienting and practical force that is the cornerstone of Italian culture and is, in and of itself, the original social network, safety net, and often, serves as a *de facto* government.

4.2.5 Linguae

The code cluster *linguae* pertains to the uses of the Italian language in speech or the use of Italian to create an in-group dynamic. In this cluster we find a pragmatic position coupled with a sense of fatalistic resignation created by the feeling of absence or loss of homeland as a moral failure. This position was further compounded with life in a host country that was fraught with ethical dilemmas. Chiefly, the assimilation aspect of a society results in continuously tearing down and stripping men, women, and children of their language and culture in order to build a new idealized citizen: the American. Due these larger cultural gravitational forces, much of the reason that IAs do not possess Italian language skills today can be traced back to this position of US domestic cultural hegemony coupled with the WWII “Don’t Speak the Enemy’s Language” campaigns during the 1940s (Carnevale, 2003; Verso, 2007). What does remain are different linguistic elements used with varying degrees of fluency. Some of the features of language: dialects, language attrition, transformation, instances of

Italglish in the past and now *Italiense* and the effect it has on speech and community from the past into the present and towards the future i.e., how do newer speakers of standard Italian interact and effect those who are IA. In the construction of a linguistic identity, lexical choices are often the most conspicuous markers of *italianità*. Usually this is done through the usage of Italian loanwords and phrases in English to denote in-group social cohesion. Often these are linked to jokes in a social setting as during *morra* and *bocce* tournaments. Most often, greetings, phrases and aphorisms from folk culture and knowledge are used by IAs to further align ethnically. It should also be said that there is quite the camaraderie between IAs, so much so that they consider themselves *paesani* and go about using the term when greeting friends or making new acquaintances that they discover to be of Italian heritage.

Any analysis of the diasporic Italian American's use of either standard Italian or dialectal variations should be from a descriptive rather than a prescriptive position. To give a succinct (albeit potentially simplifying) example, some of the more non-normative linguistic aspects pertain to heavy mistakes in pronunciation and spelling of Italian or mixing it up with Spanish. Though for the most part Italian Americans possess little to no Italian language ability, and even when they do possess a basic, elementary competency it is often influenced by a sort of creolized lingua franca which was originally a mixture of various peninsular and insular dialects mixed with English to produce what was referred to as "Italglish" (Carnevale, 2009; Haller, 1981: 184; La Sorte, 1985) in Little Italies or Italian enclaves around the USA (Turano, 1932). Herman Haller (1981) lists the

attributes as to what he refers to as varieties of Italian American languages for the development of “a linguistic atlas of Italian-American dialects” (182) listing some of the parameter as:

1. the ancient dialect, often in a form that is no longer found in Italy;
2. the dialect koines, the result of interference between two or more dialects;
3. an Americanized version of a dialect or Standard Italian, considered Italian-American proper;
4. an Italianized type of English. (Ibid. 184)

Although, the most important and formative situation that undoubtedly led to the “death” (Crystal, 2000: 1-2) of the Italian language in the USA was the US’s involvement in WWII. Changing wartime domestic attitudes towards foreign languages – especially the belligerent ones – as well as no federal language policies aimed at preserving or valuing linguistic plurality in the country can be considered relevant factors. This stands in stark contrast to the pluralistic language policies of the USA’s northern neighbour Canada, where additional languages, and by extension culture, are looked upon favourably as “agency” inducing (Duff & Li, 2009). In the USA, due to political posturing, public shaming (the *Don’t Speak The Enemy’s Language* campaigns of the 1940s), language attrition and cultural assimilation, the diasporic Italian American community of the United States still lacks the Italian language yet still retains a common heritage and shared, strong cultural awareness through signs. Adaptive cultural retention of tradition, albeit in many cases mutated and/or superficial without fluency in Italian, defines the culture.

4.2.6 **Historiae**

The code cluster *historiae* pertains to the history or “stories” of diasporic Italians, their collective knowledge whether in parts or the totality of the diasporic experience of Italians in the world. Personal and familial traditions, music, stories and the telling of tales are found here. Narratives about where descendants lived, departed, their locations, regions, cities, villages, towns, factor here. All of these are relevant events encoded into text and community. And, similar to *familiae* as a concept, it can be observed in many different manifestations and as a specific MCC spans and intersects with many, if not all, MCCs in the *semio-memetic* model.

4.2.7 **Locus**

The code cluster *locus* pertains to ancestral lands in Italy as well as the areas where the Italian immigrants settled including the areas people passed through on their journey. It can also encompass the “Little Italies” created in the USA and the role they played as surrogate for ancestral lands. The neighbourhood and its place in visual narrative and meaning to the group is a foundational feature of the myth of the Little Italy even though much of the spatial manipulation was a for consumer-based creation. *Youngstalians* never used this term because there was not one single place for Italians as they lived in all the city’s neighbourhoods. Little Italy is used more as an origination point, a place of both arrival and departure into Youngstown similar to the symbol of Ellis Island. Like Ellis Island, people did not rest and remain on Brier Hill. As soon as families gathered enough

capital, they departed Youngstown and moved towards the suburbs. Locus can also include places such as the various hill districts of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania and St Louis, Missouri, to name only a few, or any place where IAs came together in critical mass to create a microcosm, thereby transmuting peninsular and insular Italian symbols and values into an American location.

Due to its geography and the lack of high-density housing, Youngstown, by virtue of its relatively open spaces in the hills of the ascending high Appalachian plateau, was able to afford its inhabitants, including immigrants, housing that included land adjacent to the habitation. Yet the social conditions posed problems for IAs, therefore myths were developed to mask and negate them. At one point, Youngstown was actually known as the “City of Homes” (Posey, 2013) due to the inordinately high rate of homeownership there. Though often small, for the majority of urban dwelling and rural living peninsular and insular Italians, in Youngstown these families were actually able to have a garden and some space in an actual neighbourhood and not a tenement; all conditions that make it easier to coexist peaceably in social spaces. Not without their own issues, Brier Hill at least afforded space on the hills of the Mahoning Valley:

During the years preceding and after World War II, Brier Hill was Youngstown’s “Little Italy.” This was a well-kept and proud community. The rows and rows of two-story wooden homes, many of them painted white, were jammed so close together in some streets that sometimes you had a hard time seeing between them. Each had its own garden with the crop bearing beautiful, large tomatoes, hot peppers, cukes [cucumbers] [sic] and other vegetables. Some had grapevines which produced luscious

grapes used for making home-made wine which had a better taste than the wine you bought at the stores. This era was the hay-day of “Little Italy” in Brier Hill. (Trolino, 2001: 12)

Herbert Gans recounts a very different social experience that Italians faced in Boston’s West End before it was declared a “slum” in 1958, roughly corresponding to the time frame in Trolino’s account:

To the average Bostonian, the West End was one of the three slum areas that surrounded the city’s central business district [...] He rarely entered the West End and usually glimpsed it only from the highways or elevated train lines that enveloped it. From there he saw a series of narrow winding streets flanked on both sides by columns of three- and five-story apartment buildings, constructed in an era when such buildings were still called tenements. Furthermore, he saw many poorly maintained structures, some of them unoccupied or partially vacant, some facing on alleys covered with more than an average amount of garbage; many vacant stores; and enough of the kinds of people who are thought to inhabit a slum area. (1962; 1982: 3)

Gans’s sociological study speaks through the voice of the average Bostonian, while Trolino, on the other hand, spoke from a first-person account. Both are ways of framing a similar social condition and liminal space Italians found themselves in the USA. The effect geographical areas, locus, and social spaces have on a specific population creates both an image and interpretation of their environment and cultural ecosystems that can be observed from multiple viewpoints. The stories of densely packed immigrant dwellings were, though not unknown, just

that, stories, or in the case of audiovisual texts, narrative frames. To midwestern diasporic Italian Americans, life, though difficult was metaphorically speaking, wide open for them and their children. Though their houses would be filled with the nuclear family, extended family and oftentimes journeyman mill laborers, one could make the claim that *Youngstalians*, like their counterparts out west, were able to live a life in relative peace as compared to their counterparts in the coastal “megalopolises”.

4.2.8 Remarks on Categories of Analysis

In developing a framework for analysing diasporic Italian culture, this research has sought to find an objective way to review textual expression of diasporic culture. It is due to these MCCs that readers classify and describe Italian (diasporic) culture in order to decode and define the signs contained in each:

- Model
- Meme analysis
- Deconstructing what a *literary* meme is
- What does it do? What effect does it have on the reader?
- What is the connection between text, image, and interpretation?

However, one of the potential problems with clustering is the combining of tangible and intangible culture expressions. As Macionis et al. (2010: 53) point out:

Some aspects of human behaviour, such as language, social practices such as kinship, gender and marriage, expressive forms such as music, dance, ritual, religion, and technologies such as cooking, shelter, clothing are said to be cultural universals, found in all human societies. The concept of material culture covers the physical expressions of culture, such as technology, architecture and art, whereas the immaterial aspects of culture such as principles of social organization (including, practices of political organization and social institutions), mythology, philosophy, literature (both written and oral), and science make up the intangible cultural heritage of a society.

In the creation of meaning, we can consider memes as identifiable textual and visual units that can be categorised, selected, and analysed within a specific context but also in relation to their occurrence and recurrence. Thus, this section has dealt with intersecting clusters containing core cultural concepts in diasporic Italian culture as empirical examples. These textual and visual units of meaning in the form of MCCs help organize and/or define Italian Americans as a distinct ethnic group in the United States and a subgroup within the larger global Italian diaspora. Moreover, a case can be made that parallels can be drawn not in the language and culture of DI, IA, and PII cultures but in the interpretation of shared signs of *italianità* even if they are different due to spatio-temporal positionality.

Before concluding, it should be stated that after evaluating the notion of a mechanism that transfers cultural data with varying degrees of fidelity, often via meme, I began to wonder if the term Memetic Encoding Cluster (MEC) would suit the description better, terminologically speaking. I would say that using the word “encoding” rather than “code” would perhaps imply *action* rather than

observation. Apart from these two novel concepts, as previously stated, possibly the path of least resistance would be towards MCs or Memetic Clusters. In any case, the abbreviation MCC stood for memetic code cluster (memeplex), which is a unit containing multiple memes working in unison, grouped together by frequently collocating subject/thematic content. For example, in a scientific taxonomy *rituali*, or “rituals”, would be the macro title, while the micro would be the specific components, or attributes of a religion, as can be illustrated in Figure 4.1.

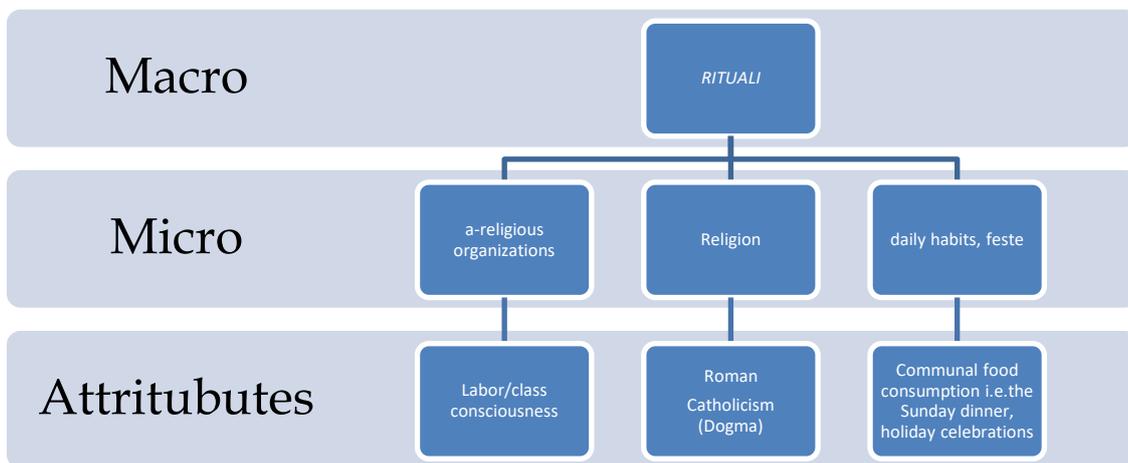


Figure 4.1. Node Clustering

MCCs becomes a macro superstructure that enables clustering the various components analysed in the sample of self-published literature (section 6) as well as other relevant texts and materials that pertain to the diasporic Italian Americans of Youngstown. When relevant, we can also analyse other texts from different regions of North America as the clusters are not exclusive to the Italian American context. This was done only as a way of supporting the reading of *Youngstalian* texts. This will serve the purpose of orienting the reader towards a more thorough understanding of IA regional culture as understood through text.

The MCCs build on the clusters developed during my previous research on IAs in film and television, at that time referred to as a “viewing methodology” (VM). The VM was created after reviewing a sample of Italian American texts – written and audiovisual – to ascertain what components could be clustered together in order for students to better understand culture as it related to IAs over various texts, including but not limited to literature, films, television shows, print, and TV advertisements. In short, the VM was useful in keeping organized when elements of IA culture manifested themselves over a multitude of diverse texts.

As explained in section 3.2.4., clustering provides a quick, easy to understand reference point that helps readers plot the complex information that appears during analysis and knowledge extraction from unstructured sources, i.e., texts, documents, images (Driver & Kobel, 1932; Zubin, 1938; Tyron, 1939). By creating these clusters as a methodological framework, three ontological questions can be answered: 1. what can we say actually exists in the IA world? 2. into what type of taxonomy can we place IA culture and organize this information? and 3. what meaning does this structure produce in the observer?

Yet if we are to target, analyse, and decipher the diasporic Italian cultural code of *italianità* vis-à-vis the immigrant narrative, we should look first at how texts are packaged for consumption to populations in the periphery, operating outside the centres of cultural and linguistic power. Specifically, the first layer that observers and readers decode is a book’s cover, Genette’s “peritext”. These covers as peritexts create and/or evoke preconceptions in an observer’s mind while placing the sign in a larger field of meaning.

4.3 Book Covers as Paratextual Information

In this section, Gerard Genette's (1997) theory of paratexts is applied to a sample of texts, specifically the book covers that encompass and contain them as a *prima facie* layer. Covers work in conjunction with texts by providing literal, symbolic, and/or neutral content for readers to interpret before they enter the text; they are an antechamber of content-forming ideas and accessing preconception in the mind. What they access is a mixture of personal and group experiences that have been encoded in a subject throughout their lifetime. It could be said that no one encounters a text as an empty vessel nor alone. In some ways, each person is a fugitive *text* in and of themselves. They carry a multitude of texts, and, by extension, narratives, with them throughout their lifetime and sometimes, beyond their mortal existence. Figure 4.2 shows steel workers exiting Youngtown's Sheet & Tube Campbell works while crossing a bridge to and from the mill. Superimposed onto them are the various books by *Youngstalian* authors to act as a visual metaphor. This metaphor illustrates the connection of ideas contained in texts and also contained in a reader's mind. These readers then go on to spread both the ideas, experience, and memories around a geographical area of the Mahoning Valley.

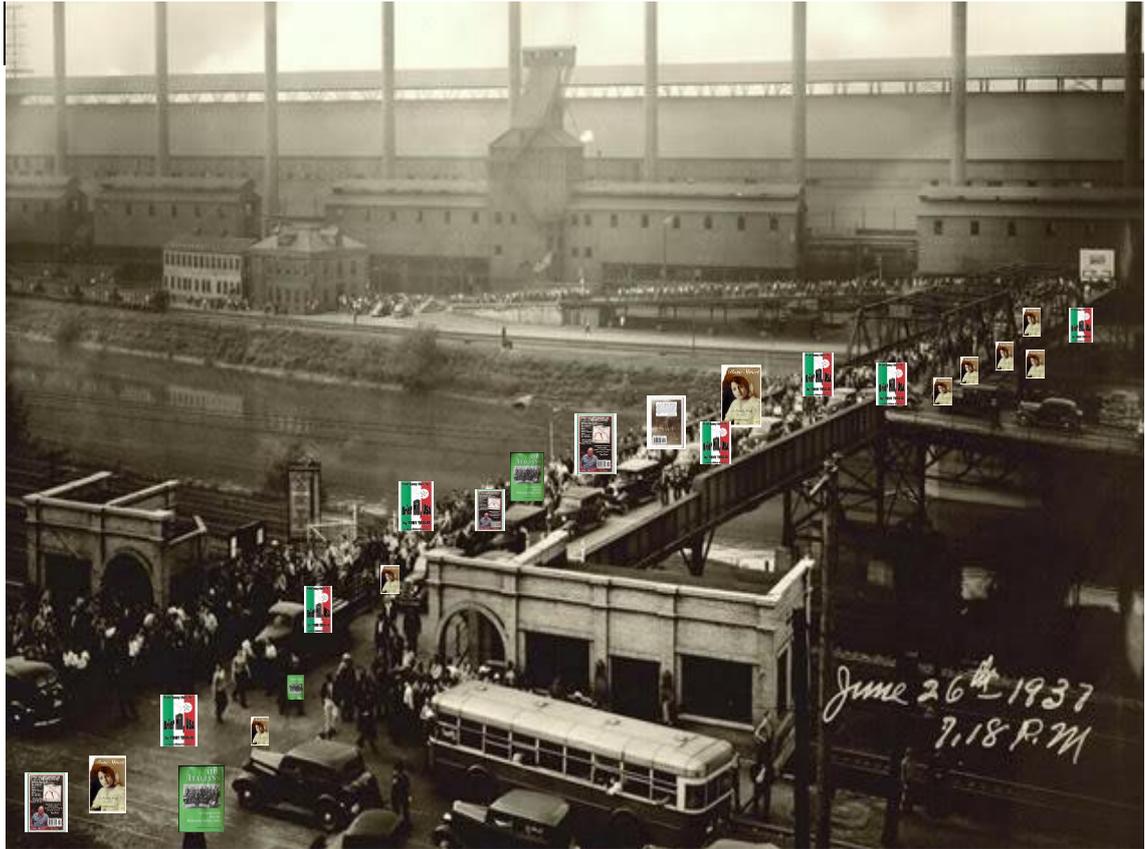


Figure 4.2. Steel workers exiting Youngtown’s Sheet & Tube Campbell works. Mahoning Valley Historical Society (1937)

A well know aphorism goes “you can’t judge a book by its cover”. But is this in fact true or is there more to this simplistic folksy saying? Book covers as paratexts — specifically peritexts — in and of themselves offer a multitude of interpretations by readers, consumers, and communities. As a communicative act, peritexts elicit and create meaning in potential readers by means of either specific or non-specific information. This is accomplished through the uses of visually collocated aesthetic qualities such as colours, linguistic markers as stock phrases and phonemic combinations operating as memes and/or any other data that may or may not reflect what is contained inside the text. Peritexts can entice both a reader and potential reader, like the Sirens who lured Ulysses and his crew

to the rocky shoals of the Sirenum Scopuli, but with less disastrous consequences. When applied to covers, a peritext influences the initial semiotic interpretation as well as preconceptions based on experience and bias. Together they lure the reader into the texts, or keeping within the above metaphor, the rocky shoals of the text. Genette states that:

Usually these *localized* [my emphasis] verbal, numerical, or iconographic items of information are supplemented by more comprehensive ones pertaining to the style of design of the cover, characteristic of the publisher, the series, or a group of series. Simply the colour of the paper chosen for the cover can strongly indicate a type of book. (1997: 24)

Three main points become clear when analysing covers: 1. they access certain preconditions in an observer's mind thereby 2. creating preconceptions that will accompany the reader as they enter the text, 3. book covers also act as codes that depend on the readers' preconceptions about a recognizable concept – for the purposes here, the framing of Italian American ethnicity.

As Genette states “simply the colour of the paper chosen” (1997: 24) can have a *prima facie* effect on a reader. In the case of an Italian or Italian American, one set of signs, ideas, memories working in unison as either self-contained memes or a multifaceted memeplex might perhaps rush to the fore creating preconceptions then influencing ideas and opinions whereas in another, a reader with only a cursory understanding of Italian or Italian American culture, and by extension history, might elicit another interpretation. Furthermore, the “right” book as sign system may resonate with a reader and may in fact bring about

involuntary memory à la Proust's "madeleine effect" (1992), in the sense that said reader could quite possibly be transported to another temporal moment; the cover and the visual information acting as a metaphorical madeleine confectionary. A reader with first-hand experience of the event, material could be sent on a journey back in time while someone without the same experience would be able to access the situation, but it would be filled by imagination rather than actual first-hand experience.

From a phenomenological position, it is within the realm of memory that much of culture, and by extension material culture, is located. We can say that the memes that are continually generated through culture, IA and non, continuously morph into new, novel combinations through a combination of unlimited semiosis and unlimited memeosis, the two being inexplicably tethered. Therefore, one cannot interpret a sign that has not yet arrived to them via meme and one cannot decode a meme if the information contained within it is indecipherable. The last circumstance is applicable to someone with intimate knowledge of Italian Americana whether through family or lived experience. Yet the underlying conceptual framework can be applied to groups other than diasporic Italian Americans, this last point being another one of the goals of this research. While the Italian as trope is quite a fecund meme in media, many non IAs will and do recognize the Italian sign and narrative system as they are linked in US and not Italian popular culture. Yet, it should be stated that these Italian signs will mostly, if not exclusively, be in the English language. Therefore, an Italian American meme will be in English and not standard Italian. In fact, it is in

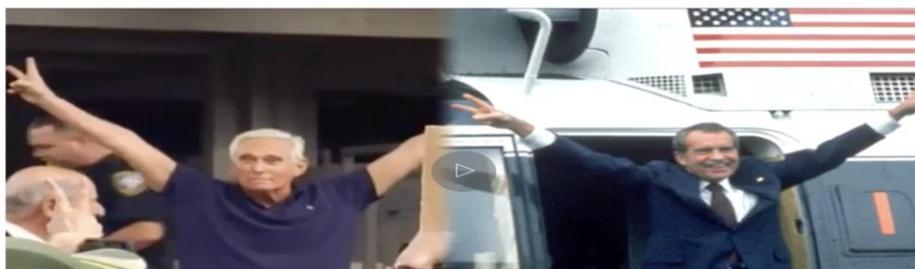
the memes that we see major differences in the two “cousin” cultures. For one example, any cursory search of Twitter’s #anofferyoucantrefuse will reveal the continuous use of Puzo’s iconic phrase “make him an offer he can’t refuse” (1969: 72; Coppola, 1972) used in one combination or another, often modifying the pronoun to reflect gender and circumstance. Now this phrase as meme has the implied meaning of “if you don’t do what I say I will kill you” which is a quite a troubling proposition to encounter. Yet the phrase, apart from linking an IA text to popular culture infinitely, is also a clear example of a fecund meme that continues on in the linguistic spaces of both the English and, in translation, Italian languages. Another important feature of a phrase as meme is that they cross the osmotic boundary that exists between the real, tactile material world — in this example a written text to a cinematic text — into the digital realm thus creating a feedback loop of *unlimited memeiosis*. Here we are extending the term “unlimited semiosis” (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43) and applying it to the continual transformation of memes as they encounter and incorporate more information. As of writing this, there has been a resurgence of references to what could be considered the most cited text in American popular culture, *The Godfather* (1972) – specifically the sequel (1974) and its use of “omertà” regarding witness testimony. These references are now being used to explain and critique certain events transpiring within the Executive branch of the United States federal government. This would seem to suggest that not only are IA texts more relevant than ever but also that the synthesis between the mass media/entertainment sector and the civil service/government sectors are now

working in unison. Yet while this is nothing new within the USA mediasphere, what is new is the relative fluidity with which information flows through once traditional media sources into decentralized, holarchical systems of knowledge distribution. This in turn supercharges media consumption habits thereby creating more potential memetic occurrences and adding to longer periods of information virality, whether it be through the consumption of content via contemporary media streaming platforms, social media applications, and/or traditional, terrestrial broadcast television or radio i.e., legacy media.

Figure 4.3 is an image that circulated on Twitter. The picture offers another example of a reference to *The Godfather trilogy* (1972, 1974, 1990 [2020]). Here we have long-time Donald Trump adviser and collaborator, the *agent provocateur* Roger Stone being compared to Frank Pantangeli.

What Is a 'Frank Pentangeli'? Roger Stone Indictment Includes 'Godfather' Reference

POLITICS 10:23 AM PST, January 25, 2019 - Liz Lane



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'The Godfather' References Used By Roger Stone To Explain His Indictment Emails

By Bruce Haring
January 27, 2019 12:50pm

11 COMMENTS

f t y i @

Figure 4.3. One example of a recent citation from *The Godfather, part II* by Deadline

In both the book and film, Pantangeli was called in front of the US congress to testify on his involvement, and his boss Michael Corleone involvement in organized crime. As it turns out, Stone would not cooperate with American authorities and because of this, was convicted of various crimes. He would then go on to be pardoned by the former president sometime later. Often, people in prominent positions in the US, whether famous or infamous, will use the text as a tool, or frame to describe and interpret a specific or general circumstance. The media also uses the same technique. And it is not just Twitter. Watch any mediatic expression from a film, television show, or newscast/infotainment programming and sooner or later one of the iconic phrases from Puzo's *Godfather* will be employed, often tongue in cheek, to elicit an ironic response or evoke humour and not foreboding tragedy as in the original meaning of the phrase.

And increasingly, Americans (US) interpret their actual world through texts from US popular culture the Godfather *in primis*. Interestingly, *The Godfather* is often used to explain events in televised news programs. To further illustrate just one of the many examples, in January of 2019 CNN's morning show *New Day* (2013-present) had a segment in which one of the anchors used *The Godfather, Part II* to explain a current legal situation the former US president Donald Trump had found himself in with regards to former personal lawyer and fixer³⁶, Michael Cohen (CNN *New Day*, 24 January 2019). The anchors, using the analogy then went on to roll a clip of the film itself during a scene at the US congress where a mafioso was supposed to testify but in the end chose not to due to a thinly veiled threat to his family. This threat is based on the principle of silence or *omertà*³⁷ in transnational Italian organized crime. It would seem that fictional representations of American power dynamics in texts are a core conceptualisation used to describe the actual power dynamics in the actual world. Often, fictional representations in popular mediatic culture of the United States supplants reality.

Lastly, the role of social osmosis cannot be understated, nor underestimated. Many people come to an understanding of IA culture not through direct exposure but by being exposed to the memes and subsequent

³⁶ According to the OED a *fixer* is someone who "makes arrangements for other people, especially of an illicit or devious kind" (<https://www.lexico.com/definition/fixer>).

³⁷ Omertà is "a code of silence about criminal activity and a refusal to give evidence to the police" (OED: <https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100249610>).

signs interpreted from them. They are inexplicably linked symbiotically. Using the iconic phrase once again, conversations about said phrase will generally bring about character references from the book (but mainly the film) and their personality traits. For example, are you a Sonny (hot tempered, loyal), a Michael (cool, collected), or a Fredo (weak, treasonous) type? The piercing of the osmotic space has been part and parcel of the IA in American popular culture³⁸. In another example, CNN anchor Chris Cuomo – brother to New York governor Andrew Cuomo and son of former NY governor and US presidential candidate Mario Cuomo (1932-2015) – became embroiled in a minor scandal when he got into a verbal altercation with a person who referred to Cuomo as a “Fredo” (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/13/nyregion/fredo-cuomo-video.html>).

On the national level, the use of IA signs has a larger presence in the media while on the local level the visual semiotic appears to have a different objective. Book covers provide varying degrees of connection to Italian ethnicity as a defining cultural attribute. Moreover, they are quite effective advertising tools. Returning back to the act of tactile text creation, it would seem that nowadays in publishing, with the proliferation in the past and current amalgamation of stock photography companies — Corbis Images and Getty Images being the two largest — covers do not necessarily connect to book content in the macro or correlate textual content with the image on its cover. Yet in the micro, when it

³⁸ Though seem to not be abating due to the relaunch of the FIAT 500 line of automobiles into the US market and crucially the accompanying advertisement campaign that hit the ground running with tropic representations of Italian and Italian Americans in both the meme and mediasphere.

comes to small presses or self-published DIY texts, the choices the authors still utilize are easily recognizable images and artwork serving as a semiotic portal into the text. One important distinction that needs to be made is that Italian Americans *advertise* their ethnic identity in a multi-ethnic USA (the periphery) as opposed to in Italy (the centre). Often, IAs employ strategies to make their cultural expressions stand out by the use of “conspicuous colour” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 108). A palette of green, white, and red or as often is the case, sepia toned images of a remote, bucolic past are two of the most diffused and repetitive. In Italy, Italian ethnicity is taken for granted and reinforced by both memetic and semiotic content in the form of tangible, architectural structures, literature, daily linguistic exchanges, i.e., indigenous culture whereas these structures are lacking in the USA. The generally accepted interpretation of the Italian tricolour is that *green* stands for the verdant hills and countryside, white for the country’s northern snow-covered alpine border again in Carducci’s words, and *red* for the loss of life during the “Risorgimento” (resurgence) and subsequent “Unificazione” (unification) of the Italian peninsula into an integrated nation-state. This, as well as a more religious view was offered by Italian Nobel Laureate Giosuè Carducci in a speech for the first anniversary of the tricolour. During the same speech Carducci also declared that the flag was the sum of the theological virtues of hope (green), charity (white), and faith (red)³⁹. However, distribution of these texts does not necessarily imply that they

³⁹ See <http://www.radiomarconi.com/marconi/carducci/carducci.html> (accessed 1 July 2019).

in fact produce meaning, but they can take on significance by virtue of their existence (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 21) and by virtue of their existence, encode meaning or perhaps regain what Marcel Proust referred to as “du temps perdu” or “lost time” (Proust, 1922: 31).

Whether or not the target is IAs or another group of people not ethnically connected to Italy or Italians, some of these texts will have different meanings due to ethnicity, personal history, or interest in the subject area of a text. Lastly, and of crucial importance is the role of *provenance*, i.e., “where signs come from” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 23). It takes as fundamental the context in which a source text is spatially located. Provenance, as a conceptual framework, closely aligns with Roland Barthes’ ideas of connotation and myth (1972; 1977) in the sense that the overarching narrative structure of a commonly held belief is highly contextual to both time and space as well as being inexplicably linked to a signifier in order to create and elicit meaning. By evoking Italian signs, an IA seems to simultaneously assimilate concepts for another time and place in order to encode remote meaning into a localized text. For example, the editors of a cookbook, wanting to locate in Italian semiotically, may use sepia-toned images of an Italian grandmother or *la nonna* to express authenticity, lineage, and quality, values important to both diasporic Italian and Italian cuisine. Therefore, provenance is a key attribute to the creation of diasporic culture. This is due to the lack of signs from the centre in the periphery, accessing larger frameworks of knowledge thereby creating more and at times infinite interpretations. While provenance may hold a nostalgic component, it is pragmatic in nature as

diasporic subjects seek to create a connection, a sort of cultural Wi-Fi, by connecting to their previous home countries, or in the case of those born outside the centre, a connection to a mythical past realized in the present. Any cursory analysis of North American diasporic Italian American culture would reveal that often many of its linguistic and semiotic attributes are steeped in dialectal loanwords, history, nostalgia, and collective memory of an immigrant past experience. Furthermore, this may also account for much of mainstream Italian Americana appearing simulacric and outdated as it lacks a forward look orientation.

The visualisation, and the way the frame is set and executed in texts, already sets the stage for what is expected due to preconditions set in the observers' mind: a sepia tinged Italy forever rooted in the past. On its surface, this is not necessarily negative. In fact, if it were not for the past there would not be much inspiration to subsequent generations. Yet, when does something rooted in the past begin to rot the present? And while these recollected shared experiences have coloured much of both the artistic and academic discourse related to IA culture there is another fundamental position that has emerged: where is the future located for Italian America? and what will it look like? As it applies to American studies, we can expand the frame out to encompass class, race, gender, and lifestyle. Gardaphé (2016) sees this future as a moment to reassess what is meant by multiculturalism "so that the result is the creation of an inter-ethnic/racial and class solidarity rather than fragmentation" (147). Here we can add that shifting our focus and incorporating more studies of lesser-

known Italian Americans experiences as well as other lesser-known ethnic experiences outside the metropolitan centres of mass cultural production and narrative reinforcement can help to build the solidarity that Gardaphé envisions.

4.3.1 Tricolored and Sepia-toned Peritexts

Two of most conspicuous examples of ethnic framing in Italian American culture as it pertains to signs are 1. the three colours of what is known as the Italian *tricolore*, i.e., the Italian national flag and 2. what can be referred to as photographs of Italy steeped in the sepia-tone: a fixed, immutable sign of identity inexplicably rooted in the past and locked in a certain spatio-temporal moment that continually regenerates and transforms itself. As a meme in and of itself, it may be one of the most fecund and virile, continually being attached to IA/Diasporic Italian identity. Yet, this is not unique to IA texts. The same can be said when looking at texts from other (American) ethnics. One example is *Contours of White Ethnicity* (Anagnostou, 2009) where the peritext creates a sepia-toned frame that could be generally ascribed not only to the book's protagonists, i.e., Greek/American immigrants, but may just as well be, to name only a few, Chinese, Irish, and for the purposes here, Italian immigrants. The sepia-toned image acts as a "symbolic attribute" (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001: 108) in that the colour and prominence of the image — the whole cover is one black and white picture while the text itself is imposed on top of the image — evokes a specific preconception creating an initial meaning that the reader decodes as the past. Furthermore, the book cover then becomes a signifier in and of itself by the

“noise” (2001: 21) created due to the *sepia toning* of the images caused by age and degradation that, initially, was not the intention. Due to this, a photo taken in the past then loses control of what it potentially means in the future and in a certain sense becomes a form of altruistic art or “art for the art’s sake”.

Again, one obvious example in diasporic Italian American culture would be the use of the “tricolour” composed of three colours: green, white, and red. Most, if not all, IAs will immediately recognize the sign and the colour combination therefore associating said sign with Italy and Italians. These three colours are used extensively, and often rather exhaustively within Italian advertisements in the promotion of Italian culture and giving colour or noise to Italian and Italian American themed products. This attachment to Italian signs becomes a manifestation of overt pride in personal history and connecting oneself to the Italian peninsular/insular region mainly to distinguish oneself in multicultural societies, or as Al Pacino’s character in the film *Donny Brasco* (1997) tells the titular lead after inquiring about why so many wise guys stood around and did nothing in front of a social club “to show the flag”, i.e., representing the organization by appearing in front of the social club in order to demonstrate solidarity. Here we find the overarching signification of being Italy as a group under the umbrella of the Italian tricolour as peritext.

Metaphorically speaking, if we consider a text as a mammalian cerebrum then the book cover acts as a sort of textual meninges, the protective cover. The meninges are membranes composed of three layers; the *dura mater* (tough mother) closed to the skull, the *arachnoid mater* (spider-wed like mother) and

the pia mater (tender mother), which is the membrane closest to the brain and extending into the sulci folds. Therefore, in a certain sense Genette's concept of four covers (1997: 25) act as metaphorical meninges covering a text and protecting its meaning by conspicuously telegraphing its sign. Yet rather than protecting it from potential readers it facilitates understanding and provides ancillary information externally of what may or may not be happening internally, that is to say, inside the text. These ancillary elements encompassing IA texts then lead to a potential reformulation of the well-known saying previously mentioned into a new "tongue in cheek" take on it. Therefore, perhaps "you can judge a book by its cover" or at least surmise an initial idea of what the text may or may not be about due to the preconceptions created by a paratexts.

How the texts are presented and sold in the community is also of importance due to the semiotic information that a book cover can potentially transmit to a DI community. Texts also continue instructing and influencing matters of importance such as language, culture, history, and memory as well as anchoring DI Italians into a larger spatio-temporal discourse. They also may lie dormant in one of the various public libraries throughout the Youngstown and Mahoning Valley awaiting the moment when perhaps a third or fourth generation Italian American discovers them and begins a journey back into the history of Youngstown's Italians. The information contained in the texts are a subjective synthesis and record of time and experience. By reading these theses texts, a person can gain an understanding of what it was like, as Tony Trolio said, "growing up Italian in a section of Youngstown" (2001: 10).

Locus is crucial to these phenomena. Whether they are DIY or mass-produced texts, the location where readers find these texts are basically the same. These texts can usually be found locally but due to the importance of online distribution, organizations such as Amazon also provide a way to purchase these texts. They are in and of themselves signs waiting to be decoded by both members of the in-group and out-group. In this specific case, we have multiple interpretations that can be created just from the front and back covers alone. Another factor to consider is the subjectivity each interpreter brings to an individual's understanding of an interpretant sign (Peirce) in this case, a *Youngstalian* text. Peirce posited that "anything can be a sign" so long as it had a relation to something else. Ergo, if we apply Peirce's reasoning then anything can be an Italian sign if it is interpreted as an Italian sign. Yet paradoxically, not everything is in fact an Italian or American sign. In reality, it is within this liminal space between two hegemonic cultures — American and Italian — that what is considered Italian American emerged and continues to evolve. Therefore, analysing peritexts offers a first layer insight into another way *Youngstalian* authors create meaning in their texts.

4.3.2 DIY Covers

What follows are the various ways these books can be deconstructed and an explanation of how the texts move memetically through the Italian American community of Youngstown connecting the various stories contained in the texts to the people themselves over diverse temporal and spatial periods.

Self-published DIY IA texts are most often if not exclusively found in regular or trade paperback form. This is due to economic factors and the inability of local de facto DIY publishing “companies” or vanity presses, such as the national copy services chain Kinkos, mid-size small presses, and local printing services to provide hard bound services or provide them at a prohibitive price point to non-bulk private customers. Therefore, self-publishing is often the only choice a local author has, especially if they are printing a book initially just for family gifts as was the case with Carmen Leone’s *Rose Street*. Self-sufficiency, low to no cost, and local distribution are all hallmarks of DIY culture.

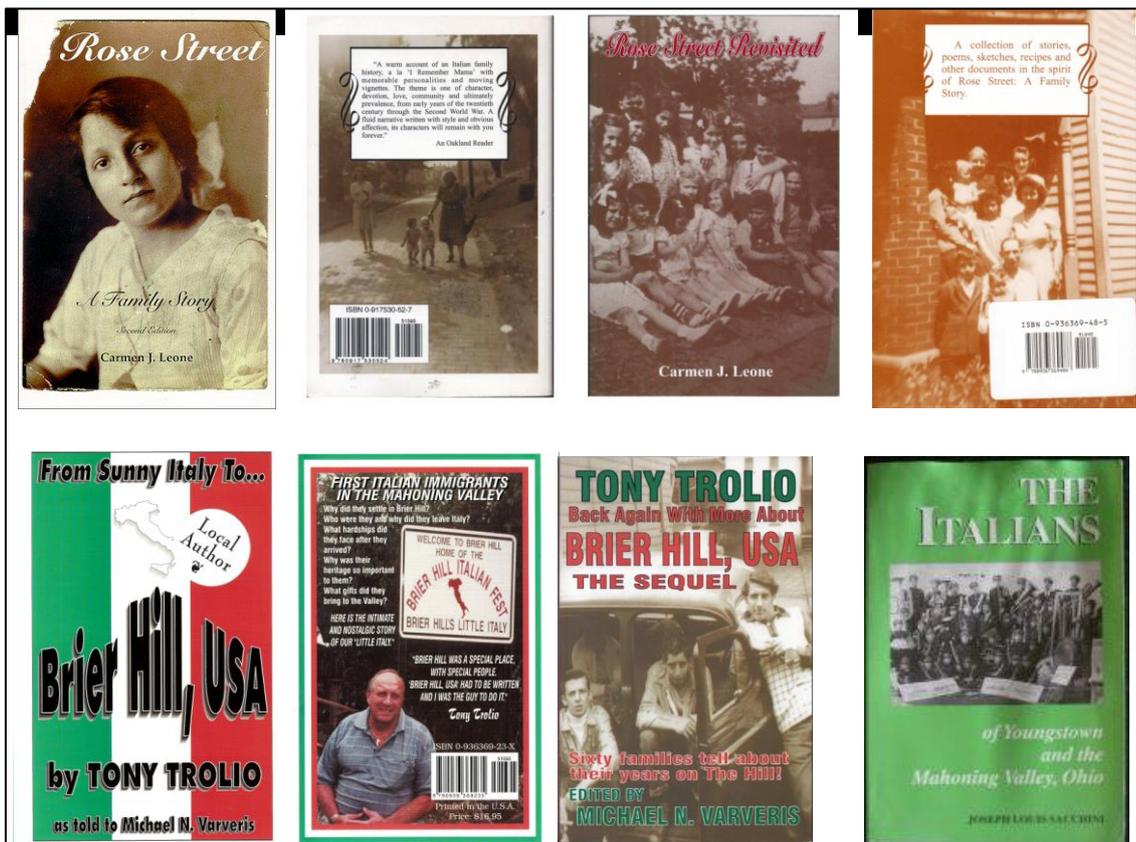


Figure 4.4. Multiple examples from five texts demonstrating different multimodal strategies

In the four texts in Figure 4.4, we have examples of the paratexts that signify *Italiantà* through colour (green, white, red) and nostalgia (sepia-toned images), the two main strategies used by the authors. As they are produced locally it would stand to reason that these choices offer greater chances for success in terms of the publications' circulation. This is due to the preconceptions that both these strategies produce in their target audience: Youngstalians. These covers access preconceptions of an Italian world in the periphery and everything that entails experiences of it or being part of that time even if the physical locations no longer exist or, if they do are loci that are no longer considered *Italian* and lack the signs that made them Italian in the first place. Once again, the ephemeral nature of the old neighbourhood passes from an actual, living place with meaning into a figurative space, one that exists in memory and mind.

Yet delving deeper into the creation and delivery process of DIY texts of equal importance is the ephemeral quality of texts and the materials used. Simply put, these texts are not exactly intended to stand the test of time, so to speak. Zines, comic books, and mix tapes are, or at least were the most noticeable contemporary DIY material objects/expressions and the choices employed historically have been cheap paper and quick turnaround both adding to an aesthetic coupled with a sense of urgency. Material culture plays a large part in identity creation, propagation, and perception in IA communities. Added to the creation of these ephemeral expressions of material culture was the feeling of urgency. This last one was the key factor is rushing Rose Street to the printers so it could be finished for the Christmas holiday. Leone had intended it as a gift to

his family to be “printed and wrapped by Christmas day” (interview with C. Leone).

4.3.3 Italian Colour Collocation vs Sepia-toning

As previously stated, the three hues that make up the colours of the Italian national flag are extensively used in IA culture but less so in Italian P/I culture. Here is perhaps one of the greatest differences between the two nationalities and subsequently the way texts are used, decoded, and effect the two groups. In the United States the use of the Stars & Stripes since WWII has been a symbol of freedom, prosperity, as well as many other post-Enlightenment principles since the flag of the thirteen original colonies, the Betsy Ross flag, was hoisted in defiance of the British colonial rule. The Italian in America, or the Italian American whichever may be the interpretation, uses the object of the flag chiefly in what we can refer to as the American sense, inclusive or overt nationalism with a dimension of patriotism. Meanwhile in Italy, due to the historic hegemony and antagonism of the Roman Catholic church and the dark legacy of the Fascist period, P/I Italians have mixed sentiments about the use of the Italian national flag, let alone waving it around. Although popular usage of the tricolour has grown, it is still mainly used for contrast against non-Italic cultures and showing support for Italian sports teams in international play. Displaying it outside or inside the home and having figures of its pop culture use it as prop is more of an American usage and in some specific cases Italian American usage. Here I am referring to the use of the American flag. Two good examples would be 1.

Sylvester Stallone's film *Rocky* (1976) which uses the American flag for trunks, warm up gear, and wrapping himself in the flag during the film's iconic finale and 2. Bruce Springsteen's *Born in the USA* (1984) album cover and tour poster for the accompanying tour, whose use of the US flag is sarcastic, ironic, and questioning the establishment. The Italian flag is not as conspicuously used in Italian culture as it is in American. That is unless it is in conjunction with FIFA or other international football play when Italians seek to distinguish themselves for a sort of soft national solidarity albeit with a semiotic shelf-life coinciding with match play.

In conclusion, peritexts elicit, or construct a first impression thereby producing a cognitive impact, or layer with their external images and textual elements drawing potential readers into the internal text. How the cover is perceived depends on the position of the observer or interpreter, in relation to the "interpretant sign" - not the interpreter per se but that which "guarantees the validity of the sign in the absence of the interpreter" (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 93; Eco, 1979: 15, 68-72). Often this is tongue in cheekily referred to as *italiani senza italiani* or "Italians without Italians"; this, in and of itself, constitutes a metaphysical problem still left unresolved (see Chapter 7). In this case, the interpretant sign is either Italian, American, or a hybrid. One must also take into consideration other factors, such as how the interpreter draws on personal or cultural experience to understand the signs. In the Peircean model of the sign, there are three subcategorises of the interpretant: the immediate which is the perceived denotation of the sign, the dynamic being the tangible impact of the sign and

lastly, the final interpretant, which is a previously held idea in the mind that may be fortified, altered, generated, or transformed by the denotation of the sign. Therefore, the impact peritexts have on readers cannot and should not be understated when analysing texts, specifically when it comes to texts in lesser-known diasporic Italian communities throughout the world, but for the purposes here texts by *Youngstalians*.

Moreover, when entering a text, a reader, or an interpreter of signs, undoubtedly brings meaning along with them in the form of personal knowledge, bias, or preconceived notions about what they are beginning to read. The colours utilized serve to connect potential readers to a text through the aesthetics of ethnicity and memory. Texts, and the collective conscience they espouse and link into create a sequence of meaning unbound by both time and space. On this journey, they create a sort of ripple in the fabric of a diasporic Italian community. And we can find evidence of these ripples in textual form whether they be *Youngstalian* or from any other IA group in the US. But before getting too far ahead, the authors who are producing these texts and encoding information causing these ripples in time for contemporary and future readers. A reader must then choose which metaphorical wave to ride based on the indexical signs presented through the peritext of a cover beaming out signs of varying degrees of recognition.

4.4 Concluding Remarks

In this section, we have discussed the specific parameters of interpreting texts via the interpretive tool of a collection of signs encoded in memes forming *memetic code clusters* or MCCs. The MCCs offer an effective way of describing both the visual semiotic and cultural aesthetics of diasporic Italians in the periphery. Moreover, these efficient and scalable clusters were categorized and placed in an holarchical model as a mode to decipher meaning in the collection of sample texts contained in this study. Due to the theoretical nature and constraints of the study, at the moment it is impossible to make specific reference to each and every instance of a potential MCC, therefore the underling position is that each of the sample texts contain a multitude of them (see discussion in Chapter 7). Furthermore, both sample texts, while having multiple points of enquiry, generally focus on the public and private communal act of food preparation and consumption. This specific feature was chosen due to the Italian culture possessing one of the most transcendent culinary cultures in the world.

The second part of this chapter also looked at the role that multimodal experience and colour plays in the preconceptions preceding the interpretation of book covers as peritexts. By accessing previous knowledge that *a priori* places a text in a field of meaning that then enables subjects to interpret signs symbolically and figuratively, these symbolic aesthetic attributes allow readers to access and interact with Italy as ur-sign (Tamburri, 2018: 199). This interaction maintains a figurative channel open to the centre with varying degrees of fidelity. In the next chapter, the focus will move on to the first of this study's two samples:

audiovisual texts. In these texts, the paratexts and Italian signs become a defining attribute that adds character and content to the sample shows in question building on an aesthetic that draws heavily on *italianità*.

5 Sample I: Audiovisual Texts

This chapter looks at the first of two samples that demonstrate the continuous dialogue between Italy as centre and places where manifestations of Italian culinary culture have taken hold and prospered outside of it. In the case of the variations of Italianate cuisine, presenters have gone on to create their own interpretations of Italian foodways rendering Italy a symbol. In doing so, each variation of Italian cuisine has become a centre in its own right through the use of mass media and precisely sculpted cooking programs. These diverse manifestations and interpretations of Italian food and foodways have morphed into diasporic Italian culinary culture in the periphery. They are connected by their historic relationship to Italy and its culinary traditions even if at times the contemporary connections have been broken or interrupted by various events. Through the flattening of televised space, *un filo commune* (common thread) or filament is developed that runs through and connects all these expressions of Italian culinary culture thereby creating a global Italian culinary aesthetic while continuing a dialectic between peninsular and insular Italy as cultural centre and its various literally and figurative peripheries. The popularity of Italian food and television cooking shows that utilize Italy as a fundamental attribute via sign systems are numerous and create both visual and cultural aesthetics all their own. Here the term “television” is applied in a broad sense due to the changing

nature of media consumption practices, particularly amongst younger generations with respect to multiplatform media. It can be posited that this *Italian* aesthetic, in conjunction with ubiquitous media systems, propagates the contentious concept of Italian culture manifesting *italianità* around the world. Furthermore, a fundamental underlying mechanism that continues this unlimited semiosis (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43) of signs associated with Italian food culture is the memes that continue to be generated and spread via an interconnected, mediatic world consumers inhabit and operate in. Yet in this mediatic universe of signs, who exactly are some of these cultural gatekeepers? Due to the transnational popularity and appeal of these shows often they become the only exposure to Italian and Italian American cuisine, culture, and less so, the Italian language for an audience. Following some methodological considerations, we shall move on to a non-exhaustive intercultural sample of Italian-themed cooking shows hosted by Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver (UK), Buddy Valastro (USA), and David Rocco (CAN/IT). Like grape vines transported and planted into new loci, each show presents multiple interpretations of Italianate cuisine anchored in diverse spatio-temporal cultural positions in two distinct peripheries: The United States and United Kingdom. Oliver, while primarily based in the UK, does occasionally film limited series in Italy while most of Rocco's mediatic output is based in Italy but occasionally in India as well. While each cooking show attempts to portray Italy in a positive light, it becomes apparent that what constitutes "real" Italian cooking can all too often be a moving target and a changing recipe.

Subdivided into five sections, this chapter focuses on the three interlinked definitions of Italian cuisine, Italian culture, and memetic transfer of their intrinsic aesthetic and cultural values in an effort to probe the nature of the elements that go into creating the visual semiotic that give these shows their Italianate quality.

5.1 Framing Culinary Programming

Before moving into the frame of television cooking shows that utilise Italy as a defining aesthetic, it is worth noting Erving Goffman's (1961) insights on what he refers to as the "anchoring of activity":

It has been argued that a strip of activity will be perceived by its participants in terms of the rules or premises of a particular framework, whether social or natural, and that activity so perceived provides the model for two basic kinds of transformation—keying and fabrication. It has also been argued that these frameworks are not merely a matter of mind but correspond in some sense to the way in which an aspect of the activity itself is organized—especially activity directly involving social agents. Organizational premises are involved, and these are something cognition creates or generates. Given their understanding of what it is that is going on, individuals fit their actions to this understanding and ordinarily find that the ongoing world supports this fitting. These organizational premises—sustained both in the mind and in activity—I call the frame of the activity. (1961: 247)

Food, as undeniable principle of organization in human culture transfers well into the frame of television. Added to this is the fact that Italy's culinary culture,

aesthetic qualities, and the global popularity are ideally suited to the medium of television. It is from inside the frame that social agents in the form of television presenters, create a simulacraic reality that influences audiences, and their perception of Italian peninsular, insular, and diasporic cooking traditions through the spread of Italian signs via memes. Moreover, television has also had the effect of flattening these three varieties of Italian culture rendering them, at least in their mediatic representations, as the same. This is the *modus operandi* of television production; it is a similar mechanism to the creation of ethnically commodified franchise restaurants. While television is the ephemeral expression authentic, the corporate franchise is the encoded concrete manifestation of the commodification of (Italian) culture via the application of memes encoded with signs denoting and connoting *italianità*.

5.1.1 Unlimited Combination of Italian Culinary Culture

As one of the heavyweights in global cuisine, Italy has been used as a visual commodity for well over a century, the Italian immigrants fleeing poverty and famine in southern Italy, to the heavily urbanized environments of the United States, where Italians went so did their food culture. Due to this, foodways were established and developed keeping a channel open to centre from the periphery. Though unthinkable in the past, one can wonder what would happen if an Italian from the 1930s was transported into the new millennium. After he/she got over the initial shock of the ubiquity of liquid crystal, LED, and more technically advanced screens in our everyday life, would they recognize the images of Italian

food if you sat them down for a television cooking show? Would they recognise the signs? Would you hear them complain, in dialect, that what they were cooking on TV was not, in fact, “Italian”? Certainly, there would be some commonality as many of the foodstuffs used in Italy existed back then and in many parts of the world Italian products were imported, some more in the past than today.

Yet, the interpretation and the symbolic value of Italy as aesthetic *ingredient* to television programming has changed considerably. In the process, Italianate cuisine and those presenters that engage with Italy as culinary system have gained considerable popularity and cultural capital in recent years through their use of Italy as aesthetic. This success has benefited the Italian peninsula and its food industry both in terms of mass production and myths of origin, promoting “clean eating” and a more laid back or “slow food” approach to cooking. The Slow Food movement, while not new, has been making an impact both in Italy and abroad. It is a movement that places emphasis on local production with its rhetoric of food ways that focus on “good, clean, and fair” production and consumption practices with an origin in the Italian Left and founded by Carlo Petrini during the tumultuous in 1970s Italy⁴⁰ (Schneider, 2008).

⁴⁰ For a more in-depth discussion on the Slow Food movement see Schneider, 2008 and the Slow Food: website: <https://www.slowfood.com/about-us/our-history/>.

However, a full discussion of the food industry and its exploitation of the success of *italianità* memeplex goes beyond the scope of this work, so only succinct analyses are provided in the sections that follow.

Within this culinary discourse, and for the purposes here, three epistemological points of importance emerge: first, diachronic and synchronic foodways; second, food as a meme including the memetic concepts of cultural transmission and adaptation; and third, filmic and TV Italianness through mass media. Though each of these have their own importance, we shall not privilege one over another as they often work in unison to create a semiotic field of interpretation. Moreover, each of the cooking shows rely on what we can consider meme-driven personalities that both create and disseminate, with varying degrees of authenticity, Italian signs while continuing to engage with Italy as a system of meaning both for themselves and audiences alike.

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of all things Italian, whether they be in the form of high-end clothing, food stuffs, and more capital-intensive purchases such as automobiles. Armani suits, Barilla pasta products, the incursion of Eataly on the global stage and, most visibly, the 2011 reintroduction of the Fiat 500 line of automobiles into the US—with varying results—are some of the more noticeable examples in the mediasphere. Although currently, the viability of FIAT in the US market is becoming increasingly more questionable (Isidore, 2018; Eisenstein, 2019). The effects of globalisation have reached into and have influenced most of the world at this point in one way or another (James, 2010). Through the translational migration of data via memes containing

interpretable signs, different forms of what would be once considered national cultures have forced us to reconsider what culture we are encountering at any given moment in our commercial and, increasingly, *digital* lives. These sliding and intersecting ontologies of cultural knowledge become a continuously morphing waking semiotic dreamscape that often lacks any fixed descriptors when we encounter them through the media. Therefore, the framing of ethnicity on television provides context and solves the doubt about what we are encountering because “it is perfectly possible for individuals, especially one at a time briefly, to be in doubt about what is going on” (Goffman, 1961: 302). Due to these aesthetic frames, we are able to delineate, albeit for a short time, what and where a particular sign originated from and where it has settled and further our understanding about a target culture. Furthermore, the objects that are used are of equal importance in the creation of meaning.

We can consider all these ephemeral expressions of material culture as memes in and of themselves. They influence human behaviour and attitudes towards Italy as a general concept. Moreover, Italy as a cultural centre, is here considered a memeplex, that is a group of individual memes working in unison conveying cultural information making said information available for mimicry or interpretation. However, we should beware of making grand epistemological statements regarding culture due to relationships between material objects and temporality or else we risk falling into the dubious posture of essentialism rather than the more phenomenological relevant state of ephemerality.

The unlimited semiosis, and to extend the term to memetics, *unlimited memeiosis* of memes generated from a cuisine memeplex of Italian origin create a circular aesthetic with Italy at the core, though the interpretations of the attributes, or nodes, surrounding this core change based on time and space, i.e., loci. Italian semiotician Umberto Eco's statement on semiosis is fundamental to explaining the fecundity of this mechanism:

Semiosis explains itself by itself: this continual circularity is the normal condition of signification and even allows communicational processes to use signs in order to mention things and states of the world. (Eco, 1979: 198)

Therefore, since signs have narrative potential, and the possibility to constantly define themselves, then it stands to reason that these evolving narratives can also alter and shape the perception of, for the purposes here, Italian cuisine and the mediatic culture that viewers consume through television. Furthermore, as the popularity of TV cooking shows grows, they then begin to create more influence; and what better example for memes — a word derived from the Greek word for “mimicry”— than the recipes that must be copied and reproduced to the letter in order to have a successful outcome. To achieve a semiotic interpretation of the memes considered in this chapter, it is necessary to refer to a specific conceptualization of Dawkin's (1976) originally coined term ‘meme’ (see discussion in section 3.6).

It is my contention that Italian American cuisine began with and continues to operate on signs that initiated with Italian immigrants via the memes they transported from Italy in the form of recipes. For these recipes, their origin and lineage to Italy as culinary centre are fundamental to any claim of authenticity in Italian food. A foundation myth that had itself begun only in the early 20th century in Italy (see Helstosky, 2003; Portincasa, 2007, 2019). The recipes helped recreate a connection with Italian culture and this began a new phase of diasporic Italian culture. As these peninsular and insular Italians became more and more integrated into American society, the recipes as memes began to evolve into hybridized versions of the original memes incorporating new data and replacing the old while developing new nodes that create what can be referred to as code clusters. Therefore, Italian American culture is in a constant and consistent state of give and take within the hegemony of American culture, and, because of this, when we compare and contrast Italian and Italian American culture one must be cognizant that, while there may be signs recognizable to each, the interpretations of these signs may either coincide, differ considerably, or be wholly indecipherable. Furthermore, these memes are vectors for signs which establish and maintain a symbiotic relationship thereby insuring the fecundity of both. It should be stated that this definition, as well as the theoretical underpinning of this article are linked to the broader study in which food and foodways are just one of the forceful, fecund, and influential cluster of memes that create and represent Italianness/*italianità*.

Since the 1890s, the modern era of immigration out of Italy has been a fundamental contributing factor to the influence of Italian cuisine and the identity of both the Italian state and the larger Italian diaspora. The rise of industrialization and the need for cheap labour in the United States from 1815 to 1871 loosely coincided with what is referred to in Italian as *il Risorgimento* (Resurgence) and subsequently culminated in *l'Unificazione* (Italian Unification) of the Italian geographical-political region (Duggan, 2007; Mac Smith, 1967, 1997; Mac Smith et al., 2002). This nascent modern nation of Italy thereby created an inadvertent, symbiotic relationship between itself and another emerging empire: The United States of America. In fact, the Italian government sinisterly factored this exodus into policy considerations when deliberating on those most at risk on the Italian peninsula:

These push factors were combined with the expansion of American industry, which wanted cheap, unskilled labour. The Italian government also saw the advantages of emigration, since it provided a social safety valve that relieved economic pressure on the country by reducing the population most likely to push for social and land reform. (Sensi-Isolani, 1999: 295)

In an even more sinister twist, the Italian government began to reason with other people's money, so to speak, when "the financially strapped government became increasingly aware that the immigrants' remittances provided it with badly needed capital, which became important for the economy" (Ibid). Therefore, the groundwork was laid for a considerable shift of the population from peninsular

and insular Italy to many parts around the world. Due to this population movement, whether into Northern Europe, South or North America, these proto-Italian nationals took with them the memes of the various ancient and/or relatively recent culinary traditions they had in their minds. In their new homes, these Italian peninsular and insular immigrants, migrants, expatriates, would seek to create the same dishes using the food stuffs available to them thereby reconstituting recipes via memes. Little did they know they were part of the beginning of a modern Italian diaspora and the food culture and recipes that they took with them would be the foundation that would continue the communication between the Italian as centre and the diasporic Italians as guests of host countries in the periphery, a circumstance crucial to the development of all Italian culture outside of Italy proper.

5.1.2 Italian Cuisine as Global Aesthetic

Though this sample focuses on Italian themed cooking shows in English, the influence on world cuisine and the economic considerations by Italian immigrants and those making money off their labour cannot be underestimated (for a recent discussion, see contributions in Sassitelli, 2019). One would find it difficult to not come across the ubiquitous Italian *trattoria* or, in the case of the US, an “Italian grill(e)”: memes in and of themselves creating narratives through their outward signs. In this culinary give and take, a hybrid form of Italian food outside of Italy began to emerge as well. Old traditional recipes evolved to please different palates and dining expectations. This divide is beautifully illustrated in

the film *Big Night* (1989), where we see the contrast between what is considered authentic Italian food and the less than authentic food at, Pascal's the brothers' main competitor, a simulacric dining experience to say the least.

Specifically, in the USA, and the UK to a lesser extent, the Italian dining experience has developed into a sort of cultural cuisine without the obligation of history and faux-ritualistic pomp yet still containing in a superficial, artificial sense, Italian signs with little to no meaning apart from a surface understanding of them; often just a hollow shell of *italianità*, or a cannolo without filling. Yet the corporatized and commodified style of cuisine being alluded to here is just one component of a larger discussion anchored in discourse on global cultural commodification outside the scope of this study. The discourse surrounding the consumer culture and the production of ethnic identity through Italian American foodways is growing considerably and its discussion is beyond the remit of the memplexes at core of this study (for a fuller discussion of the broader picture, see Cinotto, 2013; 2014 and specifically Parasecoli in Cinotto, 2014: 244-255; Cinotto, 2019).

One example of this transformative cuisine is diasporic Italian, specifically Italian American, creation and consumption practices. Paradoxically, order and a strict adherence to traditional recipes are part and parcel of the Italian peninsular/insular Italian dining experience and generally speaking fundamental to Italian cuisine. Yet often these recipes are either a memory or interpretation of an original. Therefore, diasporic Italian dining places less emphasis on the order of the courses yet retains the fundamental signs of an

Italian meal. Speaking about the interaction between the two variations of the Italian family meal, Fabio Parasecoli recounts:

Food, abundant and delicious, eliminated any distance between my numerous cousins and me during that emotional and unforgettable event. I soon realized some of the dishes served had the same names as those I used to eat back home, but they looked and tasted different. Moreover, the way they were served was new to me: most dishes came to the table at the same time, and there was no trace of the sequence of appetizers (antipasti), primi, secondi, side dishes (contorni), and desserts that structures big, festive meals in Italy. (Parasecoli, 2014: 1).

Not surprisingly, food and a family meal close the space between Parasecoli (from the centre) and relatives (in the periphery or “new” centre) and provide him with an “unforgettable event”. Whereas the expectation of foreignness, or otherness, is assumed since the meal takes place outside of Italy proper, it becomes clear that there is a common semiotic understanding which closes the distance between the geographical space; a connectivity through food consumption operates as a sort of culinary/cultural Wi-Fi, connecting Parasecoli with family across the temporal space forming a sort of culinary interdimensionality. Yet how did the recipes arrive there? Memes offer us a neutral explanation of the Italian signs’ transit from their point of origin in Italy (centre) to the tables of diasporic families in the USA (periphery).

One way of interpreting the flow of recipes as memes, and the *materia primaria* or “primary (raw) material” that originated with Italian immigrants is to

look at how the food culture of Italy influences people and then how that shapes their understanding of Italian culture in the centre as well as in the periphery. In an unbroken sequence of a convivial, *sepia-toned* representation of Italy, chefs, cooks, and TV producers have found their own recipe for propagating and enforcing the meme of Italianness or *italianità*. This meme is particularly strong in English-speaking countries with large, historic populations of Italian immigrants such as the United States and Canada in North America and, in Europe, the UK. For their representative nature and success four TV personalities/chefs are considered here for the ways in which in their shows, as much as in their recipes, they use food as meme of Italianness. Nigella Lawson, Jamie Oliver, Buddy Valastro and David Rocco, with their respective shows, are considered here for the visibility of their Italian-style cooking. Each of these chefs has become an economic and cultural force through commodification of Italian cuisine via consumer products, restaurants, and media personas. In the introduction to a special issue of the *Italian American Review* entitled "Italian Americans and Television" (2016), Cavallero & Ruberto state:

Italian-American foodways once marked the culture as different, but programs and celebrities like these have helped to commodify ethnic identity to the point that ethnically specific foodways have been transformed into mainstream U.S. culture and are now, therefore, consumable by the masses. (67)

This seems to imply that due to a wave of ethnic cooking programs, Italian American cooking had become mainstream, almost American. In fact, Marinaccio

(2016) states as much when he says, “culinary programming has gained enormous popularity and media presence since the late 1990s” (2016: 269). It is precisely this popularity that can cause an effect on the periphery and shape non-Italian interpretations of Italy as a cultural system. Often Italy, and by extension “Italian”, loses all meaning and then becomes a sort of place holder or floating signifier waiting for peritextual information (section 4.2) to contextualise and anchor it into an identifiable frame. Marinaccio looks to Robert Orsi’s (1985) conception of the “domus” as a theatre and places this target squarely on the kitchen (2016: 287). When defining the overall visual aesthetic, the Italianate (Nowak, 2015: 5) frame is used by hosts and production companies alike to entice viewers into watching their programmes. It is through the requisition of this “ethnic culinary capital” (Naccarato & LaBesco, 2012; Marinaccio & Naccarato, 2015: 71; Marinaccio, 2016: 269) that actual capital is generated through advertisements and viewer ratings.

Writing on the centrality of food to diasporic Italians in 1920s-1930s New York City, specifically Italian Americans’ identity, Cinotto (2013) states the three main reasons were:

First, the power of food to create and support family and community in a world of culture and material stress; second, the importance of the food trade in the Italian immigrant economy; and third, the symbolic value of food in the self-representations that helped Italians understand who they and whom they aspire to be. (2013: 3)

Applicable to the general state of ethnic culinary programming, these three attributes form an efficient trichotomy for interpreting Italianate cuisine and foodways. However, cooking shows and celebrities have helped to commodify ethnic identity to the point that ethnically specific foodways have been transformed into mainstream U.S. culture and are now, therefore, consumable en masse through different modalities and across a multitude of locations (Parasecoli, 2014; Randall, 1999; Ray, 2007). It can be said that by their style and construction of Italianness, in their discourse these chefs embody the aesthetics of what is referred to in Italian as “la dolce vita” or the sweet (good) life. In short, Italy and Italian culture have, and continue to be is a big, tasty business ripe for the picking, i.e., exploitation:

As the diffusion and success of Italian food is turning into a true global phenomenon, Italian American culinary habits are also eliciting growing attention in the USA and abroad, partly due to the visibility of Italian American and their cultural practices in various forms of popular culture, including fashion, movies, television, and a growing number of books and cookbooks, presenting both traditional and innovative recipes. (Parasecoli, 2014: 245)

Here we can clearly recognise the memes of production in Italian American culture. The popularity of the Italian memplex, though never expressly called as such, has been the underlying mechanism of cultural transmission via diasporic Italian Americans as vectors. Moreover, due to this “popularity” as Parasecoli calls it, in the periphery, it is not only people of Italian descent that

acquire these memes as it would be in, say, Italy. In a certain sense, these ethnic based memes have crossed through a metaphorical osmotic barrier and can now be spread by those of non-Italic origins in social spaces that are not semiotically or expressly Italian.

5.1.3 Mass Mediatic Consumption

George Bernard Shaw once stated, “There is no sincerer love than the love of food”. But it begs the question: does having a “sincere” love of something in and of itself permission to change the fundamental nature of the thing which a person loves? Perhaps, perhaps not. Yet one thing is for certain: the role of food in popular culture through the medium of television has become an alternative reality in and of itself or, to extend the use of Eco’s “ur” in “Ur-Fascism” – that is the attributes that are need for fascism to thrive in a society⁴¹ (1995), an *ur-reality* of what Italy is created through television. This then continues a “dialogue” with Tamburri’s *ur-sign /Italy/* (2018: 199) in which the fundamental attributes of Italy reformulate to continue a transnational dialect. Cooking shows become in a sense an idealized and ephemeral representation of Italy consumed through the visual and auditory senses.

⁴¹ Regarding Eco’s use of the concept “ur”, he contends that as fascism was not a “coherent system”, even the existence of one, or some but not all the attributes could become a catalyst for other attributes to coalesce around the one attribute. Here, without knowing it, Eco made a case for clustering, and by extension memetic code clusters, as the semiotic content and the aesthetic attributes of a culture. This act of reformulation begins new cycles that continue into perpetuity.

When looking at how Italian food is portrayed in US and Anglophone media it seems apparent that those who are presenting appear to be doing so out of a sincere appreciation for the food and Italian culture. At times, they even seem to seek to create novel hybrids or recreate times past in an attempt to tap into nostalgia for a bucolic, sepia-toned visual narrative steeped in the past; a sort of “Grand tour” of Italian food that viewers can consume from the comfort of their homes, living vicariously through the presenters and not having to bother with the realities of international travel. To be fair, one factor to consider is that many people just do not or will not have the opportunity to experience Italy, let alone the historic *Italian* parts of the US.

Yet, as we drill down deeper into the image-creating medium of television, what is being shown and interpreted by viewers can change as the target location of broadcasts move further out from the centre of Italy proper. Whether their motives are to exercise symbolism through the preservation of tradition or just inspire daily life, the cuisine of Italy enjoys a large and growing profile throughout the world. Due to its elevated profile, Italian cuisine has often been co-opted by less sincere agents who have different motives as to why they utilize *Italian* as sign-food system. While these motives may not be easily or clearly understood, what is clear are Italian food signs in the media, with the most noticeable manifestation being the television cooking show.

5.1.4 Recipes as Movable Memes

Ever since Italians left the peninsular and insular regions of Italy, transporting with them their food as a sign system, the case can be made that there has been an ongoing debate on what constitutes *real* or *authentic* Italian cuisine in and outside of the culture. Spend any amount of time eating with an Italian or Italian American family — around the dinner table as domestic altar — or at an Italian or Italian *themed* restaurant, and perhaps the conversation will shift on to an aesthetic discourse about the precise nature of the food, the recipes and the connection to a specific locus of origin for said recipes. Moreover, the internet and especially social media has continued the decentralized, horizontal discourse on what constitutes real or authentic Italian food and recipes that used to take place exclusively in households or in restaurants. Facebook groups such as *Italians Mad At Food*⁴² (@italiansmadatfood) where purity of classical Italian dishes is argued over repeatedly. Here we can see how the memes of Italian food have also colonised the digital space and internet communication.

Of course, who is sitting at the table is important. Is it a homogeneous /Italian/ group or mixed company? Is the interest in the dining experience and ethnic choice or purely pragmatic one based on perhaps a work necessity? In the case of mixed, Italian/Italian American company, one example is the debate about the nature of the Italian American classic spaghetti and meatballs. Known

⁴² See appendix, fig. 4

as a quintessentially Italian American dish people are quick to qualify it as only such, often immediately, and subsequently alien to Italian cuisine proper disregarding any sort of Italianate lineage. However, spaghetti and meatballs are not unknown to peninsular and insular Italians, but in the dried pasta + meatballs combination it becomes a contentious sign in and of itself. While spaghetti and meatballs are a hallmark of Italian American or diasporic Italian cuisine as well as a typical American *family* meal, peninsular and insular Italians prefer to eat the two separately. There is some debate whether or not the dish was present in the South of Italy, but this has not been corroborated.

Yet most often, the conversation becomes one of a (+) and (-) binary nature. In other words, diasporic Italian cuisine is somehow “fake”, “wrong”, or more specifically inauthentic because it does not come from Italy proper as *centre* and not because of any inherent flaw in the recipe or food itself. Instead of one where food consumers see the similarities in the ingredients, what the discourse is, or rather becomes, is one of purity and derivation from a certain notion of culinary dogma, but it does not take into consideration the ephemeral nature of existence and by extension the semi-ephemeral nature of recipes themselves. In this case, the transformation of the ingredients used by people in one part of the world by another group of people in another part of the world. Both are to a certain extent authentic in their own subjective orientation, and it is this dissertation’s position that focusing on the differences in a certain fixed temporal setting is unhelpful in creating a broader discourse on the transformation of culture, specifically Italian culinary culture. With that said, one can recognize that

television is a give and take medium where ratings are important for a cooking show's continual popularity and remaining on air, not to mention the advertisers. Therefore, the shows in this chapter were chosen to illustrate examples of relationships between centre and periphery in this discourse, which interrelated cooking and cuisine with concepts of time, space, and content relevant to defining their specificity in representing Italianness.

5.1.5 The Mediatic Italian

These cooking shows and the accompanying celebrity of presenters sometimes go beyond people and becomes a lucrative commodity in and of itself, often exploited by large corporate franchising concerns as well as the marketing of culture for mass consumption and publication purposes, i.e., cookbooks, branded kitchen accessories, and so on. Many times, what is seen on television is usually developed with the end viewer in mind, a viewership often operating on pre-conceptions of outdated stereotypes, sepia-toned narratives that foster misconceptions of Italy and, by extension, Italian and Italian American people, the country, and culture (see Cavallero, 2004; De Stefano, 2006; Gardaphé, 2006). Television production companies, producers, writers, and TV hosts often continue to perpetuate the notion of an archaic, sepia-toned Italy steeped in the past always looking at modernity from the outside; a sort of ancient periphery looking on to a modern centre. Ironically, Italy is quite a modern country that blends, seamlessly and un-seamlessly at times, modernity and antiquity. Yet, responsibility ultimately lies with those that produce these audiovisual texts and

in an ideal world they would be cognizant of the effect that they will have on the viewing public (Tamburri, 2011). After all, the image as (moving) iconic image has a certain power over an audience. Speaking to the issue of culpability regarding the distorted images of Italians in cinema and television, Tamburri lays the responsibility at the door of both the artistic directors and cultural powerbrokers:

The fault, nevertheless, if this is the term, lies not only with the producers and actors of these movies and TV programs. It lies also might — we perhaps say on an equal plane — with the Italian and Italian/American viewing public as well as with the Italian and Italian/American intelligentsia. (2011: 14)

Interestingly, Tamburri's suggestions ring true today just as much as they did in 2011. Though Italian American Studies has created a space for the critical study and analysis of all things Italian in the US, especially with regards to bi-lingual international publications, the trope of the Italian in media often undercuts more realistic representations of Italians and Italian American culture. In the mediasphere, the fecund meme of the Italian as humorous trope still is the target of many ethnic, and non-ethnic jokes (Davies, 2011). It would seem that producers in the creative arts fields have not put in much effort either. Tamburri goes on to offer concrete solutions to this current state of stereotypical representations in the mediasphere which include cinema but mainly television:

It is, namely, the responsibility of this second group — the cultural brokers of Italian Americana — to articulate a discourse that is well researched, profoundly rigorous, interrogating of all viewpoints in a respectful and thereof non-dismissing manner, and, lastly, accessible to all. (2011: 14)

Therefore, in order to counter the stereotypical images of the Italian as subject-
icon, a concerted effort on the part of all Italian Americans must align in three crucial ways to develop a “discursive power” manifested in “language, narrative, and dialectics” (Viscusi, 1989; 1990) to create a “group narrative” (Tamburri, 2011: 15) that would supplant the master narrative of Italians in America and create a new one more reflective of the actualities of the culture.

5.1.6 Full on an Empty Stomach

One of the consequences of this master narratives is that audiences then expect to see only this presentation when they consume these types of cultural media products which in turn has the potential to shape peoples’ ideas in the real world. This is most evident in tourism where people have been fed, to extend Carl Jensen’s phrase “junk food news” that is the “sensationalized, personalized, and homogenized inconsequential trivia” in the form of news stories (2001: 251), cultural junk food. Applied to cultural programming, this junk food diet of stereotypical images and notions of a culture — for our purposes here Italian — then encounter the real culture in loco. A certain form of stereotypical cognitive dissonance potentially occurs when the apparent incongruities between the mediatic representation conflicts with the actual manifestation in real life, often evoking humour. Two basic examples are Americans traveling to Italy and

realizing that the country possesses a relatively modern infrastructure on par with the United States and, at times, surpasses it. Yet, due to linguistic barriers placed on foreigners while visiting in Italy — including Italian Americans — who do not speak Italian, coupled with the sepia-toned images they receive before arriving in Italy, a sort of cultural cognitive dissonance emerges.

An orientation such as this can skew how the host presents the culture and food to provide said end viewers with what is expected due to stereotype, misinformation, and culinary dogma. There is also the element of presenting Italy as a place of pleasure and leisurely attitudes coupled with the *dolce vita* lifestyle which appreciates a more relaxed style of living in stark contrast to what is believed to be the more frenetic societies such as the UK, Canada, and the United States. Hence, the following sections engage with three celebrity chefs of predominantly ethnic Italian parentage (or by “professional adoption”) and their programs.

Before moving forward, understanding the larger contexts of mass communication and global culture will prove helpful in understanding the phenomena of Italian and Italian-less cooking shows. Therefore, the next section includes a contextualization of these examples in the current media industry while the following section depicts the features and specificities of these examples. The fourth section focuses on a discussion of these shows as a feature of performative Italianate cooking.

5.1.7 Italian Culinary Aesthetics

In the modern age of mass communication (McLuhan, 1967; Hall, 1973; and to a lesser extent Innis, 2008) and the emergence⁴³ of global culinary culture through the globalis(z)ation of food (Jones, 2006; James, 2010), food consumption has embedded values of Western-style capitalism into the ethnic culinary experience in locations outside their traditional centres. This is achieved through the influence of the aesthetics of American popular and consumer culture and ubiquity of these transnational television shows. US based i.e., American, and to a lesser extent British television cookery and shows play a major role in establishing, defining, and stabilizing not only what Italian cuisine *is*, but also what is expected when the signifier /Italian/ is either written, uttered, or conceptualized in the mind of those consuming these audiovisual texts. Television cookery shows are a multimodal aesthetic experience subjectively expressing value and taste while they often have a larger reach than the authentic spaces where the traditions and recipes originate. Though there is no good or bad per se when it comes to taste, as it does not lead to any fruitful discussions towards a Kantian *universality* (Gronow, 1997: 11, 87), value on the other hand can be looked through the memetic attributes encoded with signs that have the allure of Italianness. These memes then go one to create a form of, albeit weak, social capital (Bourdieu, 1972) by which corporately commodified spaces (CCS)

⁴³ For the effects of globalization of consumer goods see <https://foreignpolicy.com/2004/02/10/the-cultural-globalization-index/> (accessed 1 July 2019).

derive income. Often it is these CCSs that become a major font of information for consumers that then becomes their only experience with “Italian” culture, but as simulacra, thereby shaping and reenforcing preconceptions of Italy. This exposure then continues cycles of distorting the concept of Italy.

As a “system of representation” (Hall, 1997) the medium of television can not only shape an audience’s understanding of ethnicity by way of ethnic cuisine but also has the ancillary effect of influencing and shaping the perception of Italian culture; think of this as a sort of feedback loop. Often this can feed off stereotypes as in the case of Buddy Valastro *Kitchen Boss* (2011-12) or reinforce old ones as in the case of David Rocco’s *Dolce Vita* (2004-present). What then happens is the figure of the presenter takes on the role of the gatekeeper to the portal of Italian food culture and oftentimes becomes the centre of the show. In a best-case scenario, audiences learn an authentic recipe or are exposed to certain foods that they would not normally consume, e.g., tripe and what Anthony Bourdain referred to as the “nasty bits”, often hallmarks of authentic food the world over. In a worst-case scenario, they are led astray by presenters who become influential in their specific style and take on cooking and culture by virtue of their mediatic position as culinary icons. The focus here is not whether the presenters in this sample do so knowingly or inadvertently but the ways in which some use Italian food as themes, such as in the case of Nigella Lawson and Jamie Oliver, or as a show’s general ethnic focus as with Rocco and Valastro.

While the word *Italian* contains the semantic and pragmatic content available to establish meaning in and of itself on a primary level, a situation arises

with how these audiovisual texts are presented and interpreted by viewers across geographical loci with different concepts of what constitutes *Italian* cuisine, and by extension *Italian* culture in general. The originally established meaning of Italian cuisine begins to change and this subsequent transformation leads to an interesting recombination of culinary DNA played out on screen in the form of “fusion cuisine” (Chiaro & Rossato, 2015) a trend that continues unabated. One example of this is the takes place in New Jersey, US⁴⁴ (S01E03, New Jersey) during the first season of New Jersey born Anthony Bourdain’s *No Reservations* series (2005-2013) with guest Mario Batali. At one point, there is a tongue-in-cheek exchange that signifies Batali as a sort of “Godfather” of Italian food in America. Although, with Batali’s (and Joe Bastianich) opening of Eataly in NYC and his vast restaurant empire one could make the claim that he is a short of “Godfather” of Italian cookery in the extended, semantically shifted meaning of the word.

Perhaps we can agree, to quote McLuhan (1967), that “the medium is the message” in the sense that McLuhan’s *form* imbeds itself into the actual *content* of the cooking shows themselves. In these cookery programmes we see a synthesis of both as many of the recipes and dishes call for actual material object to fulfil them. Some examples include but are not limited to *pizzelle* (Abruzzo), which uses a specifically shaped iron, *pasta [spaghetti] alla chitarra* (idem), a wooden box strung with fine steel strings that resembles a guitar, *passatelli* (Emilia-Romagna) a concave piece of steel with small holes in it mounted with two handles. As

⁴⁴ New Jersey is one of the states with the highest concentrations of Americas of Italian descent.

previously stated, the average peninsular and insular and diasporic Italians will view the signs of Italian cuisine differently than someone outside of the culture. This is not to say that non-Italians cannot learn or understand Italian cuisine, as in the case of Nigella Lawson. It merely means that location and personal history play an important formative role at a semiotic level in the interpretation of Italian cuisine as a 1. sign system and 2. ethnocultural production. Therefore, it becomes even more difficult to ascertain intentionality either way as we cannot be sure that these factors are taken into consideration when producing these audiovisual texts — another potential area for future research — whether consciously or subconsciously.

Firstly, this chapter does not claim to be an exhaustive analysis of the whole of culinary television let alone that of Italian themed cooking shows. For the general discourse on televised cooking programmes including the linguistic and translational aspects of Italian cooking shows in Italian see Chiaro, 2012; Collins, 2009; de Solier, 2005; Rosatto, 2014; Chiaro & Rossato, 2015 and for the discourse and critique surrounding Italian American themed cooking shows see Naccarato et al., 2017; Nowak, 2015; Wong, 2018. This chapter, on the other hand, offers a sample that includes television cooking shows in English that are available on Italian television to Italian audiences via the pay cable platform, SkyItalia. Consideration was also given to what could be classified as diasporic Italian cuisine and the peripheries where they are based. Hence, these shows were chosen because they provide a good example for what is reflected to the Italian peninsula, the historic centre of Italian cuisine. Food is not only a

fundamental human necessity and organizational principle, it is also a framework that has developed to give structure to people's lives and society as a whole and create meaning outside of both the politic economy and the coercive influence of capital (Descola, 2013; Douglass, 1971, 1971; Geertz, 1971; Levi-Strauss, 1965). It is precisely due to the ascertainable and reproducible nature of food that it holds the place as — to apply a Levi-Straussian metaphor — a key attribute to identity and propagation of Italian peninsular, insular, and diasporic culture.

In the next section, we move on to a discussion of the sample audiovisual texts chosen to demonstrate the signification and aesthetic strength Italy possesses in culinary discourse. Each text relies on four different presenters from different ethnic positionalities, which in turn have the effect of further framing their shows. Fundamental to each show's success is the use of Italian cuisine and corollary signs to evoke qualities such as family, comfort and more commodifiable attributes, such as the inherent quality and superiority of Italian products, foodstuffs, and lifestyle.

5.2 Italianate Cooking Programs

In the period between 2013 and 2015, these shows were some of the most easily accessible on Italian terrestrial television. Although this sample lacks the statistical viewership for Italy, these shows were aired at a regular cadence during the aforementioned years. One reason for this lacuna of viewership data is due to the myriad modes in which Italian viewers consume multimedia

products which makes understanding who is watching what difficult to ascertain. This difficulty has also been compounded by the advent and popularity of streaming services both coming into Italy and national streaming services such as TIM Vision. Moreover, another problematic issue with viewing international programming in Italy is that many shows need to be adapted, subtitled and/or dubbed. This means that a TV show that had a run, for example, in the UK in 2005 may only show up on Italian television years late, if at all. This was the case with Jamie Oliver's *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* which aired in Italy in 2013 but had been filmed in 2005. While this has changed due to streaming and more international co-productions, looking back at older shows can prove challenging. In fact, although difficult to locate full episodes of *Kitchen Boss* since it is a relatively newer program as episodes are often blocked behind paywalls, some these episodes can be found online in clip form. Therefore, while there may be more viewing options for programmes/content today, the time and space aspect of traditional terrestrial television has been inexplicably detached for a temporal moment or weekly schedule. Furthermore, this long interval between when these shows were created then shown in Italy may be due to their profile whereas other higher profile shows get aired sooner rather than later⁴⁵.

Returning to the sample from this study, shows such as *Kitchen Boss* (2011-12) and *Rocco's Dolce Vita* (2012-present) focus exclusively on Italian

⁴⁵ For a more in-depth discussion on English language audiovisual imports and translation practices see Chiaro, Heiss and Bucaria (2008) and Díaz Cintas and Nikolić (2017).

Peninsular/Insular or Diasporic cooking while *Nigellissima* (2012) and *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* (2005) – while not exclusively *Italian* – devotes a certain amount of the show's aesthetic to Italy and Italian cuisine. *Kitchen Boss* was a spin-off of *Cake Boss* (2009-present), a rather well received program in the US dealing showing the day-to-day operations of the Valastro family's *Carlo's Bakery* in Hoboken, New Jersey. The popularity of the shows has created the "Cake Boss effect" and made Hoboken a tourist destination in the tri-state area (Staub, 2010). Rocco on the other hand presents himself as a culinary journeyman/traveller and has also starred in and produced cooking/travel shows in India and parts of Africa in the vein of the late Anthony Bourdain. Since the shows are mainly made on location by Rocco and then sold to networks, they do not fit into the standard annual "season" categories. Lawson's *Nigellissima* was an 8-part limited series for the BBC based off of the book *Nigellissima: Instant Italian Inspiration* (2012) while Jamie Oliver used the same strategy of self-promotion and production.

The analysis entailed a multimodal (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001) approach to interpret culture via audiovisual texts. This method relies on a combination of interpreting the signs produced and employed by the presenters in relation to the overall aesthetic the presenters were attempting to convey to an audience. Moreover, this approach focused on presenters that transmit culture and as such are the ephemeral vectors transporting information between cultures in relatively real time.

5.3 Italianate Chefs

Memes, and memeplexes, may survive by encoding their message through human vectors in stones tablets, vellum parchments, architecture or even artefacts as simple as propaganda fliers, gas station advertisement signage or, for the purposes here, cuisine and recipes. These memes are all present in the sample as outlined in section 4.2. Not in order of importance, the following examples contain four chefs. They are discussed in this order: in the case of the first two, illustrations include two extremes on the same spectrum. On the one hand, there are the programmes and books of Nigella Lawson, which look at Italian cuisine from a perspective that is firmly-entrenched in British culture; on the other hand, and to a lesser extent, there are those of Jamie Oliver, equally entrenched in British culture but attempting to hide this with marketing strategies and continuous references to his *epiphany* as a chef under well respected restaurateur, cookery writer, and Italian peninsular transplant to the UK, Antonio Carluccio.

5.3.1 US and UK Italianness

While there may be similarities between most immigration cycles out of Italy into the wider world, the difference between US and UK Italianness is helpful to understanding cultural variations between the groups and often, the visual aesthetic utilised in cooking show whether in a studio or on location. The main defining difference is proximity to and geographical relationship with Italy as centre. In contemporary times, as the UK is physically closer than the US mainland, distance becomes less of a defining feature in the evolution of UK

Italians as with their US counterparts. They are never truly far from Italy as centre. Within a couple hours, Italians living in the UK can return to Italy and update their cultural data so that they are really never detached from Italian culture and language.

US based Italians, on the other hand, are much more into the periphery since traveling back to Italy is not a quick option of financially feasible for most. In the past, this was even more difficult. Added to this equation is the fact that during the periods of Italian mass immigration (1880-1924), many Southern Italians did not have the nostalgic relationship to the Italy as their descendants would develop. Therefore, IAs hold a more diachronically and at times, ahistorical and *idealised* view of Italy, while UK Italians have a more synchronically or contemporary view of Italy. Applied to this study's cookery show hosts, Italianness is also a fuzzy position because it depends on a hosts' personal experience with Italy and the means one has to go back and forth from centre to periphery and back again.

5.3.2 Nigella Lawson (UK)

Nigella Lawson is a British television personality and food writer. She is the daughter of former Chancellor of the Exchequer, and life peer to the British crown, Nigel Lawson (Smith, 2006) so a bit of *prestige* comes with her show. She clearly states her approach is "Italian inspired" (Lawson, 2012) cooking which comes to be understood as simple, functional food for friends and family. Specifically, relevant to this study is her show *Nigellissima* (2012), a 6-part limited

series which aired intermittently on BBC and through the BBC on demand service as well as on Italian terrestrial television. The series' tag line states "Bring the spirit of Italy to the kitchen with ingredients you can find in any supermarket. This is a home cookery course in dishes that elevate everyday eating into no-fuss feasts" (IMDB). As the show is a tie venture to a cookbook of the same name, Lawson has used the medium of television to promote her version of cooking with Italian cuisine and ingredients featured in *Nigellissima*. Clearly this is the case as signalled by the choice of the title which utilises *-issima*, the suffix which denotes a superlative in Italian, i.e., very Nigella. In some of her promotional photos for the book, Lawson is dressed in 1950s retro clothing, harking back to and aligning with the sepia toned images of early 20th-century Italy with the plain black dress with white collar⁴⁶. Lawson has also starred in many cooking shows, so she is well placed as a cooking icon in British media and interpreter of foreign cultures for domestic audiences. Each 40-to-45-minute episode starts with either a panoramic shot of Florence, Italy or else a street shot of London before Lawson starts the cooking segment. Shifting among the good mother, sexy-seductive vixen, and the chic gourmand Lawson usually presents from what viewers are to assume is her kitchen. Her recipes are usually a fusion of different cultural cuisines. Due to her affection for Italy and the time spent there in her youth, she often makes "Italian" inspired recipes, which involves using name brand, high end Italian products that would only be found in delicatessen shops.

⁴⁶ For the paratexts from Lawson's show and books see Appendix 5.

Part of the appeal of her show lies in illustrating how easy it is to cook a “family” meal in a short amount of time. What never comes into play is her status as part of the upper class and the fact that many of the ingredients that are taken for granted and used by regular families become luxury goods outside of Italy. It is a show of privilege masking itself as attainable to everybody. Though she is appropriating what she believes to be Italian culture by way of luxury goods consumption, Lawson, in all actuality is rendering a meal palatable to English visual tastes and aesthetics. In doing so, she is taking and transforming what Roland Barthes (2012) considered petite (culinary) bourgeois culture and making it universal to her viewership.

5.3.3 Jamie Oliver (UK)

Though not a primary focus of analysis, any critique of British Italianate cooking would be remiss to not acknowledge the work of Jamie Oliver⁴⁷. Oliver is an Essex born chef, restaurateur, and television personality (Hildred, 2001). His food “empire” encompasses casual and light dining restaurants both in major cities and also in airport terminals. and he has done a significant amount of work to improve the public consciousness about healthy eating. His television show, *Jamie's Great Italian Escape* (2005), was a six-part travelogue series that was first broadcasted on Channel 4 (UK) and sporadically on Italian terrestrial television. Since Oliver is traveling around Italy in a WV bus, each episode takes place in a

⁴⁷ For the paratexts from Oliver’s show and books see Appendix 6.

new regional locale. Shooting locations included: Altamura, Puglia (E05), Marettimo, Egadi Islands (E02) and Palermo, Sicily (E01), and Amalfi, Campania (E06). General regions included Le Marche, central Italy (E04) and one episode takes place among the friars of Farfa Abbey (E03).

Known for his casual, intense behaviour when cooking, the normally friendly Oliver sometimes overdoes it with cheekiness which has caused him problems. For example, in episode S01E04 “Le Marche”, Oliver continually refers to one middle-aged *Marchegiana* woman (Rosella) as “nonna”. By the woman’s demeanour, quickness of retort and tone, we can see that it is an insult in this context so much so that after a while, the woman, visibly annoyed, all but reprimands him:

Oliver: Ok, Nonna!

Rosella: Ascolta, mi chiamo Rosella (listen, my name is Rosella).

Here, the use of *Nonna* is an example of an Italian word that has been appropriated and has semantically shifted meaning when used by a non-Italian speaker to encompass every Italian woman “of a certain age”. But in Italy, *Nonna* would only be used by actual family members as a term of endearment. Lacking the family connection, Oliver’s use of the term as one of endearment is taken as a mistake. Admittedly, this is a slight *faux pas*, but it leaves one to wonder whether the cheekiness or lack of respect Oliver displayed to the woman is the same with which he approaches the ancillary culture that surrounds Italian food.

Furthermore, we must also ask if this lack of basic cultural understanding of Italian interpersonal communication can translate into an understating of Italy cooking. After all, his culinary *empire* encompasses restaurants⁴⁸, books, and TV show are titled in the possessive: *Jamie's Italian (restaurants)* and so on. Since Oliver operates most of his businesses in the UK and is successful, then it must then be *authentic*. This association brings to the fore an interesting point of observation regarding who “owns” Italian food, which leads us to the logical conclusion: can a certain style of cuisine actually be “owned”? We have already seen in commercials by Fiat Chrysler, that when an American family buys a new FIAT 500, they “receive an authentic Italian family” with it (Paris, 2019). We should be so bold to posit that no other ethnic groups would be given away with a new car in the US without a certain amount of public and social media outcry. The short answer is anyone with the required skills can “own” a certain culinary approach. What we see with Oliver, is that his version has become a sort of globalized Italian or, in the case of *Jamie's Italian* at the Gatwick Airport, or what we can call *airport Italian*. This is not to say that what Oliver is doing is inherently malicious or evil. After all he has tried to raise awareness for health eating in the UK (*Jamie's School Dinners*, 2005; *Jamie's Return to School Dinners*, 2007; *Jamie's Ministry of Food*, 2008) and in the USA (*Jamie Oliver's Food Revolution*, 2010-11), a country notorious for corporatized food. So, as an Italophile he may be one of the most successful.

⁴⁸ Currently struggling to survive the economic climate and now the fallout from Covid-19.

5.3.4 Buddy Valastro (USA)

Bartolo Valastro Jr, professionally known as “Buddy”, aka the “Cake Boss”, and more recently the “Kitchen Boss”, is a first-generation⁴⁹ Hoboken-born Italian American confectioner and celebrity chef. His initial success and subsequent fame stemmed from the elaborate cakes that he and his crew of artisans, siblings, and cousins created out of family’s bakery. Named after his father Bartolo “Buddy” Valastro Sr (born in Lipari, Italy), the multi-generational, family owned, and operated *Carlo’s Bake Shop* commonly known as *Carlo’s Bakery*. Since the family bought the bakery from Carlo Guastaferrro in 1964 who started the bakery in 1910, The Valastros have been providing cakes, Italian pastries, and other hand-crafted confectionery to Hoboken and across the river to New York City. Though being *Italian* is a fundamental signifier to Valastro, his family and his business, it is not an exclusively Italian place as they make other non-Italian based recipes as well.

Apart from his name correlating to peninsular/insular Italian cultural naming conventions — including the use of nicknames as placeholder for proper first names — the Cake/Kitchen Boss as sign also evokes the term “boss” which has a loaded connotation. By using this term, once again the aforementioned connotations of Italian American films such as *The Godfather* and organized crime

⁴⁹ In this study, “first generation” refers to children born in the United States from Italian born parents.

in the collective conscience of American popular culture become attached to this show. Valastro goes so far as actually tapping into the Mafia/organized crime meme by titling his show⁵⁰ with the same font and image used in *The Sopranos* television show (1999-2007). Some of the more noticeable examples are the use of the nickname⁵¹ “The Boss” for Bruce Springsteen as well as corporations, often incorporating this type of slang into their jargon as a way of demonstrating power and authority. In short, the loaded connotation becomes a marketing tactic and attaches itself to the stereotype and lexicon of Italian Americana. This is a reoccurring theme in American television and has been taken up by other Italian Americans as well as non IAs. Kitchen Boss is a straight cooking program that showcases Valastro and his immediate family and friends. Firmly steeped in a version of Italian Americana based in New Jersey, Kitchen Boss makes frequent use of family recipes whether they are actually Italian or Italian American; the distinction is almost eliminated. Language use plays a fundamental role in the show’s home cooked aesthetic, with the liberal use of Italian salutations and phrases to denote in group affiliation and presentation as Italian to the audience. The show is peppered with “Ciao”, “buon giorno”, “mia famiglia” (with Spanish pronunciation, i.e., “mi familia”), as well as Sopranos/New Jersey IA catch phrases “bada-bing, badda-boom”, which Valastro sometimes uses when he

⁵⁰ For paratexts from Valastro’s *Kitchen Boss*, see Appendix 7.

⁵¹ In Italy, “boss” is used quite often by African migrants in casual conversation with people as a form of endearment even if it does have a negative connotation in the agricultural industry of Italy, an industry notorious for the exploitation of the migrants.

adds spice or another ingredient to a dish, similar to Emeril Lagasse signature “bam!” catch phrase. In the show’s pilot (S01E01 *Date Night*), Valastro’s approach is based on the traditional cooking show setup: we see him working from behind a kitchen island with the appliances and sink in the background. Valastro explains that he is making dinner for his wife for their “date night”. He tells the audience that while she prefers a pasta course, he prefers a meat course. Valastro’s idea is then to combine the two into one dish: Chicken Sorrentino with fusilli. In this recipe, there is a break for Italy with a creation more attuned to an IA style of cooking and food consumption by combining both the 1st (*primo*) and 2nd (*secondo*) courses on to one plate.

In later episodes of the series Valastro delved into his familial relations to add to the show’s Italian (American) authenticity. In a sense, Valastro gives the viewers the rich, fatty media cuisine that fills them up on nostalgia too. The classic trope of the Italian American Sunday dinner as a visual aesthetic coupled with lexical choices such “the sauce”, or New Jersey’s use of Sunday “gravy” is another way for diasporic Italians to align with other DIs which established and maintain a sense of value. According to Cinotto, these representations comply with:

Among immigrants, the equation of food and family — an Italian-inflected notion of the family that eats together — produced nation by circulating the values of a distinctive domesticity that eventually strongly identified diasporic Italians in private as well as public arenas. That relationship also gave purveyors of Italian food a metaphor for presenting their products

and services to their diasporic consumers and for establishing their participation in the same diasporic community of taste. (2013: 3-4)

Furthermore, it is not difficult to see the connections in these representations with the simplified and memetic conceptualization of the relationship. In fact, as Cinotto continues:

That relationship also gave purveyors of Italian food a metaphor for presenting their products and services to their diasporic consumers and for establishing their participation in the same diasporic community of taste. The vision of a family eating together was best exemplified in the Italian restaurants of New York as the most valuable self-representations Italians could craft in the diaspora (ibid.)

Following Cinotto's lead on metaphor, it should be said that one of the strongest memes of P/I and diasporic Italian culture is the family meal around the dinner table, which serves as a metaphorical domestic *altar* supporting and continuing age-old rituals surrounding food consumption. Simple actions such as, but not limited to, grating cheese, eating olives and discarding the pits, and the drinking of wine encode in younger generations and re-encode in older generations what an Italian meal consists of through frequency, process, and competency. After each segment, after the food has been prepared Valastro and the people who took part in the episode, whether they are his nuclear, extended family or just friends, sit down and eat the food together. This breaking of bread together is historically a common attribute to the Italian and Italian American tables respectively. So much so that it almost becomes a trope in and of itself.

Yet, the consumption of a meal in the company of others, as well as in films that have Italian as a theme or Italian people as characters in them are very prevalent in Italian American cinema. The most popular would be the films of Francis Ford Coppola and Martin Scorsese (Cinotto, 2013: 2). However, while their films utilise family meals, they also have scenes where food consumption is used as a backdrop, specifically in the gangster genre. Food consumption becomes a ritual of the “extended crime family”.

5.3.5 David Rocco (CAN)

Entrenched in both the culture of Canada nor Italy, *David Rocco's Dolce Vita* 2004-2013 (Food Network, NAtGeo in Italy) offers the most authentic version of cuisine in the sample as the show is always located and filmed in Italy. His approach is more laid back and reminiscent of Anthony Bourdain's cooking/travelogue shows *No Reservations* (2005-2012) and *Parts Unknown* (2013-2018). Due to the more ethnographic rather than mainstream television cookery style of filming, the lower production value of the show trades sets for segments done *in loco*. In 2008 Rocco also published a cookbook with the same title as the television show – a *de rigueur* decision repeated with the other hosts in this study. Often the television program serves as a tie-in to the book⁵². Rocco

⁵² For the paratexts from Rocco's show and books see appendices #8

portrays himself as someone who is trying to learn from his Italian hosts and often, friends.

To extend the Jewish law of return to Israel or *Aliyah*, Rocco's show is what this study considers "return" cooking⁵³, as it offers the most authentic representation of the spirit of Italian cooking and is in and of itself an act of (culinary) cultural recovery. Even though he presents an idealized, bucolic lifestyle/visual aesthetic (S01E01), which most Italians do not partake in, *Dolce Vita* comes across as being exactly what Canadians or Americans think they are going to encounter when traveling in Italy and by extension what Italians are doing every day.

With that said, Rocco's show appears to be the most educational of the sample as he takes the time to source both local ingredients, recipes and possesses adequate Italian language skills to converse in standard Italian (S01E02). This last point cannot be discounted as it was the only show that had regularly had segments where the audience could hear standard Italian, albeit often with a Tuscan pronunciation, lexical choices, and accent. It should also be stated that *Dolce Vita* is perhaps the smallest show in terms of production with Rocco and his wife acting as producers. There is a natural familial intimacy to the show which is lacking in Oliver's and Valastro's productions. This is not to say that each of the shows in the sample do not have segments with family, friends, or

⁵³ Although the concept of *Aliyah* here is taken from the tradition of Judaism, Rocco himself is not Jewish.

celebrations with them. All that is implied here is that *Dolce Vita* succeeds in creating an independent film style production which more closely resembles what life was and is in fact like in many of the lesser-known towns and villages throughout Italy.

5.4 Sample I Analysis

The three cooking shows were chosen to demonstrate varying degrees of success when it comes to being Italian, presenting Italian, and cooking Italian. Each strives to create programming that relies heavily on Italy as a visual aesthetic as well as, in the cases of Valastro and Rocco, the Italian family as a system of values. This not to say that Lawson and Oliver do not utilize family memes, but their use is ancillary to their execution and presentation of the food.

Unlike Buddy Valastro, Nigella Lawson, and Jamie Oliver, Rocco operates closer to Italy as centre rather than periphery. This is due to Rocco actually being from Canada but making the choice to live and work in Tuscany. Lawson and Oliver, on the other hand, do not live but occasionally work in Italy even if they have spent extended time there. Being able to make a quick jaunt over to the continent is an important factor to the frequency with which the average British person can connect to some concrete, first person version of Italy and not one filter through the media or, in the case of food choices, filter through British culture.

On the other side of the Atlantic, Buddy Valastro often refers to himself and his dishes as “Italian” but in reality he means Italian American. This is in

contrast to David Rocco who also refers to himself as “Italian” yet focuses on living in Italy with his family and learned recipes from P/I Italians. Rocco is going to the source and recreating contemporary takes on Italian food in Italy proper, i.e., the centre, whereas Valastro taps into an imagined Italian American past for his recipes and uses it to create new Italian American hybrids, firmly based in the New Jersey, New York tri-state area, a sort of ground zero in the hierarchy of IA popular culture. Moreover, Rocco seeks out recipes for peninsular and insular Italians to show him how to cook like an Italian and with authentic Italian recipes rather than attempting to construct what the other presenters — to a lesser extent Lawson — claim is authentic Italian food.

Rocco’s *Dolce Vita*, however, does have the drawback of creating an “Eat, Pray, Love” environment where Rocco moves around Florence living life how he perceives Italians do, once again reinforcing the myth that most people unfamiliar with contemporary life in Italy hold. Attitudes in the US often portray Europeans, and by extension Italians as lazy, napping in the afternoon, and not living life as seriously as their North American counterparts.

There is also an aspect of what would seem to be a sort of fetish with Italian based programs for a foreign international audience. As with most cooking and travel/lifestyle programs, it becomes apparent that these cooking/lifestyle shows offer the viewer a way of vicariously living through the presenters, thus reinforcing the sepia-toned image of Italy’s past, never permitting it to be the modern country, but one locked in the past. Through the moving image, and the diffusion of these pragmas as memes, views reinforce commonly held prejudices

towards Italy and Italians but seeing a country at its most exalted locations and historical sites neglecting to see the quotidian realities that Italians live in by constantly recycling these places and space in general, Italy again becomes locked in an idyllic past, the sepia-toned Italy, at the expense of its present and future.

5.4.1 Triangulating Language and Culture

Signs in the form of jingoistic phrases – Buddy Valastro’s evocation of utterances linking to the larger meme of the Italian gangster and mediatic mafia culture – and iconography offer structured, easily digestible cultural information to consumers, the effects of which have the potential to shape the public’s perception of people and their food customs. In a certain sense, the semiosis that begins with consuming these audiovisual products starts a chain reaction in the observer merging not only the visual semiotic information they are interpreting but the preconceived notions viewers already possess.

As is the case with Valastro, and to a lesser extent Rocco, the importance of food and the actual table itself as a communal place in the *domus* (Orsi, 1985) can be said to be fundamental to their programmes’ visual aesthetic. For Italian and Italian American families alike, it acts as a domestic altar. Memetically, the ideas that are transferred to the participants in the table as ritual go on to instruct them in how they organize their own food consumption inside and outside the nuclear family. Semiotically, the image of the table and what it means to the average peninsular/insular and diasporic Italian cannot be understated: it is an anchor, a point of encounter and comfort.

This chapter primarily discussed a random sample of Italian themed cooking shows available on Italian terrestrial television, produced inside and outside of Italy. They are not an isolated phenomenon and the kitchen is not the only space where Italians – and their food culture – as visual commodity or social capital are utilized to express style and good taste, i.e., the *la dolce vita* aesthetic. Yet, one can posit that by ascribing to this aesthetic and promoting it through cooking shows TV hosts continue to perpetuate various interpretations of Italy whether they be cultural, through the use of space/locations, customs, and values signifying *italianità* or linguistic through the use of Italian and the miscommunication that can arise from a host's lack of Italian language skills. This chapter offers a yardstick of comparison, almost a unit of measure of *Italianate* representations that will be discussed in relation to the literary samples from Youngstown in Chapter 6.

The effect these audiovisual texts have on the perception of Italy and Italians as a group leads to the observation that they are just one player in the creation of their image and sometimes agents in either propagating stereotypes through language and references to the mafioso culture *vis-à-vis* *The Godfather* (Valastro) or actively reassessing what modern Italian cooking - and by extension *Italianate* cuisine is through a desire for authenticity (Rocco) and culinary cultural appropriation, assimilation (Lawson, Oliver) and commodification (Oliver). Furthermore, if we consider the diasporic Italian as a guest in a host country as defined by Safran (2018: 5), then we can say that Italian Americans in the USA have moderate control over their image because they can, at times,

control the narrative space and offer IA interpretations of Italian culture. Though they have benefited, in a certain sense at least, from such images as powerful, all-controlling *mafiosi* and other nefarious professions who adopt the *mafioso* meme demeanour and aesthetic. Yet this insider status is precarious as it only takes one moment or event to bring it back to an outsider aspect of identity to re-emerge. We can posit that the image of distinctly Italian cultural products often contributes to long-established stereotypical tropes of Italian people which could best be defined as, to extend the term, “olive face”.

Once these audio-visual products are aired, the public can then interpret and decode the images as visual texts i.e., unlimited semiosis. Often the case is that some of these shows further perpetuate the sepia-toned narrative of an Italy locked in the past and further exploited as a cultural commodity benefiting everyone else except the people who inhabit the centre proper, all the while commodifying and co-opting their signs of culinary identity for either monetary or profile advancement. These aesthetic and cultural values then become a mediatic parallel to the actual reality of Italian cuisine and culture in which it was and continues to develop. Parallel examples that also operate on the Italian visual semiotic and aesthetic are Italian American restaurants and cuisine, specialty stores, consumer goods and subsequently, by economic necessity, commercials. These are all examples of cultural capital that was brought with the people of the Italian diaspora but has since been adopted and/or assimilated into mainstream American/Italian American culture. In a sense, in the mediatic universe Italian culture in the periphery becomes more influential than the culture in Italy as

centre. Authenticity becomes a continuum along which we find varying degrees of success. Unfortunately, this cultural capital has been more often than not spent by non-Italians for the purpose of monetary gain. One example is the franchise restaurant “The Olive Garden” that boasts: “when you’re here, you’re family” and purports to be a denizen of authentic Italian cuisine. One need not look further than the fact that olive trees grow in groves and not in gardens to recognize the lack of Italian cultural competency. The authenticity becomes a factor because the simulacra become the real as the real gets overlooked. In reality, these commodified spaces are purpose-built simulacra utilized by small, medium, and multinational corporations and food conglomerates for capital accumulation through the appropriation of culture. What they provide is empty ethnicity for consumers and, in a sign of the times, are quite popular. In fact, there is much research and analysis that goes into creating these ethnic commodified spaces. Parasecoli goes into detail of what aesthetic choices corporations are adopting to entice customers:

Together with food quality, service quality, price, and location, the restaurant ambience has been indicated as one of the main factors influencing the customers’ experience. Lighting, aroma, soundscape, temperature, cleanliness, design, décor, the overall atmosphere, the comfort of the seating arrangement. (Parasecoli, 2014: 246)

And while these points are structural in nature, there are the finer points of ethnic culture that have been reduced to simulacra through the path culture takes inside the commodification “translations and interpretation” process:

Among these strategies, the adoption of themes referring to ethnic traditions has been identified as a marketing tool that restaurants employ to provide customers with unique experiences and to differentiate themselves from the competition. The elements that are taken into consideration usually include design, décor, music, costumes, and other signifiers that in the United States have come to be associated with the culture from which the cuisine originates. (Ibid.)

Yet, regarding scholarship in the critical analysis and study of food, consumption practices, and the effect it has had outside of diverse loci of origin, Simone Cinotto points out that the study of Italian food, has mainly been overlooked due to the hegemony of U.S. exports into Italy. He states that current scholarship has basically “ignored the Italian American case” (2014: 2) in favour of focusing on the exportation of American goods and culture and has “privileged the eastbound direction and traced the exportation to Europe of American marketing cultures and consumer dynamics” (Ibid 2). Therefore, an interesting situation arises with Italian themed cooking shows and their popularity as they combine to form an efficient system of meaning viewers can decode, which then normally translates into consumer choices. Italian food stuffs, which we can consider floating signs of Italian culture, again become a two-level commodity and material objects in the context of TV shows. Furthermore, these signs symbolize Italy and Italian values as both product and commodity. Furthermore, the historical perspective posits that *much* (my emphasis) of the ethnic identity that Italian Americans possess, whether diachronic or synchronic, has its origin in the peninsula and insular Italian food products, i.e., signs that were imported in the

U.S. for consumption by the immigrants (2014: 3). This last point supports one of this dissertation's hypotheses that diasporic Italian culture has in the past drawn off signs that originated in Italy as centre and contribute to an actual and not a metaphorical connection to Italy.

5.5 Concluding Remarks

As stated at the outset of this Chapter, this sample did not intend nor expect to be exhaustive. The aim was to raise awareness of the growing significance of a potential semio-memetic application to the study of Italian and diasporic Italian culture regarding imports and exports of notions of Italianness. The chapter intended to challenge conceptualizations of the effects that exporting these notions have had and continue to have on two important intersectional facets of contemporary culture, i.e., food consumption and the global media ecosystem.

How the perception of culture via the signs and their vehicles, memes, is utilized, interpreted, and propagated through television cooking shows is continuing to evolve will no doubt be analogous to the recipes Italian immigrants brought with them in their minds as they traversed, and continue doing so, a metaphorical ocean of time and space. This metaphorical space has now been filled with quasi-reality shows that assume the role of authentic connection to Italy with the hosts serving as our interpreters of both Italian and Italian America cuisine and by extension, culture. Therefore, when it comes to analysing the potential effects that these shows have from a memetic position there is a dearth in scholarship that specifically references memes as contributing to cultural

transmission, which considering the prevalence of discussions surrounding memes in mass media, seems a notable lacuna. These shows' recipes, décor, sounds, music, and locations provide a visual aesthetic that engages and continues the process of unlimited semiosis of Italian culture in the periphery.

Lastly, one could contend that for the Italianate food system, there may in fact be a proportionate amount of scholarship to pair with the glut of Italian themed cooking shows. This section has shown how we can apply a memetic process to the dialectic between culinary programming and the spread of *italianità*. The memes that are metaphorically uprooted from Italy and then are spread through these shows do in fact take hold in the new figurative *terra mentale* or "mental soil" of a viewership detached from the geographical location of Italy. They showcase foodstuffs or allusions to authentic Italian methods of food production, these programmes are then cultivated, take hold and then grow in influence going on to bear metaphorical crops that become hybrids of both cultures imparting a particular "flavour" generated through the characteristic loci imparting a distinct *cultural terroir*. Therefore, as previously stated at the beginning of this chapter, through the mass media and the flattening of televised space, *un filo commune* is developed that runs through and connects all these expressions of Italian culinary culture whether they are in Italy or abroad. In a sense, Italy becomes what it is in the eye of the beholder. On one hand, in the productions of Lawson, Oliver, and Rocco this is achieved through the use of décor or *in loco* filming rendering Italy an exotic locale and as such, closer to the centre of Italian culinary culture. On the other hand, since Valastro is operating

far outside the boundaries of Italy and Europe, we see a production that is steeped more in the culture of American Italians, i.e., Italian Americans/diasporic Italians.

The global aesthetic is deeply rooted in signs of *italianità* that spread through the global mediasphere via memes. Television cooking shows are an ideal visual environment for audiences to see these signs. As such, these shows are just one of the more efficient, versatile, and visible methods of transmission and distribution of Italianate cuisine containing multiple manifestations of /Italy/ as sign system. Moving further into this dialectic, in the next chapter we shall see another complementary variation of traditional texts that make up the other hemisphere of this study.

6 Sample II: Literary Texts

This chapter considers the second set of samples that include works of ephemeral nature as the foci of the discussion of the Italian American self-description and portrayals. As the first sample considered audiovisual texts in the form of television cooking shows, this sample considers local, do-it-yourself written texts, as well as the production of material objects. Both expressions use Italian culture — in the expanded sense — as an aesthetic and thematic sign system allowing viewers and readers alike to experience multimodal interpretations of Italy and the United States of America fluidly. Texts in these forms are used to achieve a number of objectives of this study: 1) the recognition and examples of memes that are then used 2) to identify patterns that define identity in order to, 3) categorise the features that enable us to investigate these artefacts as possible manifestations of the abstract conceptualizations of identity and culture used thus far. Hence, what follows is a brief outline explaining what ephemeral texts are and a description of the sample texts used in the study.

6.1 The Ephemerality and Aesthetics of Loci

An ephemeral text is any text, whether print or visual, that lasts for a relatively short time depending on social and environmental conditions. These virtuous material objects encoded with *la storia*, both history and story, are compressors

of time and space continuously generating discourse. Moreover, as previously stated, the process of assimilation is often seen as a negative process of inertia that inevitably happens to dislocated subjects out of their historic centres while in the periphery. What is less acknowledged though is that these new peripheries, which in the case of diasporic Italian Americans, have the potential to be, and often do become new cultural centres where novel forms of meaning production take place.

Most references of Italian in American popular culture focus on texts by well-known authors such as Mario Puzo, due the success of *The Godfather* trilogy and its effect on the American collective conscience. Other Italian American authors such as Don DeLillo, John Fante, and Pietro Di Donato are also a few of the more easily recognizable mainstream literary sources. However, they are nowhere near to being referenced as much as *The Godfather* even if they are quality literature. In fact, it would not be hyperbolic to claim that *The Godfather* is the most referenced text after the Bible in US popular culture, perhaps even more so. Here the signifier /Italian/ is used for the purpose of demonstrating the position that to most Americans there is no difference between what we have been referring to as diasporic, peninsular, and insular Italians. Usually the adjective “real” describes Italian nationals from Italy that speak Italian as a mother tongue and bear no association with the United States other than through the mass media. Also, they could be considered “foreigners” to Italian Americans, therefore continuing to solidify a cultural wedge between the three macro variations on Italian people. Most of the Italian American zeitgeist

revolves around and are set in more urban settings and metropolitan areas with a sizeable Italian population. East coast loci include, but are not limited to, New York, New Jersey, Boston; Midwest cities such as Cleveland, Pittsburgh, and Chicago; Southern cities such as New Orleans and the state of Florida. While the Central and Mountain states are generally underrepresented, except for Colorado due to the popularity of John Fante's work. The West Coast includes Los Angeles, San Francisco and the California wine country north of the city (US Census Bureau, 2017), as well as smaller pockets located throughout the Pacific Northwest — another underrepresented locus. The canon is considerable, and the work done with regards to it has grown significantly and, in all likelihood, will continue to grow. All these places, in one way or another, provided the landscapes and material existence for most of the literary and artistic expressions that would go into creating and defining the canon of Italian American literature.

Often, in the case of the ports of New York and New Orleans, these have been the entryway into, to use the term in its most metaphorical and poetical way, *L'America*. These ports of entry are points in a much longer and complex discourse on human migration and continue to be an unbroken chain in our collective evolution, a chain that links to a larger metaphorical world of language and culture, creating a rich and vivid world regardless of the time that spawned it, lasting only as long as the text remains intact.

But other more detached geographical areas will lack connections to places outside the US due to their isolation. Texts then can fill the void and become semi-ephemeral memes of cultural transmission and maintenance;

vectors of culture spreading through a population encoding and re-encoding in new loci assimilating new information in the form of language, customs, values, and aesthetics. They are either cherished because they have gained importance or they are discarded and, in the best scenario, perhaps traded off to a small independent bookstore. This way, they may lie dormant waiting to be discovered by a third, fourth, fifth, or even sixth generation descendants related to one of the Italian families that called. We can only speculate as to our hypothetical buyer's motives, but for the sake of argument, perhaps they are looking to reconnect to some semblance and variety of local ethnic culture that no longer exists, or only exists in simulacra (see section 4.3). They might even be foreign students studying at Youngstown State University who have heard about the history of Youngstown's working-class and steel industry past as well as the immigrant labour force, issues of human capital and sacrifice. All of these motivations can be debated but the underlying principle of *la ricerca* or "the search" for texts, as we can call it, are twofold. Some purveyors of books might just be looking for something to have on a coffee table in their living rooms or parlours; texts can be discursive objects in their own right. Yet, whether they are found in the more internationally connected coastal areas of the US or in loci nestled in the country's hinterland, texts then become a fugitive filament connecting Italy as centre to the US and its diasporic peoples as well as keeping Italian signs, as memes, in continuous motion through semiosis.

In the case of the texts in this sample, they are devices that not only recount the past but modify it. This is done through various metaphorical anecdotes,

specific phrases, and key words as memetic code clusters (section 4.2) inadvertently linking the texts to larger events outside of the Mahoning Valley. Ideas such as family, identity, as well as freedom, opportunity, poverty and resilience are explicitly or implicitly alluded to in them. It is these metaphors that diasporic Italians in America “live by” in the texts and often define the aesthetic frame in which the narratives are oriented. Lakoff and Johnson related the fundamental purpose of them in our lives, which is applicable to the diasporic Italian American field of meaning:

Metaphor is for most people a device of the poetic imagination and the rhetorical flourish — a matter of extraordinary rather than ordinary language. Moreover, metaphor is typically viewed as characteristic of language alone, a matter of words rather than thought or action. For this reason, most people think they can get along perfectly well without metaphor. We have found, on the contrary, that metaphor is pervasive in everyday life, not just in language but in thought and action. Our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is fundamentally metaphorical in nature. (1980: 8)

Texts, in their most essential form are metaphors in and of themselves, providing ideas, shaping desires, and orienting a person within a specific spatio-temporal matrix and at times moving between them. They also function as textual talismans linking those in the present, at the time of encountering them, to a wider discourse of Italian American experience. It is not the importance, simplicity or complexity nor the greatness or lowly status of a text’s discourse that matters but the interpretable signs that are contained therein and how they

create ideas, or memes in the reader's mind. Those, as subjective aesthetic markers of taste, can become quite misleading if a reader has no preconception or *a priori* knowledge of the Italian American experience, or Youngstown and *Youngstalians*.

In the case of the Italian American community, both in the past and present, in the post-industrialized city of Youngstown or *Youngstalians* and some of the "homespun histories" or semi-autobiographical, self-published, literary works that were generated from the memories, history, and create of this small colony, these authors have produced and circulated books that have documented diasporic Italian Americans in the various stages of assimilation into the American experience and collective conscience, while at the same time showing how their lives fit into the general history of both the Mahoning Valley and the whole of the United States. Moreover, they are textual evidence of a continuous semiotic link between diasporic Italians and peninsular / insular Italians.

The responsibility to create semi-ephemeral texts was taken on by individuals from different backgrounds with the same objective. That objective is to pass down their history to successive generations of Italian Americans so as not to lose the important experiences that went into creating their story. By making an altruistic text, something is created that is pure and as honest as a fictionalised biography can be. In an interview with Carmen J. Leone, he stated that "obligation" motivated him to write *Rose Street* (Leone, personal communication, 12 October 2014). The same obligation was also voiced by Tony Trolino (2001: 9-10). These authors felt that if they themselves did not write it no

one would, and then their history would be lost, lost to their families, extended families, and the community as a whole and then no one would remember “growing up Italian in a section of Youngstown where not only was promotion of the Italian heritage stressed, but the early immigrants [sic] effort as well to become productive citizens in this land of the free” (Varveris in *Brier Hill USA*, 2001). It is these demonstrations of signs connotating and denoting *italianità* that become the defining aesthetic markers whether in texts or paratexts in the forms of both book covers and material objects.

6.2 Youngstown, Ohio, USA as Metaphor

Before moving on to the texts, it would be beneficial to first look at Youngstown through the lens of a national metaphor. Literally down the hill from Brier Hill, the Jennette blast furnace named “Jenny” was the same blast furnace that Bruce Springsteen immortalized in his ode to the Rust Belt “Youngstown” on his 1995 album, *The Ghost Of Tom Joad* (see appendix). Springsteen tapped into the plight of Youngstown’s working-class that was quickly moving down the social mobility ladder and becoming part of a permanent underclass, a class often ignored unless there is a national election (Linkon & Russo, 2002; 1). We must remember that the only reasons that Italians moved into the Mahoning Valley at all was for work in, first, the abundant coal mines (Lariccia & Tucciarone, 2019) and then the steel mills, including the ancillary industries that developed to serve the mills and process the raw output, i.e., fabrication shops, tool & die, and so on.

With regards to class, owing to the city's position as a post-industrial urban environment in decay signified by the term "Rust Belt", texts from or based in Youngstown are for the most part Working-Class literature. Almost everyone from the Mahoning Valley, no matter how wealthy, identifies with the steel industry and their immigrant past. Therefore, through this, a case can be made for *Youngstalians* embodying working-class values. Moreover, the descriptor/signifier "working-class" is more than a social designation, it is a value system that shapes the worldview of *Youngstalians*.

Further down the economic chain, this also included less industrial based work such as dry goods and services, restaurants (especially bars), accommodations and boarding houses — the last being a way mainly working-class families supplemented their income. In *Rose Street*, the dual nature of the text as local history comes out in the description of the East Side of Youngstown and how, after work, men would frequent bars to "re-hydrate". Consumption of salt tablets was also a regular occurrence for mill workers as they would lose minerals through sweat during the long shifts manning the blast furnaces. After a long shift working around the steel mill's hellishly hot blast furnaces, the bars of Youngstown were filled. Here we can see the MCCs *loci* and *rituali* come into play:

Across the way and down just a little to the left where Wilson Avenue intersects is an empty lot, weeds hiding whatever ghosts remain of the Ritz Bar. The men returning from their long day at the mill used to file out of the bus and drag in for a drink (or two) before the trudge up the hill to

their homes. Sometimes our mothers, exasperated, supper on the table, sent us down to the Ritz to get them. We looked that because it meant someone's father would spring for a 7-Up. (Leone, xiv)

In order to understand working-class, steelworker culture one must understand the connection to what Pietro Di Donato referred to as "Job" in his novel *Christ in Concrete* (1939) as a field of meaning and labour as a location where meaning is created. In the case of Youngtown, the home, the mill, and then the bars, serving as social spaces of inclusion similar to the Italian *dopolavoro*, or "after work" clubs, make up the three parts of daily life that working-class *Youngstalians* structured their worlds around. In *Rose Street* they become another aesthetic intersecting ethnic, local, and work culture respectively.

In terms of the immigration history of the valley, the main migration routes were coming overland from the East meeting up with family members that had previously made the trip, i.e., chain migration. Yet, as the migratory experience waned as the older generation passed on and many Youngstowners left the Mahoning Valley — a sort of internal diaspora as well — art and music began to look at the Rust Belt for a new American aesthetic: One example is the Bruce Springsteen song based on the history of the Mahoning valley iron and steel history which is tethered to US history. "Youngstown" (see appendix) is not filled with nostalgia per se but appreciation and pride for life in the mill and

the sadness of losing jobs in it⁵⁴. One can image that for the more literate Italian workers, the blast furnaces and orange clouded skies above the city, the mills must have conjured up images of Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*. There, amongst the flaming, bright glaring molten iron ore, an identity was forged of equal parts American and working-class yet anchored in Italian when out of the mill. Though it was the mill that proved to be the ethnic cauldron that forged a new form of American after they ceased to be a location of meaning the concept of the steel worker became a thing of the past or even a trope of Midwestern America. These working-class figures toiled throughout their lives, then disappeared into history or else constituted a "new underclass" (Maharidge, Williamson & Springsteen, 1996). It would be another Italian American, Bruce Springsteen, that would bring their plight, history and contributions to the USA back to life with a sort of *sonic archaeology*:

Springsteen has brought voice to a largely unspoken dilemma involved in the Midwest's difficult move away from heavy industry: Working in a blast furnace is "a job that'd suit the devil." But that job "fed my children" and only thing more hellish than having that job was NOT having it. (Dryer, 1995: C5)

The "devils" that Springsteen refers to are those workers dispossessed by the rising tide of inequality and systematic long-term unemployment. These factors

⁵⁴ For an in-depth discussion on Springsteen's music, including American folk music, and labour see Portelli, A. 2020.

rendered workers redundant as well as eliminating work as a basic function of personal identity and self-actualisation in a country that lacks the necessary historical and cultural safety nets that many countries possess and even take for granted. These safety nets provide a cushion, whether financial, medical, or culture that supports, shapes, and provides meaning in subjects' lives.

In the US, as opposed to Italy, culture is mostly linked to the expenditure of capital and the “promise” — some would contend “lie” — that being wealthy is right around the corner if you just work hard enough. Springsteen and Steinbeck both evoke the notion that bad things happen to those who do the right thing. Whereas in Italy the country itself provides meaning thorough its millennia of history, in the USA history is often secondary to industry. Yet, one could contend this has changed considerably in recent times. While it is true that many people, young or old, skilled or semi-skilled/unskilled, and professionals alike still depart Italy today — the famous *cervelli in fuga* — again, this is now a choice. As outlined in Chapter 1, peninsular and insular Italians are not forced to leave due to governmental policies or selection pressures larger than themselves, but because they either have the education requisites and financial means or else have made opportunities for themselves abroad. Contemporary Italy, on the other hand, both provides universal healthcare and boasts a high standard of living/quality of life. The Italian of today has what Italians of the past lacked: individual agency. Along with that agency come more opportunities through work and travel. Sometimes a mixture of both.

In the United States, more than many other English-speaking countries, your profession or work is more than a “Job” (Di Donato, 1939). “Job” is a part of identity and a purpose. Lose one and the others go with it as well and Durkheim’s social anomie begins to flourish (see section 3.1.5). In these smaller, localised events, we can see how Youngstown, and the Mahoning Valley, becomes a window into a larger national and international industrial shift effecting socio-cultural conditions as well as artistic dynamics:

When Jenny closed, the Brier Hill works employed 1,500 people. Her demise came two weeks before what is still referred to in Youngstown as Black Monday, the day Youngstown Sheet & Tube laid off 5,000 people at its Campbell Works, the biggest labor massacre in U.S. history. (Dryer, 1995: C5)

Anyone who has spent any time in Youngstown, or any other Rust Belt city or town, knows that these places were the first American cities and towns to suffer the trend of offshoring⁵⁵ and all the other commonplace practices that corporations engage in today. From shifting industry to states with more lax labour laws, tax abatements, or else moving to countries with lower wages and working standard, the mass employment that Americans works used to take for granted has all but evaporated in many regions around the United States, the

⁵⁵ “Offshoring” is the practice of a company or corporation in one country arranging for people in another country to do work for it that often takes advantage of cheaper costs of labor and materials.

Rust Belt being a perfect example of this. They are interlocking and demonstrate just how transient and ephemeral societies based on work and industry are and that they can fall prey to larger economic forces leaving workers to pick up the pieces to shattered lives and communities. Underneath these economic forces are the subcultures that ebb, flow, and transform when these extenuating circumstances befall them and deprive them of capital that is crucial to maintaining life and happiness in a country theoretically based on materialism, capital accumulation, and social advancement. It was this human toll that Springsteen encountered and recounted, although for Springsteen Youngstown was a hypothetical and not a reality, his Youngstown was an aesthetic landscape.

While the majority of the Italian Americans had already taken the opportunity to move out of Brier Hill due to more housing becoming available in extra-urban and suburban towns outside the city limits, the memory of Italian Brier Hill loomed large and permeated most discussions about Italian Youngstown. Those new spaces, however, would see the Italians spread out over the valley and not necessary maintain the ethnic identity that was once more prevalent and literal on the Hill. Many Italian Americans continued their journey into the American way of life built around strip malls, shopping centres, convenience food and simulacritic dining in the form of Outback Steakhouses (faux Australian) and Olive Gardens' (faux Italian). Due to the dual factors of Youngstown losing its industrial tax base to the tune of billions of dollars, the upward social mobility of many American-born children of working-class immigrants following the "American Dream" would decline in the years after

the mill closures. “Black Monday” on 19 September 1977 in many ways was not the end, but the beginning of a paradigm shift not only in Youngstown and environs, but in the whole United States as well as in an increasingly, integrated global world; the workers as raw cultural ore would all be smelted into the metaphorical blast furnaces of United States cultural hegemony. The world would also be smelted into the culture of (Western) American-style capitalism.

It is important to reflect on the historical condition of the Mahoning Valley as work, labour, class, and ethnicity are the chief characteristics that have shaped the inhabitants in the locus. The Italians of Youngstown and the greater Mahoning Valley are not a puzzle to be put together and solved but a piece of a larger phenomenon of cultural transformation. It is at the same time one variation expressing the American experience. The diasporic Italian American, the *Youngstalian* experience is one of many interpretive positions with which we can frame, analyse, understand, and decipher the multitudes of cultural codes inherent in the complex system known as the United States of America. A system that is often actively and passively reduced to images emanating out of the mass media and displaying values more indicative of American corporate values rather than those of the actual inhabitants of the country. On the one hand, often what is left is continuously flowing images devoid of any deeper meaning, principles or values and just containing the empty signs of an individualist, feel good consumerism. On the other hand, do-it-yourself texts are the polar opposite as they are rich in meaning, values, and principles waiting to be discovered or re-discovered often in an act of ethnic recovery.

6.3 DIY Texts Ephemeral

One aspect of this sample is to focus on texts that are outside the canon of Italian American literature, which in turn resides in that liminal space between American, English, and Italian literary traditions. This space is reflective, a mirror of the state that diasporic Italians find themselves. The canon of Italian American literature itself has always been “from the margin” (Tamburri, Giordano, Gardaphé, 2000: 5), pushing back against the hegemony of literary prescriptivism yet continuously illuminating what Italian Americana was, is, and what it could be, from the pens of those born into or adopted by it.

Due to the ephemeral nature of texts and the general communicative process, examples such as Carmen Leone’s *Rose Street* (1998), *Rose Street Revisited* (2000) and Tony Trolio’s *Brier Hill USA* (2001), *Brier Hill USA: the sequel* (2004) offer insights into the transition from peninsular and insular Italian to Italian American, as well as the passage from oral to written texts. The numerous reoccurring elements that inform readers as to what constitutes *italianità* is fundamental to the identity and aesthetics of diasporic Italians of North America, specifically those in and around the Mahoning Valley of Northeastern, Ohio, with Youngstown serving more or less as the historical and cultural centre of this locus.

Returning to the concept of ephemerality, the phrase “for a short time” is intended to mean a state of temporal existence, anchored to some form of time keeping. This may automatically seem to not correspond to the notion of this

study's sample texts, as texts in the form of trade paper backs appear to possess relative permanence because they are made of paper and printed with ink, thus encoding the text onto the page, even if they last for only a short time. Yet if one expands the time frame to acknowledge that not every book will have the good fortune or relevance of say, a Gutenberg Bible or an ancient hand-illustrated codex then each and every textual expression of a culture comes into play, so to speak, as a potential instrument of codification thereby initiating or reinitiating semiosis. Moreover, even with the lack of texts specific to diasporic Italian Americans in Youngstown, their story composed of MCCs lives through the many social activities that take place in the area. While there may not be a specific literary tradition amongst the *Youngstalians*, the MCCs demonstrate the connection both to Italy as centre as well as to the other new centres of Italian American loci throughout the USA. Texts and their figurative leaves provide in whole or part something to decipher.

Yet a text must serve the ephemeral inertia in order to survive and replicate. As a meme, a text can remain in motion or dormant. In a best-case scenario, most books will up in used bookstores while others, materially speaking, will be lost to the void and become a "non-text". The question has been asked that had the library of Alexandria not been burned in antiquity where would the state of knowledge be now? And the world created through scholarship, where would it be as well? Therefore, how many texts, sacred or not, have been metaphorically burned by neglect at the altar of time? How many have been left to rot in basements or been destroyed by neglect? These lost books, regardless of their

significance, demonstrate the preciousness of texts and their ephemeral quality in the face of the passage of time. Moreover, due to the lack of actual critical texts on *Youngstalians*, it is necessary to consider the larger experience of Italians in the US as a whole and the scholarship that has been done. Enter the do-it-yourself texts and their capturing of a snapshot of time, the ephemeral experience and authenticity that comes with creating said texts.

6.4 Carmen J. Leone

This section focuses on the works of Carmen J. Leone, in particular the first of his short novels: *Rose Street: A Family Story* and to a lesser extent *Rose Street Revisited*. Both these books were self-funded and self-published by Leone himself. The books were distributed to family members as Christmas present (1996: 199) then becoming available to a modestly sized reading audience. Paradoxically, the intrinsic value of paperbacks has risen in contemporary times while their cost to produce has dropped. While we cannot be sure to the reason that this larger national chain (Barnes & Noble) chose to implement a policy decision that would not reduce but eliminate the possibility of self-published DIY books/texts to be sold and displayed in these big box bookstores, this may be due to the shift from IA high culture to low culture. Leone was himself born and raised in Youngstown and has lived in the Mahoning Valley for his entire lifetime. As a former university professor, Leone is not the typical *Youngstalian*, as most Italian Americans would have either stayed within the working-class or pushed their children into more financially lucrative professions, such as medicine or law.

Leone went from a working-class background to be a cultural gatekeeper as his writing, by virtue of his educational attainments, put him into another group of IA writers: a sort of a *literati* with a lower case "L". By doing this, Leone took control of his own story (Gardaphé, 2006: 5) for future generations so as not to be defined by someone else. Due to his education, Leone moved into another world, another reality, further away from his working-class origins. Yet his writing was still firmly anchored in it as subject matter. *Rose Street* reflects this in many ways. For example, throughout the book attention is drawn to the work the people in Youngstown did including the domestic work female protagonists do throughout the novel. Whether it was as a street paver/bricklayer, or other manual labour in the city of Youngstown, work is used as an aesthetic marker in the form of MCCs. Place and space become a fundamental defining aesthetic to both the authenticity and ephemerality of Leone's story: Rose Street as primary setting and the physical street itself on the book's back cover. Brick roads and streets bridge and connect time and space from reader to author, and from past experience to present interpretation of that experience. Many of the main streets going north and south into and out of Youngstown were paved with locally made red brick. As masonry was considered an "Italian" trade, many of them found jobs in this field. Yet, it was not only Italians but many different ethnicities working and living together (Leone, 1998: 29) but each holding on to their unique space whether for work or in their private lives, even if "several neighborhoods on the East Side of Youngstown just north of the river were settled mostly by Italians. Hine Street, where the Vitullos and the Leones lived, was in one of these

neighbourhoods (30). Streets then become much more than a method of transit but become a sign in and of themselves that delineated the boundaries of these now imaged Italian American neighbourhoods existing only in memories and texts.

6.4.1 *Rose Street* (1998)

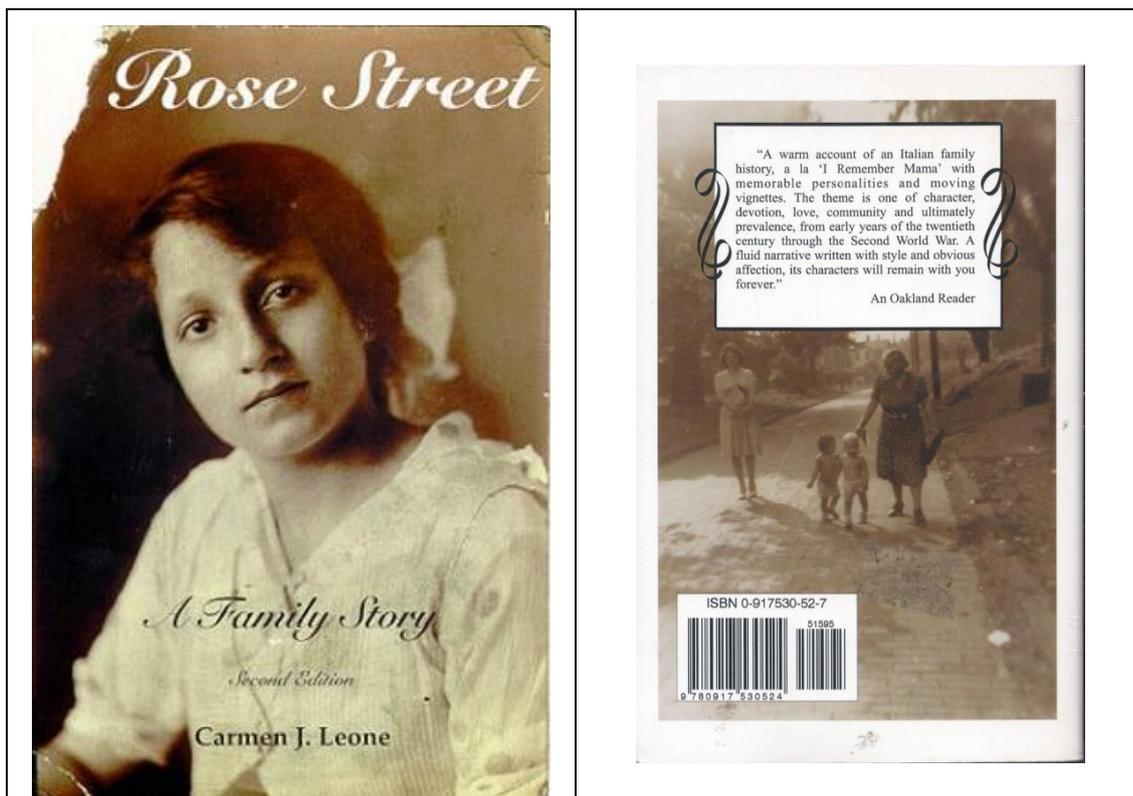


Figure 6.1. Front and back cover of *Rose Street*

While the author considers it a biography (or more precisely fictionalized biography, due to the author taking certain liberties with scenes) Leone amassed childhood memories as well as stories recounted to him by family members. Yet this does not detract from the book's quality but instead adds a richness due to its "collaborative" nature of familial input. It is a sort of potluck literary meal. *Rose Street* is a story with discursive power that can be read in multiple ways. For

example, the original target was the Leone family (the centre) but those outside the Leone familial orbit (periphery) can also access the text's content. Again, not in exactly the same way but in a larger, more generalised *Youngstalian* and Italian American experience. In a certain sense, it is a living document that captured a time and place that no longer exists as it did when the Leone family experienced it, a common theme in memoir.

This capturing of the soul of experience is fundamental to quality DIY ethnic, and in this case, regional literature. Like the unique diversity of artisans throughout Italy who craft and practice their art wherever they found themselves, most often artisanal skills could be employed to earn money or raise funds for a local *mutuo soccorso*, or "mutual aid society". In a time before robust social services in the USA, the concept of *mutuo soccorso* moved with Italian immigrants coming from Italy and then became places where both settled and recently arrived Italian could receive assistance in a new land where often Italian was not spoken. In the lesser-known Italian American communities, one can find many expressions of *italianità* due to the authors' motivation to create texts without the desire to make more than the cost of the endeavour, therefore rendering this material expression of narratives virtuous, our virtuous texts (see 1.7). These texts are a form of literary *mutuo soccorso* that has memetically transited from within the Leone family and out into the community. However, this is not to say that *Rose Street* was or is a huge commercial sensation. It is just one of the very few texts that deal specifically with *Youngstalians*.

Narratives help in passing down cultural knowledge. The gift of a virtuous text, or the labouring over one, is a contribution that transcends the spatio-temporal plane of existence. Leone, as a writer of virtuous texts can take his place among those other “pioneers of *italianità*”:

The earliest American writers of Italian descent became, in essence, pioneers of Italian/American self-discovery, -definition, and - declamation. Their writing depicted the struggles, the dreams, the nightmares, and the reality of what it meant to be and American of Italian descent. (Tamburri, Giordano, & Gardaphé, 2000: 5)

Since one would be hard pressed to find many literary texts, if any at all, written by Italian Americans in Youngstown, both Leone and Trolio stand as outliers, or “pioneers” of Youngstown’s variation of *italianità*, or *youngstalianità*. Moreover, due to the lack of a literary tradition in the Mahoning Valley most, if not all, the texts dealing with Italian themes tend to be historically framed and published with small presses. While the city and the area had a thriving industrial past, and with it all the material and intellectual culture that that entails, after the area lost its industrial base so too went any chance of developing a distinct literary tradition. Like most other medium and small US cities, the larger metropolitan areas act as a vacuum pulling the energy out of locally produced expressions of creativity. In the case of Youngstown, Cleveland and Pittsburgh were these two larger centres of cultural power pushing and pulling the city. This push & pull between two larger American *polis* would create a tension in Youngstown as it resided in the liminal space between those two centres of cultural, linguistic, and

financial power and influence. This influence would culminate in Youngstown becoming a contention space for the Italian American mafia form for most of the 20th century (May 2011; 2013).

6.4.2 Synopsis

Rose Street is predominantly about the Vitullo-Leone family and their struggle during the beginning of the 20th century. While it is a family story, the city acts as not only a location but a character in and of itself. The novella spans through the Great Depression, the two world wars and, although there are many subplots, the driving story is one of loss and survival. The matriarch of the family, Giselda, dies because, against doctor's orders, she becomes pregnant. Because of her death, all the domestic responsibility of raising the family's children is left to the eldest daughter, Josephine - or as everyone in the family calls her, "Jo" - who is no more than a child herself. Because Jo is forced into this position due to her father's "old world" belief that it is the job of the women to cook, clean, take care of the men and raise children she in turn loses her childhood and is forced to fill the role of her mother. There is also conflict between the siblings due to Jo not being much older than her brother and sisters. While in this position of authority figure/caregiver, Jo continues to feel she is overwhelmed by the task of raising her five siblings. Complicating the situation later on, Jo must also raise her own five children that are born after her mother's passing. She harbours a strong resentment towards her father, Beatangelo, who she believes is culpable for the death of her mother. This is due to the fact that Jo's father knew his wife was in

physical danger if she had another child as her last child was delivered with great difficulty. Jo also dislikes Beatangelo's lack of interest in his own quasi-orphaned children leading to Jo's emotional breakdown (152). Often, when there is conflict among the siblings, he accuses Jo of not handling the family situation better in the absence of matriarch Giselda (147). In what could be best described as fits of anger - or what we would now call grieving or even PTSD - due to losing wife and life partner Giselda, many times he threatens to send all the kids to the orphanage (148, 152). This causes Jo quite a bit of anxiety due to her fear of having the family unit broken up, personal failure, and perhaps not honouring her mother's memory by having the family separated. There are other less dominant subplots that discuss family members, events, and some smattering of Youngstown and US history, especially in the 1920s (158), and events outside the region, but at its core it is a family story as semi-fictional memoir.

6.4.3 Form

Rose Street is broken up diachronically into sections by year so it can also be read chronologically. Coupled with some complementary historical material from Youngstown and the US as a whole, a total picture emerges of pre-WWI and WWII American culture from an Italian/American point of view. But even if readers do not have supplemental information handy, Leone goes and offers the occasional "what was happening in Youngstown and the US in general" at the beginning of certain sections, therefore creating a holistic picture of events happening concurrently to his family's story.

6.4.4 Selected MCCs in *Rose Street*

What follows is a sample of memetic code clusters in the text of *Rose Street*. As previously mentioned, and in keeping within one of many frames of interpretation, the role and function of food in the texts as a unifying and cohesion building principle will be targeted. Right from the beginning we see a mixture of various MCCs coalescing around a central core: the table as domestic altar. This accesses a communal lifestyle with a welcoming meal to strange “New World” and further lends credence to the diplomatic function of food or MCC *moralis*. From the beginning, Leone sets the stage with a call back to Italy itself through MCC *locus*:

Except for the families living in the houses in those days, Hine Street on the East Side of Youngstown was not like the mountain villages in the Abruzzi. The clear, blue Italian sky had been replaced by one with a perpetually orange tinge in this Ohio steel town, and black and silver specks floated down from heaven and settled on everything and everyone.
(3)

While this does seem a bit out of place for a novella that is mainly a fictional memoir, the blending of genre spans both Gardaphé’s *Poetic* and *Early Mythic* modes. It can be said that *Rose Street* has more of a genre fluidity to it. Regarding MCCs *rituali*, Vitullo family matriarch Giselda and daughter Jo are preparing a meal for a family friend whose wife is making the long journey from Italy to Youngstown. Seeing how this new arrival will be entering a new, strange land, the Vitullos offer a large, welcoming feast in an act of *bella figura*:

One had to be indoors, listening to the musical rhythms of a strange speech and inhaling the happy blend of spaghetti sauce bubbling and chicken sizzling in the frying pan to know that some of Italy was here. (3)

While everything seems fine through the expected order of life through food preparation, something is actually amiss as their expected guest never arrives.

Later on, the sombre dinner commences:

We'll have the soup," Gesilda said, "while the pasta cooks." They took their places and waited while Gesilda portioned out the soup. As she set the last bowl at her own place, Beatangelo said, "Buon' Appetito." (6)

The soup was called "wedding" soup, because it usually appeared only at wedding dinners. As always, with its greens and chicken and little meatballs, it was delicious. Jo broke soda crackers into hers and waited for it to cool. [...] Beatangelo slurped down his soup, twirled his spaghetti, and jabbed at the chicken, as if this was an ordinary Sunday dinner. Marco picked at the greens in his soup, whimpering between sips of wine, glancing quickly at and away from the lady, who looked only at her food as she devoured it. (7)

In the first passage we have the interaction between MCCs *rituali* and *linguae* as the act of food consumption is preceded by the use of the phrase "*buon appetito*".

Also, in an opening sequence we encounter what could be considered a sort of Italian American "magical realism" through an encounter with the supernatural as an expected guest, *Commare Filomena (linguae)*, dies on her journey to the USA (8). Her place at the table on the other hand, is taken by a complete stranger, and a famished one at that:

She was pale as a ghost. Not even Jo's smile could save her. The lady dropped to the porch floor. In the flurry that followed, it became obvious that this woman was not the one expected. Beatangelo and Marco carried her inside to the couch. (6)

In conversation with Leone, he recounted that this was in fact a true episode that actually happened. Although the fact that the woman was a ghost seems dubious, the fact that a stranger could come to someone's house, be fed, and then go on their way – albeit strange in our current time – perhaps was more common in the past. The encounter ends as abruptly as it began:

When the lady had cleared her platter even of a second helping of pasta, eaten a chicken thigh and a huge salad, and wiped her dish clean with a slice of bread, she stood abruptly and uttered, in clear, perfect English, her first and only words. [sic] “thanks you. God bless you. You are good people.” (7)

6.5 Anthony “Tony” Trolio

During his lifetime, entrepreneur and de facto amateur historian, Anthony “Tony” Trolio (1940-2013) played a significant role in the creation of the DIY texts, *Brier Hill USA* (2001) and *Brier Hill, USA: The Sequel* (2004) as well as the production and propagation of Italian American culture. Yet, these texts were in a sense ancillary projects to fill a niche and were sold in a corner of his silkscreen print shop and at functions such as *feste*, and in other Italian ethnic based contexts in an around the Mahoning Valley. In fact, these DIY books could also be found in the larger, national chains that were in the Youngstown/Warren, OH area.

Unfortunately, due to a policy change with the juggernaut Barnes & Noble, one author was told that they would no longer accept unsolicited books from local authors themselves (Mitzel, in written exchange with Leone, 2019). All new acquisitions would have to come through one of their preferred warehouses. Yet, in order to be in one of their warehouses, authors had to have a bit of name recognition or else be picked up by a publisher, which is often not conducive to the DIY ethic. This all but stifles the chances for small market authors and DIY enthusiasts to enter into any larger reading market, i.e., meme pool (Mitzel, personal correspondence with Leone, 2013). Here, in *Rose Street* we have an example of a text that is pushed out of the larger commercial market and then pulled into the smaller, ethnic niche market. Trolio owned a sports apparel and embroider business where he created and sold a diverse array of team uniforms, t-shirts, jackets as well as books and Italian American themed merchandise. These last two functioning as meme delivery vectors in and of themselves of IA culture in Youngstown. Tony Trolio was just one of the many people in Youngstown's IA community that kept the idea of Italy and what it meant "growing up Italian in a section of Youngstown" (2001: 10) alive in the Mahoning Valley.

Trolio was born in Youngstown to Italy-born parents Antonio and Nicoletta (née Gioa) who themselves immigrated from the province of Matera in the region of Basilicata, specifically the town of Colobraro - one of the common towns that fed the Youngstown Italian population. Most came through chain migration and word of mouth in Italy. They arrived in the United States on March

25 March 1922; after passing through immigration and customs at Ellis Island, they made their way to Youngstown (2001: 25-30). This young peninsular Italian family – with a five-month-old baby – would go on to settle just up the road from the Jeannette “Jenny” Blast furnace of Youngstown Sheet & Tube in Brier Hill.

As another working-class “wiseman” (Gardaphé, 2006), Trolio was also an organizer of the largest Italian American *fiesta* in Youngstown, the Our Lady of Mount Carmel & Saint Anthony Parish’s annual festival. These community festivals are crucial to the ethnic identity of diasporic Italians by re-encoding signs of *italianità* as well as language, even if the language spoken is a mix of historic regional dialects (common), standard Italian (uncommon), and English. Trolio also periodically produced cultural events featuring live Italian music for his Ciao! Promotions company. As works of more of a raconteur of stories rather than the typical writer per se, Trolio’s books were dictated orally and then transposed by Michael N. Varveris, a friend and assistant for publication who initially urged Trolio to put pen to paper. Both the works of Carmen Leone, Trolio’s books were self-financed and published locally in keeping within the small press tradition of artists operating on the periphery both in the USA and in Italy. One intercultural similarity for example would be the Editori Moby Dick of Faenza, Italy, a small local press that publishes the journal *Tratti*. Moby Dick specializes in poetry, specifically writings in the Romagnolo dialect, in which noted Romagnolo poet and academic Giovanni Nadiani (1954-2016) was a frequent collaborator. Due to the presence of Moby Dick as a local DIY publisher, one can still find books, and events in the Romagnolo dialect throughout *la bassa*

Romagna (South-eastern Emilia-Romagna) and beyond, thus helping to preserve both the Romagnolo dialect and cultural memory. Both these methods of cultural production in two diverse geographical loci essentially have the same *modus operandi*: to create and spread a variation of Italian culture and dialectal life.

6.5.1 Brier Hill, USA (2001)

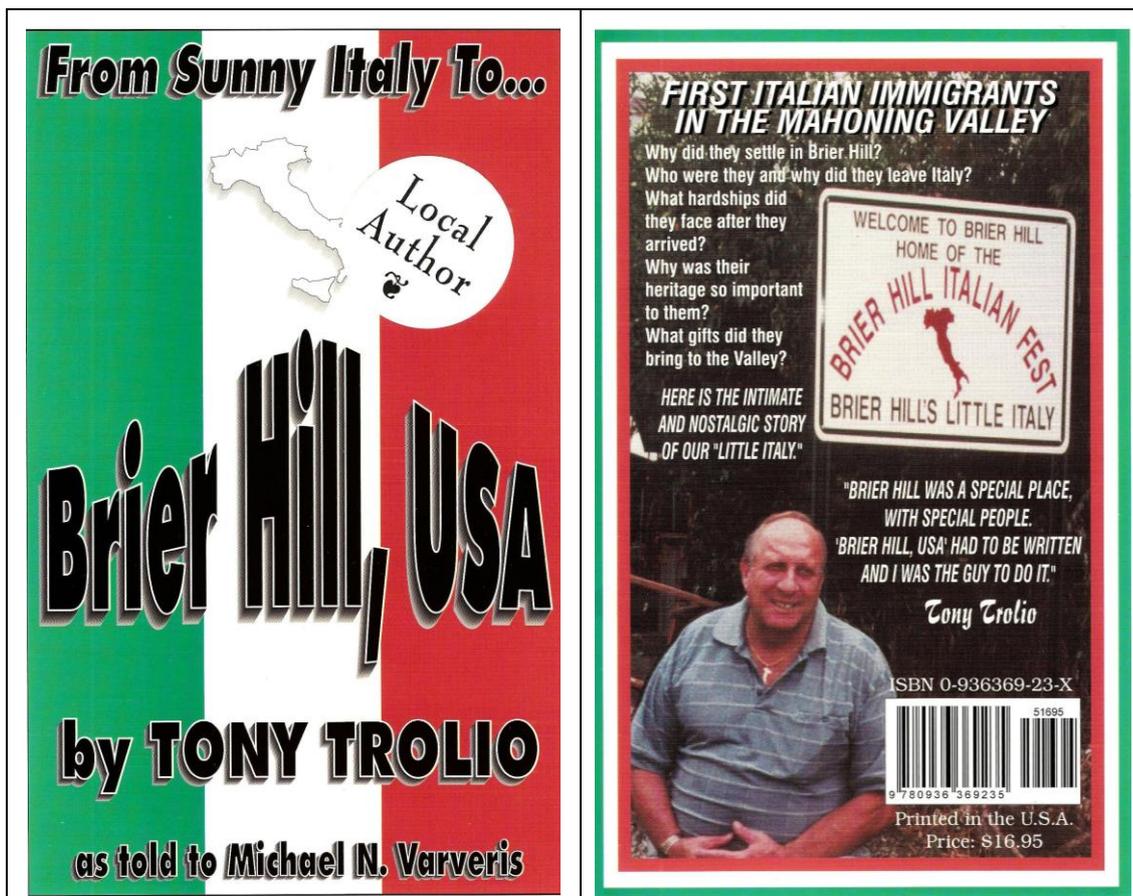


Figure 6.2. Front and Back cover of *Brier Hill, USA*

Trolie's debut novel, *Brier Hill, USA*, was his first attempt at fiction writing. This fact is reflected in both the book's style and structure. As a novella it falls short of the higher aesthetic consideration that would be afforded to it had that been Trolie's intent as an author. Similar to Leone's *Rose Street*, the book was not

intended to be a work of high literary art but something *Italian* to be sold in the corner of his shop and at the various Italian themed events he produced in the Valley. Some of these ethnic events were buffet dinners (Italian and American fare) with entertainment in the form of a show with “Rat Pack” impersonators, a month *morra* league, plus both the Our Lady of Mt. Carmel and Brier Hill *feste*. Admittedly these events cater to Italian ethnics and non-ethnics alike and rely on simulacracic representations of Italian signs to convey *italianità*. They nonetheless provide a view into the micro-culture of diasporic Italian Americans, regardless of their aesthetic “truths”. Trolio’s first novella was a collection of impression and memories of Brier Hill, what he affectional calls Youngstown’s “Little Italy” (12), though in Trolio’s time, while it was a centre of Italian culture in Youngstown it would not have been considered exclusively Italian since the Brier Hill area was a multi-ethnic neighbourhood. In fact, and running counter to Trolio’s allusions of Italian exclusivity, Brier Hill was considered by some residents “the melting pot that never melted” (Linkon & Russo, 2002: 33).

Due to its proximity to the “Brier Hill works” – a series of blast furnaces – many of the steel workers lived right up the hill from the mill. It has been said that the air in Brier Hill was always thick with ash and people had to keep their window and doors shut constantly. Along with this thick ash, it was also commonplace to see people sweeping off their porches daily because of this (Carissimi, 2015; personal communication). One can surmise that similar scenes could be seen in many of the mill towns of the American Steel Belt. The *Rust Belt*, formerly the Steel and Manufacturing belt, encompassed multiple states and

geographical areas. Centred around the Great Lakes the region, the area began to thrive due to the connection of Upper Midwestern iron ore deposits and Appalachian coal supplies moving between the states due to developing infrastructure in the form of railways and canals. Large scale manufacturing was a feature of this area and a relatively high standard of living until the de-industrialization of the American Midwest from the 1970s onwards.

Linkon and Russo (2002) explain that it was mill policy to keep the different ethnicities and races separate so as to avoid what the mill bosses characterised as “wariness” (32) of the *other* regardless of external attributes. Crucial to the stratification of labour in the steel mills, this was also implemented as a strategy in order to keep people from unionizing. A decision that would cross the work boundary and replicate itself in Brier Hill:

This balkanization within the plants was echoed by balkanization in the community as different groups as different groups settled into fairly well-defined ethnic neighborhoods. In Brier Hill, St. Anthony’s Italian Catholic church was built before the largest wave of Italian immigration, and its presence drew many Italians to settle in that neighborhood. While some of the German, Welsh, and Irish families that had settled there remained, and African Americans began to move in just to the east, Brier Hill defined itself as the center of Youngstown’s Italian community. (2002, 32)

It should be noted that while Trolio referred to Brier Hill as Youngstown’s “Little Italy”. The concept, and signifier Little Italy was never imposed on the area by people in Youngstown when Italians still lived there in relatively significant

numbers. In fact, as African American steelworker James Davies recounted in an interview for the Oral History collection of the Youngstown Center for Industry and Labor, while “there were very strong ethnic ties and considerations” in Brier Hill, the main thing that crossed through the racial boundary was everyone shared the same experience of poverty (26 September 1991).

Meanwhile, two states over and a couple of years before Trolio’s time, there were similar Little Italy experiences in other parts of the then Steel Belt happening concurrently. For example, Mathew R. Giorgio recounts in *Being “Italian” in Buffalo*⁵⁶ (2015) that the signifier “Italian” was not a “fixed identity” (2015: 4) but a transient state of performative existence:

To be Italian was a label and a misnomer; a performance; a negotiation; and a renegotiation. Lie projecting the various regions of southern Italy onto Buffalo’s west side, instead of one single and cohesive Little Italy, there existed what could be described as several “Littler Italies”. (2015: 3)

Like in Italy with its smaller *frazioni* emanating from a *comune* so too did these Little Italies become smaller nodes migrating out of the boundaries around a specific ethnic Italian enclave in Buffalo. For many, if not most, ethnic neighbourhoods would provide a safe area and serve as a point of ingress into the American culture. Giorgio goes on to explain that due to this spreading out of different diasporic Italians, they would be replicating their habitation patterns

⁵⁶ Upstate New York near Lake Ontario, Niagara Falls, and the Canadian border.

and social relationships. He further states that “stratification allowed Old World social separations to play out in the United States” (ibid. 3). Interestingly, it is precisely the transition out of the Little Italy and into the Little Italies that Giorgio credits with the move from “Italian provincialism” (ibid. 29) and the subsequent transformation into Italian Americans.

The same phenomena of transition of Italian American spaces from ethnic enclave as entry point into American mass culture operated in the Mahoning Valley with many Italians moving out of Brier Hill but not out of the surrounding geographical locus. While Brier Hill is generally regarded as Youngstown’s Little Italy presently, mirroring Buffalo, it was not the only enclave of Italian families in Youngstown’s city limits. The Smokey Hollow neighbourhood for example, had a significant Italian presence as well as the city’s East – where Leone’s *Rose Street* was set – and West sides. What seemed to be happening, again, is that due to the availability of land and single-family homes diasporic Italians began to spread out and replicate. While Stefano Luconi (2004) states that “separate villages often, meant separate worlds” in Italy (152), the opposite was true in Youngstown, where there were no longer ancient boundaries, literally and metaphorically. Therefore, keeping within the Luconi’s “separate worlds” concept, Trolio’s text provides an interpretation of diasporic culture in the USA that while not authentically “Italian”, is still connected to Italy through the creation, replication, and diffusion of Italian signs.

6.5.2 *Brier Hill USA: the sequel (2004)*

As a sequel, this book stays within the historic boundaries of the Brier Hill neighborhood or Youngtown's "Little Italy". This text draws heavily on nostalgia in the form of familial bio sketches, bringing it closer to a genealogical study à la Sacchini's *Italians of Mahoning Valley*, rather than Leone's *Rose Street*. What is most apparent is that the peritext has changed considerably. While the first book cover displays the colours of the Italian *tricolore* prominently, the sequel resorts to a more muted palette, thereby anchoring the text in a field of meaning related to the past. It utilizes a sepia-toned image of Trolio and two male family members sitting in and leaning on a car. Although, the three colour Italian tricolour palette does make its way into the *Brier Hill: the sequel* book cover as well. In this particular case, the addition of the palette demonstrates a synthesis of the two principal formats of signification used in the production of *Youngstalian* paratexts: the advertising of Italian ethnicity and the past orienting sepia-toned imaging often used to imply authenticity. On the back cover we see for the first time all the people involved in the production of this DIY text. This *de facto* collective harks back to a time when artistic productions were crafted by a group of artisans. Yet in the past, the situation was reversed. While the renaissance *bottega* "master" would follow the whole process and then come in to finish off a work of art, Trolio would provide the stories and content orally while the other collaborators would do the typing and printing of the text.

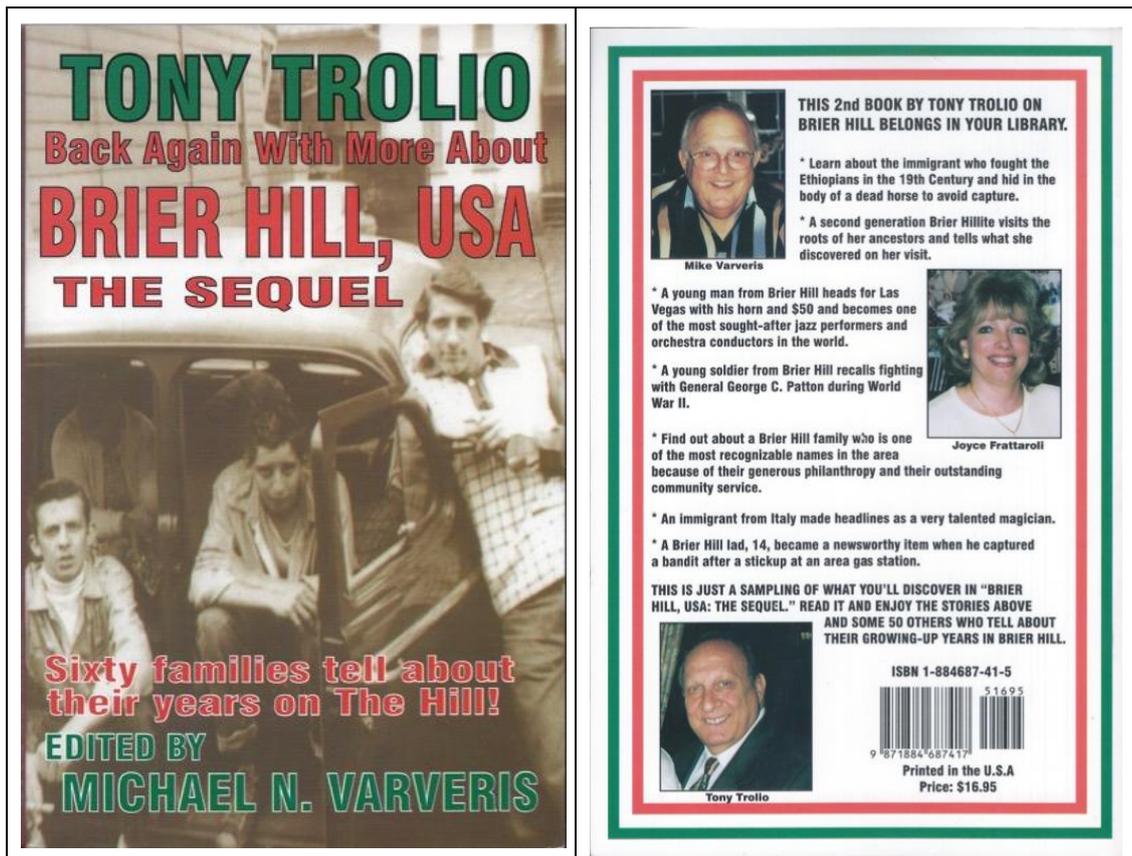


Figure 6.3. *Brier Hill, USA. The sequel*

Moreover, the peritext itself looks similar in form and text to an image macro, or internet meme⁵⁷ (Shifman, 2014). Like an internet mem, the book title is superimposed onto the cover image utilising red and green outlined in black for the top script while the bottom script is outlined in white. The totality of the cover is operating on the three-colour Italian palette, thereby framing the text in a field of meaning directly connected to Italian culture.

It would appear that Trolio's primary goal, like that of the first book, was to tell a story, but due to Trolio's limited story telling skills outside of the oral

⁵⁷ This is due to the result of a program that parses text onto an image background for easy distribution over the internet. Originated on the *Something Awful* forum, an image macro (internet meme) or externalized memes that transfer content efficiently and anonymously

tradition, the sequel lacks a narrative artifice for telling a cohesive story in the traditional sense. Hence, the book appears rather as a collection of non-fictional accounts about which, as we have seen with *Rose Street* and DIY literature in general, it is difficult if not impossible to tell where fact ends and fiction begins, or where opinion becomes truth. Further complicating the matter is the author's lack of rigour in selecting the stories that have no real thread running through them other than Italian surnames and anecdotal stories. This limitation once again demonstrates that the narrative mechanism relies entirely on the power of identity: inclusion in the narrative rested on the characters (or people) possessing an Italian surname as signifier, identity marker, and inherent attribute of *italianità*.

Yet, if we look at this as a virtuous text then this enables the reader to understand that what Trolio was actually doing was piecing together memories of his Italian Youngstown. In doing this, Trolio provided a valuable collection of texts for future generations to reference. However, linking stories to only the Italian surname as signifier as a factor related to inclusion makes one wonder about the authenticity of the accounts in the sequel owing again to lack of depth. After all, there is no attribution to these stories other than the names of the families and people contained therein.

In point of fact, *Youngstalian* texts, as all texts potentially are, are memes in and of themselves. However, due to their lack of commercial viability (importance and/or popularity) and subsequent distribution (as vectors) these texts often lie dormant for years waiting to be rediscovered, so they can begin

“memeing” again. Although, if we extend the meaning of aurality not only to *Youngstalian* texts as material objects but to the space that encompasses these texts as a zone of oral discourse, then these books are not dormant at all, as they are just compression devices for the social discourse. This discursive function perhaps is due to Brier Hill’s position in lore as a historic district or “Little Italy”, even if it was referred to it as that, in conjunction with the annual *feste* that pop up in various locations around the Mahoning Valley in the summer months.

6.6 Sample II: Analysis

From the semio-memetic view, Tony Trolio’s print shop and the semi-ephemeral material objects he produced with his family gave *Youngstalians* the opportunity to stay connected with the Little Italy of Youngstown, Brier Hill. The artistic persona is also construed by direct commercial means: Trolio was the owner and operator of *The Original Tony Trolio’s print shop* just outside the Youngstown city limits in Poland Village, Ohio. Many Italian American families moved out of the Brier Hill section of the Youngstown’s Northside as soon as they could afford to and, as previously mentioned, settled in suburban towns such as Poland, township and Village (working, middle, upper middle class), Struthers (working, middle class), Boardman (working, middle, upper-middle). Trolio’s print shop also represented more broadly a connection with Italian American culture in the valley as they moved from the inner city to the extra-urban and suburban areas adjacent to the city. Though often over the top with the use of the *stivale* (boot) patches and Italian *tricolore* (tricolore flag) patches sewn on nylon jackets, the hats

and t-shirts made by Trolio's shop would most certainly come in handy when festival season came around and people needed to reconnect to their ethnic affiliation or to show "the flag", so to speak, not as a purely ethnic experience but as an advertisement for Italian "symbolic ethnicity" (Gans, 1963). While these more kitsch clothing articles and display of outward ethnic pride may seem superficial and false, to an Italian American they would be perfectly normal and not out of the ordinary. The participation in purchasing and displaying ethnically specific articles serves the purpose of a subject's desire to connect, reconnect, or tap into a larger semiotic discourse through the material objects. It is these material object as memes that spread Italian signs throughout a community transmitting and re-transmitting ethnicity.

Another aspect to take into consideration - in the context of commodification - was that Trolio's main business was the lucrative uniform contracts with local schools' athletic departments. Therefore, an analogy can be made that much of the Italian themed merchandise was created in an environment of ethnic camaraderie displayed and used in an appeal to Italian ethnic solidarity while Trolio's shop also used the same method to produce non-ethnic material objects. Here we see the bifurcation of the DIY author, oscillating between altruism and making a living. Moreover, the Italian American as an advertiser of their own personal ethnicity often displays these out signs of Italian ethnic alignment in the historically multi-ethnic USA. Therefore, Tony Trolio's "meme generator" became a sort of cultural repository for Italian merchandise of a time gone by and ethnic identity in decline, or at least overtly self-referential.

The Mahoning Valley had above average rates of home ownership and land available, therefore families who left the original Italian settlements tended to spread out. Furthermore, Youngstown's ethnic cultural and economic centres were not immune to the interstate "highway revolts" of the 1970s (see section 1.2), which all but destroyed the Italian enclave of Brier Hill, erasing it from visual memory. As a living place and social space, it now only exists in these texts and memories. The marks they left on Brier Hill no doubt became the *coup de grace* of one of the area's Italian enclaves as a viable space for current and former steel workers, their families and subsequently their descendants, black and white alike. The 422 bypass, what is now referred to as the Ohio state route, ran right through the middle of Youngstown's unofficial black commercial district based around what is now Martin Luther King Boulevard and through the adjacent former Brier Hill neighbourhood. Therefore, since the physical location of Italian Americans' traditional locus no longer exists, Trolio's print shop was, and continues to be, a living meme generator creating visual signs manifesting in *Italian* clothing, books, and memorabilia thus keeping that history alive. It should be stated that Trolio passed away in 2013. After his passing, daughter Sherry Ann took over the print shop and continues to work in the same manner as her father due to her working with him closely most of her life.

Those *Youngstalians* who come across Trolio's books can learn about what it was like growing up Italian in Youngstown (2001: 10) or maybe just find some useful information on a family member. As primary sources about family histories are becoming more and more difficult to come by, *Brier Hill USA* (2001),

Rose Street (1996), *The Italians of Mahoning County* (1997), and the archives of the Mahoning Valley Historical Center (MVHC) remain the sole means of ethnic Italian research. They provide a catalyst for accessing and illustrating shared narratives, family history, and recovery of Italian identity that had been lost due to linguistic and cultural and assimilation, or else left abandoned. Aurality as a *Youngstalian* discursive practise is typical of folkloric and oral history narratives. When stories come up in conversations, they are often repeated due to familiarity, and little is ever written down (Cirese, 1958, 1971; Colman, 2015). When they are transcribed, it is usually done, as in the case of Trolio's two books, by an appointed "scribe". In the case of both *Brier Hill, USA* and the follow up sequel, Michael Varveris served as the actual writer. We can say that keeping in line with the concept of community, Trolio's books were a group effort. Moreover, orality or Coleman's "aurality", as a communal practice has been posited as the precursor to literacy and was a common method of group entertainment in antiquity until the radio's speaker became the voice box supplanting the human voice.

The ancient Greeks and Romans recited their artistic expression in aural groups rather than in texts, as did people in the early and late Middle Ages and the Renaissance. People kept reading books aloud to each other until they got radios, at which point they began listening to programmes such as the *English A Book at Bedtime* (Coleman, 2015: 71). We can surmise a similar scene amongst the early Italian immigrants with little to no education. They too would listen to stories or they would have been reading to each other. Moreover, can we not say

that Trolio's orality to text technique was a passage into a new form of diasporic Italian American literacy? Contemporary physics posits that there may in fact be multiple dimensions of existence happening simultaneously. In a metaphorical sense, we can say the same for the dual nature of Italian American identity. These identities are continuously oscillating between the pull of the American home culture and the memory, whether through lived experience or decoded from texts, of Italy as mythical, sepia-toned, iconic object. Yet, what is to happen to Gardaphé's Mythic poetics? Or Trolio's memories of an Italian Brier hill? While they do live on in texts, if they are not in the public conversation they do not exist. Moreover, if the physical spaces where the memories were generated no longer exist, what chance will there be for these texts to return other than during an annual festival if there is not new influx of Italian cultural data coming into the Mahoning Valley? Most likely, this distinct variation of diasporic Italian Americans will continue to reflect more of the American Italian interpretation of the world and in doing so will become less and less Italian.

6.6.1 Post-Industrial Effects on *Youngstalian* Culture in Non-Italian Based Texts

While there are those texts that directly deal with Italian themes, other texts also contain instances of Italian signs that are not central to the text's story or plot but add an aesthetic, historic dimension as well as context to the overarching dialectic of texts from the Mahoning Valley. The sociological effects of post-industrialisation and economic paradigm shifts, the effects of a macro-cultural

decline and the lack of purpose may contribute to people no longer having meaning in their lives as they are cut off from one aspect of involvement in a social interaction (Durkheim, 1933). With regards to communities and the interactions of members, the stress of job loss and underemployment, a major factor in the character of the Mahoning Valley, all but creates social upheaval on a systemic and structure level. This state of precariousness has multiple contributing factors that will inevitably affect a person's engagement with a community and their culture. The strain of insecure employment, displacement events, periods of unemployment, reemployment in jobs with lower earnings and quality, psychological distress, geographic mobility, and diminished social trust and the erosion of commitment to social reciprocity indubitably contribute to decreased levels of social involvement among displaced workers (Brand, 2015: 12-13). Being unemployed, much like being without a culture to anchor oneself in an environment, especially for those already operating in liminal spaces, can have a detrimental effect on personal wellbeing effecting levels of anxiety and contributing to depression (Ibid). One such reaction to economic decline is the changing commercial landscape that that transforms an area. Due to the Italian, Italian American minority and working-class culture that Youngstown was, dining establishments and hotels had more Americanised names. Some examples are businesses using surnames and menu items that would indicate Italy as a symbol tapping into a larger aesthetic system. In many ways, the Mahoning Valley and greater metropolitan state areas (MSA) and combined metropolitan area (CMA) continues to have a prevalently blue collar, (white) working-class

aesthetic. The area has been kept in a post-industrial malaise due to the lack of mass employment, heavy industry, and manufacturing. All this coupled with the inability of the area to reinvent itself on a large scale due to its obsolescence brought about by late-stage capitalism.

Since Youngstown was a historic multi-ethnic, working-class city, establishments catered to the widest variety of diners including those that consider themselves as ethnics as well as Americans, the hyphenated identity. Though many Americans claimed a certain ethnic identity, often many did not speak the language of the ethnicity with which they identified. Moreover, their links to the actual country where their descendants came from was often tenuous as best as many never had the opportunity to visit these countries (Davies, 1996: 1). Therefore, when can posit that, at times, a person's ethnicity was reduced to the consumption choices they made when dining out in a display of ethnic solidarity and reconnection via consumption.

Here, amongst the molten steel, sky choked of ashen grey soot, and old forests, disenfranchised Italian immigrants began the process of integration into American society. What better place than in a valley on the high Allegheny plateau of the Appalachian mountain chain is there to form a distinct variation of diasporic Italian. In many ways, Youngstown offered opportunities that were unavailable in Italy, which in turn led the diasporic Italians to make the Mahoning Valley their home. The works of Carmen Leone and Anthony Trolio demonstrate this not so much in detail but in spirit. A spirit that draws off of re-modernism rather than post-modernism. Moreover, these authors not only

demonstrate the passage from oral to written narratives but also provide an example of what can happen when profit motive is subtracted from the artistic process.

6.7 Conclusion

On the one hand, *Rose Street*, is a bridge between the Poetic and Early Mythic in Gardaphé's critical/analytical framework. *Brier Hill, USA*, on the other hand, is firmly in the oral tradition as it was dictated and then written by someone other than the author himself. Therefore, *Brier Hill, USA* fits into the Poetic mode with elements of Early Mythic. Both Leone's *Rose Street* and Trolio's "duology" demonstrate, at least textually, an organic diasporic Italian and American experience in Youngstown. While the discourse in each is not specifically working-class, they de facto demonstrate and recount that culture. Through the frame of working-class and DIY literature, *Rose Street* offers two more dimensions to the established narrative of IAs in America, and by extension, the Italian diaspora. Once again, to borrow from Koestler, these texts operate holarchically in the IA canon by offering not a more "authentic" or "newer" version of the IA experience but by add a new dimension to the liminal spaces which exist between the various centres and peripheries of North American diasporic Italian American culture.

6.7.1 Textual Aesthetics

Brier Hill, USA can be said to fall under the Realist category in the sense that Trolio believes in the correctness of Italian culture – as constricted through his

memory – in contrast to what we can understand to be the culture of the average Youngstowners and by extension, American. What is happening here is the author is taking a prescriptive view of Italian culture since anything that is not “Italian” is incorrect or the “other”. It is ironic in the sense that Trolio was born in the United States and possibly only travelled to Italy infrequently. Drilling down for a moment on generations, there is contention as to who is exactly the “first generation”. The author considers that the first generation are those born in the new or host country as the parents have a cultural formation from the origination culture. The Italian language, save for the poorly defined concept of *oriundi*, does not have a linguistic framework for dealing with successive waves of Italian people born outside of Italy as does the Japanese language and culture. For example, a foreign-born Japanese person or *gaikoko umare no nihonjin*, (Japanese person born in a foreign country) is classified on their generation apart for Japan as centre. The two most common examples being Nisei (second generation) and Sansei (third generation).

Under Gardaphé’s critical framework, the two “Brier Hill” texts place into the category of the *Poetic mode*. While the *Early Mythic* mode is defined as works by the children of immigrants, i.e., first generation. Brier Hill as *locus* provides a new origination point for the new myths to be created and recounted. Is it in-between? But, when attempting to place it, problems immediately become clear: *Brier Hill USA* lacks the use of poetry, iambic pentameter or any meter that would classify it as such. Yet what the text lacks in structural poetics it makes up for in its oral tradition. It is this oral quality that provides an aesthetic both ancient and

connecting it to a larger discourse on orality between time and space. Imagine all the stories that were told in ages past before the advent of cheap writing implements and paper, let alone books. In our time some of these stories get written down. In modern society, where most people are not writers (let alone poets), most personal stories are put into a person's obituary in print or online. Increasingly it would appear that social media is taking over as the preferred method of obituary dissemination. Since these are *post-mortem* texts, little to no memetic information is passed on unless they are specifically tuned into a particular argument, i.e., US military service during wartime, and have a network in place to collect them⁵⁸.

This chapter examined the self-published texts and material objects made by Americans of Italian descent from Youngstown, Ohio, USA, or *Youngstalians*. These texts range from fictionalized autobiographies/memoir, to transcribed oral narratives, and directories of Italian familial biographies. They are published in formats ranging from the shorter novella to a longer, more comprehensive novel form. Some of them weave factual history with the reimagining of past events while others mix orality, biographical sketches, and anecdotes into what can be easily considered ethnography. All of these texts represent the do-it-yourself ethos espoused by writers/artists willing to take on a financial responsibility for the sake of remembering their cultural past and instructing subsequent generations

⁵⁸ Here I am referencing Joseph Sacchini and Anthony Frank's obituaries: <http://www.vindy.com/news/tributes/2011/dec/15/lt-col-joseph-louis-sacchini-us-army-retire/>, as well as <http://www.rossisantuccifh.com/notices/Anthony-FrankJr> (accessed 1 July 2019).

of *Youngstalians* about what it was like growing up Italian in Youngstown. These writers come from diverse economic backgrounds, had different levels of education, yet they all shared a common cultural link: *italianità*, at least a variation of *italianità* that other diasporic Italians will recognise. Moreover, with these DIY texts we see another variation of and engagement with /Italy/ and /America/ as integrated ur-signs in the periphery.

7 Conclusions

The culture of diasporic Italians is complex and is in a continuous state of evolution through the unlimited semiosis (Peirce, [1940] 1955: 275; Eco, 1979: 68-69; 1990: 23-43) of Italian signs oscillating in the periphery. Another factor of this cultural evolution is the unlimited memeiosis that takes place and continues the cycle of expansion and compression, pulling and pushing on signs that attach as nodes to the kernel of /Italy/ in the periphery. This underlying principle continues in perpetuity. Due to the strength of Italy as centre and the popularity of it as an aesthetic position and defining marker of authenticity, the influence of Italian signs and material objects will continue to influence the cultures of host countries as peripheries into the foreseeable future. Though the physical distances between countries have remained the same, the interpretations of each country and its cultural values have continued to oscillate. The cultural gravitational force of this oscillation depends on the proximity of each diasporic group to the original centre in Italy proper. As previously stated, newly established cultural centres can replace Italy as centre after a period in the periphery. This feature was traditionally referred to as assimilation. Yet, assimilation implies a disappearance into a hegemon culture while not taking into account the continuous dialectic that exists in diaspora and amongst

diasporic peoples whether it be through pen and paper, or more technically advanced communication methods and practices.

Due to the transformation and shifting cultural polarity, Diasporic Italian Americans in the Mahoning Valley possess a unique cultural identity based in history, time and space. Yet, this identity is in a continuous state of flux, at times seamlessly moving between Italian and American/Italian American cultures. The oscillation between two cultural poles is contingent upon the available signs in the spaces they inhabit and the visual and linguistic texts they access via signs. While the USA exerts cultural hegemony through the projection of soft power – often through the mass media – Italy also exerts a form of softer cultural power of a predominately aesthetic nature in the USA. These power dynamics provide a rich backdrop for the inquiry of diasporic Italian American culture from a variety of ontological positions. Yet, this study's intent was to place and further align the diasporic Italian American experience in the larger field of Diaspora Studies and provide a critical framework that can be applied to all diasporic peoples. While this study focuses on the artistic and aesthetic expressions of diasporic Italians, the application of paratextual interpretation should not be limited to one ethnic group.

As explained and described throughout this study, Italian signs (section 3.3.3) signify *italianità*, or the qualities associated with Italian culture are how diasporic Italians in the periphery align and continue to communicate with Italy as centre (section 3.1.3). The sign-meme conjunction or *semio*-memetic code clusters provide the aesthetic and semiotic attributes that create, maintain, and

propagate Italian culture as it relates to Italians in the periphery (RQ2). The most obvious signs are the lexical units that appear in the Italian language, in its dialects, regional varieties, and spoken dialectal variants – surnames, loan words, stock phrases and idiomatic expressions being the most common (section 4.2.5). Italian cuisine, food ways, and recipes are also a major font for semio-memetic code clusters (sections 3.2.4 and 4.2 – 4.2.8) as they provide a compact structure or memeplex of mutually assisting concepts working in unison that are easily replicated and spread throughout a specific locus (sections 5.1, and 6.4.4).

In the case of the *Youngstalians*, and other diasporic Italian American groups in the USA, we can observe two cultures merging in a relatively isolated spatio-temporal dimension. To show this merger and emergence, memes, in conjunction with signs provide a method of analysing complex cultural systems, while the memetic code clusters provided the underling defining aesthetic components to cultural production and hybridisation. Moreover, a meme is the vehicle which contains a code but cannot be interpreted without some foreknowledge; rather than the two being separate entities, they are integrated and hyper-contextual to the spaces they occupy. By continuing to transmit cultural information *semio-memetically* i.e., through a sign-meme nexus, and the shift in the meaning of metaphors to subsequent generations, the texts, material objects, and spaces that are consumed and manipulated constitute multiple realities of Italian and American culture, realities that form the core of the diasporic subject's identity.

The memes that continue to transmit ideas in reality have been there since the first immigrants reached the shores of North America. These semio-memetic code clusters have been modified and continue to be modified yet still retain initial markers of *italianità* as a defining aesthetic to create authenticity. Moreover, Italy as an unlimited sign-generating system and signifier is an aesthetic value to a framework into which one can situate and view the various aspects of American culture. As a schema of interpretation, diasporic Italian Americans use the descriptor Italy - and by extensions being, feeling or identifying as Italian - to position themselves and place their world in a larger field of meaning.

As previously stated, what we can consider as *Youngstalian* texts focus on the DIY, self-published narrative accounts by the Diasporic Italians of the Mahoning Valley as expressions of *italianità* in the North American periphery, continuing a discourse and engaging with Italy as centre. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that the application of a semio-memetic model is useful in categorizing the attributes of diasporic culture and connecting it to /Italy/ as ur-sign. Notwithstanding the relatively limited sample, this work offers valuable insights into notions of identity and self-representation haunting any diasporic community as it either continues to exist or assimilates fully into the cultural hegemon. Admittedly, one shortcoming of this sample's size is that it would be difficult to draw definitive conclusions from it, although, since there does not exist a large quantity of these type of texts, the point is rendered moot until, and if, more texts emerge from the specific locus.

However, since signs of *italianità* are not exclusive to Youngstown nor the state of Ohio, as demonstrated in the audiovisual texts sample, further research may include a sample of texts from Italian communities in the vicinity of the Mahoning Valley or further afield in the tri-state area of Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia.

One of the central goals of this dissertation was to describe and apply the semio-memetic model to 1. one clearly defined lesser-known diasporic, Italian American community/enclave as a proof of concept in order to 2. utilise the model for an expanded analysis of other contemporary diasporic Italian American enclaves before they recede too far into the Americanisation process. Both the general Diaspora Studies review (chapter 2) and the theoretical discussions (chapters 3 and 4) further served to anchor this study into a larger intersectional discourse with the aim of integrating Italian American Studies into different, complementary ontologies so as to contribute to the dialectic on culture and its manifestations around the world.

By connecting and intersecting with past and contemporary research, methods and theories (chapter 2) this dissertation has demonstrated that *Youngstalians* possess a unique identity which seamlessly moves from Italian, Italian American to American oscillating in a polyethnic state delineated and distinguished by the boundaries that encompass it and the signs that come into contact with it (sections 3.1 and 3.2). The elemental traces of history (section 4.2 - 4.2.8) that are contained in semio-memetic code clusters served to simultaneously connect diasporic Italian America to Italy as a defining aesthetic (section 5.1 - 5.3)

as well as delineating the boundaries that set the criteria of membership (chapter 4). These signs do not materialise out of an ether and were transported along with human vectors (section 3.2.6) that had spread these memes over the Mahoning Valley more than a century ago where they, albeit in a different form, continue to persist (chapters 5 and 6).

There have been multiple waves of migratory flows that have washed over the shores and borders of the United States (section 1.1). The mass, historic migration of Italians into the USA is no different (sections 2.1.2 and 2.1.4). Boundaries, on the other hand, maketh the culture regardless of how far down the path to assimilation the ethnic culture has gone, because content is always changing. Moreover, the fluidity of identity glides between American and Italian American schema, oftentimes settling on specific/recognizable attributes providing the diasporic subject agency in the society they are residing in, or the boundaries they are crossing. The mental schema is at times drawing off of external signs of *italianità*, accessing a particular aesthetic value system needed for participating in their specific spatio-temporal state.

This dissertation has shown through semiotic and memetic frames that texts, whether in mass media or produced locally utilizing DIY methods, demonstrate and document a continuous link to the source country in the cultural centre of Italy while subjects remain in the periphery. Through the interpretations of signs kept in flux via memes, *Youngstalians* are both consciously and unconsciously transporters, or vectors of Italian

peninsular/insular culture albeit transformed by virtue of geographical locus and the effects of spatio-temporal change and its effect on memory.

In a nod to one of the ancient oenological skills of the Mediterranean basin, an analogy would be the concept of *terroir*; the specific character imparted on a vine's (*vinis vinifera*) phenotype due to precise environmental and geographical factors: the uniqueness imparted to *Youngstalian* culture. Therefore, it is the *cultural terroir* that provides the mechanism which explains why diasporic Italians are an equal as well as variation of peninsular and insular Italians (RQ2). It is by way of these shared signs that they, *Youngstalians*, are connected to Italy, the larger constellation of diasporic Italians and by extension, diasporic peoples in general. Moreover, what was formerly a periphery over time becomes a new centre as the dis-located people living there create new texts and imparting a distinct aesthetic profile. This study has shown that actions and activities incorporating and displaying signs of *italianità* make up the schema of interpretation (Goffman, 1974: 21) that frame diasporic Italian ethnicity. Inside this frame, memetic code clusters distinguish and delineate the constituent parts of identity. The MCCs are not fixed or essentialist, thereby permitting cultural evolution to take place depending on conditions influenced by new migrations patterns in conjunction with *cultural terroir*.

Diasporic Italian American culture by virtue of its existence is paradoxically a form of resistance as well as a compromise against the hegemony of American mass culture and the established master narrative that it espouses. And to participate in any of the expressions or elements of IA culture is an act of

either passive or active resistance to the hegemony of the mass culture. Whether or not this leads to conflict is debatable. On a primary level, by virtue of their experience, Italian Americans from the Mahoning Valley deserve at least the respect to be considered a unique version of both the *diasporic* Italian experience as well as the American experience, and as such an authentic variation of Italian ethnicity constituting a unique part of a tripartite metaphysical model of peninsular, insular, and diasporic Italian people through time and space: (*gli Italicci*).

7.1 On Culturology, Literature, and Canon

It is this dissertation's intention to acknowledge that there exists a semiotic interconnectivity among all the diasporic Italian groups of North America. Holarchically speaking, this thesis posits that all Diasporic Italians are akin due to the common exodus or flight from Italy but for our purposes here MCCs can provide useful to future studies of the Italian diaspora and migration and the indelible as well as tangible and intangible marks left on the cultures of the *nuovomondo* or "New World", specifically as it pertains to recent history. An auxiliary hope would be that the MCC structural methodology could be applied to the cultural and textual analysis of other ethnic groups.

As shown in Chapter 5, Italian-themed cooking shows create a recognizable frame and context for presenters and viewers alike to perform and engage with Italian ethnocultural productions – the sample discussed shows that within the degrees of otherness, the IA versions of these is perspicuous and

unique. What it means to be *Italian* is usually an easily understandable visual cue reinforced by recipes (indices), lexical choices, and realia. In addition to these three aesthetic markers, Italian and non-Italian personalities (icons), and rhetorical devices aided by food signs combine to form a distinct sign system. Moreover, of interest is how food signs are used by people inside and outside of Italian culture, whether they be of Italian descent or not, as a framing device to access schema directly related to Italian peninsular and insular signs.

The positionality of the Italian culture in diasporic discourse still remains to be decided. Yet, as this study has shown, the diasporic Italian as subject need not attempt to fit into one epistemological box but rather span multiple domains and discipline. In the past and continuing into the present, scholars have put forth great effort in recognizing, analysing, and locating Italian American literature as a distinct form of American literature, quite possibly even a standalone literary tradition in itself. Diasporic Italian American writings reside in the liminal canonical space between American and Italian literature. We can now take for granted that this is accepted knowledge due to the Modern Language Association (MLA) supporting a research working group specifically on Italian American literature, numerous anthologies, specific conferences, and the creation of specific graduate level courses on Italian American Literature (CUNY Graduate School, SUNY Stony Brook). Therefore, the intrinsic value placed upon the literary contributions emanating out of the Italian diaspora are further proof of its existence as a separate entity within and outside multiple domains of literary traditions. Although the current study is based on a non-

exhaustive sample of both traditional and audiovisual texts it is insufficient to make statistically relevant findings, yet it does suggest that with time the literature and culture of the Italian diaspora will continue to be a valid area of inquiry. Yet, as shown through the analysis of *Youngstalian* culture, texts are not only unique to the characterisation of their Italian American identity and of their community but are also virtuous texts that generate intrinsic cultural and social capital as a system of value. The concept of altruism as a system of value when approaching texts can potentially lead to more nuanced literary interpretations.

Moving forward, one would like to see Italian American literature included in Italian literature, as a continuum of Italian culture and expression of *italianità*. Self-published DIY literature, as ephemeral objects, offer authentic examples of living documents capturing the fleeting moments in time that specific cohorts of diasporic Italians encode into either text or material objects. These artistic endeavours become value while establishing and re-establishing a connection in the present for the past to live on through the authenticity of the artistic output of these communities.

Additionally, with regards to ethnic identity Italian Americans from the USA and Youngstown already consider themselves /Italian/. In fact, often it is only when encountering peninsular/insular Italians or traveling to Italy or abroad that IAs associate themselves with being /American/. IAs take being Italian for granted, ergo shouldn't their literature be considered Italian American at the least? A possible solution would be to consider this literature in a Diasporic literary framework which would bring it closer to the long literary traditions of

Jewish Literature that is linguistically and culturally spread out over the countries that the Jewish people have historically inhabited and influenced with their own signs that have been encoded in memes.

While the focus of this study has been on /Italian/ manifestations of culture and the texts produced from within it, the principle of analysing how texts are created and how they move through a cultural ecosystem can be applied to other cultures as well. The act of creating Do-It-Yourself texts by diasporic Italians in the periphery, as virtuous expressions of literary culture, provides readers the metaphorical embodiment and sum total of a person's subjective and selective ideas, hope, desires, and memories by applying frames that create meaning. These texts convey a shared understanding and values of the *Youngstalian* experience and can be read collectively. Subsequent generations discovering these texts then have the possibility to establish, in ideal circumstances, a method for remembering and maintaining a discourse regarding their ancestors' past experiences and the ways they preserved their /Italian/ culture in the periphery — a new centre — under the hegemony of the American cultural. Another more practical implication is the acquisition of a text. It becomes potentially the first stage of a praxis that builds concrete actions that include finding and participating in cultural activities ranging from annual, local *feste* to weekly *morra* and *bocce* tournaments. These two systems, or frameworks, one semiotic and the other memetic, keep diasporic Italian culture alive in the Mahoning Valley. Therefore, this study has also show that lesser-known diasporic Italian cohorts in the United States use *italianità* as an aesthetic marker

in their textual expressions of material culture or more ephemeral expressions such Italian themed events (RQ3).

It is, in a certain sense, a form of Gans's symbolic ethnicity, but as we have seen what is "real" is often a simulacric representation drawing off of semiotic elements that have been either forgotten, disregarded, or no longer provide agency to the assimilated American. As a moving target, the conceptualisation of authenticity, and what we considered authentic, changes with time and space. As with the DIY texts, ritualized games, and the production of cultural artefacts, the altruistic manner in which diasporic Italian Americans engage in these activities demonstrates an authenticity developed through time and space that imparts a *cultural terroir* creating new aesthetic flavours. Here, in this experiential uniqueness lies a conception of authenticity separate and equal in the dialectic between peninsular, insular and diasporic Italians. Moreover, Kress & van Leeuwen's statement that "reality is in the eye of the beholder; or rather, what is regarded as real depends on how reality is defined by a particular social group" (1996: 163) supports one of this dissertation's positions that diasporic Italian ethnic culture is as authentic as that of peninsular and insular Italian ethnic culture. This is due to the overarching socio-cultural group as hegemon which in term imposes their own unique perception, observation, and subsequent interpretation of existence while sharing a set of mutual identity markers. The multiple realities and manifestations of Italian ethnicity can either compliment or contrast the ethnic cultures themselves depending on which signs and code clusters are being negotiated by members of each group and the loci in which the

groups find themselves. It should also be stated that while the role of communication through mass media has brought cultures closer it has also had the effect of bringing back formerly contentious and nefarious notions of cultural superiority underpinned by outdated and disregarded notions of essentialism, racial and cultural superiority. Therefore, this dissertation has provided a deeper insight into the role visual and textual signs play in the construction of identity and the perception of self. It is the activities people engage in – both private and public – atomized and/or communally that generates culture.

Whether these cultural activities and simulacric experiences were or continue to be acts of symbolic ethnicity may veer off the mark in twenty-first. Most Italians and Italian Americans moved out of the inner city into the suburbs long ago and kept their identity – albeit in a different form affected by space, consumption practices, and the material objects they surrounded themselves with or manipulate as extensions of their own personal ethnic identity. Moreover, if we are to have a more holistic overview of the diasporic Italian American experience in the US as it continues to evolve, we must continue to recognize that peripheries are in fact centres onto themselves just as the medieval hilltop villages of peninsular and insular Italy were and are today. Otherwise, if we don't, we may “perpetuate a very narrow definition of Italian American” (Cavallero, 2015: 28) and continue to propagate the established narrative of what Italian America should be rather than what it is: a conceptualised state of continuous evolution and semiosis of a long, unbroken, and sophisticated dialogue with the ur-sign /Italy/ (Tamburri, 2018: 199). Ergo the memes that are

created in these diasporic Italian colonies and the signs that are interpreted and generated by material expressions of people living in this locus demonstrate that Italian memes and the signs contained in them continue to influence Americans of Italian descent, i.e., *Youngstalians*.

Furthermore, it is correct to say that the Italian Americans of Youngstown and the Mahoning Valley make up a distinct sub-group of both American and Italian culture. Just as a grapevine can be transported away from its original terrain, or to use an oenological term, *terroir*, so too have diasporic peoples “as vines”, so to speak. In this analogy, Italian Americans were and continue to be transported to a new *terroir*. This group still retains signs of its cultural *varietal* albeit now in a hybrid state. What remains is a hybrid culture mixing signs of both Italian and American culture and to a lesser extent language but more often as is the case with American ethnic groups, culture that has created *the* distinctive *cultural terroir* amongst diasporic Italians and Italians alike. Each and every diasporic Italian group is in reality a centre upon themselves in continuous flux, acclimating to new semiotic, social, and linguistic factors that influence and shape their present conceptualisation of self, identity, group narrative (Viscusi, 1989) and worldview while engaging in a dialectic between periphery and centre. Therefore, through the interpretation of semio-memetic vectors we can look at these texts as a posteriori examples of cultural transformation leading Italian American culture to be a culture upon itself closely reflecting or mirroring Italian peninsular/insular culture: a culture employing diverse signifiers to interpret the world.

7.2 Future Perspectives from this Study

To begin, it should be stated that further research is necessary on larger samples of texts in diverse loci if a semio-memetic method of inquiry is to move forward and be adopted as a critical framework for general cultural inquiry. From the socio-cultural and linguistic point of view, it is essential that further research be carried out in the form of fieldwork to document lesser-known diasporic Italian communities around the continental United States before these micro-colonies recede too far into American culture. Further research might also explore the connections and pathways new Italian migrants are making with historic diasporic Italian communities. As an extension of this, it may also be of interest to document and study what remains of the historic Italian dialectal variations that have undergone change and hybridisation through the encounters with standard American English. Recording the changes that have taken place in both languages may prove useful to the rehabilitation of neglected or near extinct languages in Western society.

Moreover, further research needs to be carried out in order to validate the analysis of the effects of the corporatization and commodification of Italian cuisine and its relevance and effect on global culinary aesthetics in the marketing of the Italian sign system “Made in Italy” as brand. With the emergence of the FIAT corporation as a major economic and financial player within the US economic system, the influence of Italian signs through material objects and products seems to be trending towards growth and higher visibility such as in the FIAT 500 series of commercials reconstituting old Italian tropes and building

new ones with American and not Italians as the target of jokes to elicit humorous responses. This economic influence coupled with younger peninsular and insular Italians working in Silicon Valley leads to the conclusion that the influence Italians exert in the USA will continue to be relevant.

Lastly, extending the concept of Indology and applying it to Italy, it is hoped that this study could contribute to the possibility and development of a more integrated ontology or what we could refer to as *Italogy*. This positionality would benefit the systematic, integrated study of the art, culture, history, language, and philosophy of the Italian peninsular and insular region – including its diaspora – and its continuing influence in the Mediterranean basin, Eurasian landmass, and throughout the western world. Furthermore, another avenue of future exploration could include how immigration to Italy is affecting and changing the notion of what it is to be /Italian/.

7.3 Epilogue

While not the only Italian experience, the diasporic Italian experience is one of many complementary and interconnected American experiences. This continues today and will for the foreseeable future. Displacement and feelings of loss create a longing that is impossible to deny and discount and can only be suppressed through force and/or indifference. From this hegemonic suppression, green shoots of creativity and ingenuity sprout up around obstacles growing towards light. Often contained in these shoots are non-indigenous signs.

The diasporic Italian experience *is* the human experience of existing and thriving on a planet that is often times indifferent or hostile to societies and social circumstances. It is a metaphorical and metaphysical universal tome; heavy and divided into many parts, each intersecting in different spatio-temporal states; past, present, and future illuminating the nature of homo sapiens through signs, texts, and the material expressions they create and remain long after their memory has passed into non-existence or else lies dormant awaiting a memetic event for a resurgence back into the collective consciences. It is a complex interplay of nodes containing frames, metaphors, narratives, images, and emotions all encircling and integrated into /Italy/ as ur-sign. This ur-sign is the kernel from which signs are generated and subsequently transformed.

The diasporic Italian experience is also a lens with which to probe the surface as well as the deepest recesses of human cognition and cultural interaction; both in a literal sense regarding the social sciences and in more figurative, literary, and symbolic modes in the humanities. From these two positions, we can also move into the metaphorical, philosophical mode of Diasporic Italian Studies and perhaps close the circle, but more specifically an ellipsis that was initiated long ago when the Renaissance stoked the fire of human centrality, aesthetic ingenuity, and rediscovery. The diasporic Italian American experience includes another crucial facet in its composition: The United States of America. All of the previously stated attributes are also applicable to the study of Youngstown as a window into cultural evolution, framing and proffering another mode of critical inquiry into the United States and the effect it exerts on

its citizenry, hosts and guests alike. Furthermore, the Mahoning Valley also provides a case study and critique of the western world and all the forces – linguistic, cultural, economic, and geographic – that act upon those living within it.

Perhaps of major importance is the effect Italy as ur-sign has on language and culture that combine to create mediatic representations of those Italians that fall within (centre) and outside (periphery) of its boundaries, creating impressions that often do not correspond to an objective reality yet nonetheless become new subjective realities due to the sheer hegemonic force, the cultural gravity the country exerts upon the world and collective conscience of those that dialogue with it as an entity of influence. In this paradoxically rapidly expanding and constricting world massively influenced by full spectrum, integrated communication, both human interaction and digitally, the world may in fact not be absolutely “knowable”, but it still remains observable, describable and, even if at times quite simple or impossibly complex, interpretable. Perhaps this interpretive state is the only form of flux that truly exists, if but for a brief moment in time and space, recording or embedding something, *un qualcosa*, into the tangible and intangible representation(s) of ephemerality that surround us and shape our perception of what we perceive to be and consider existence.

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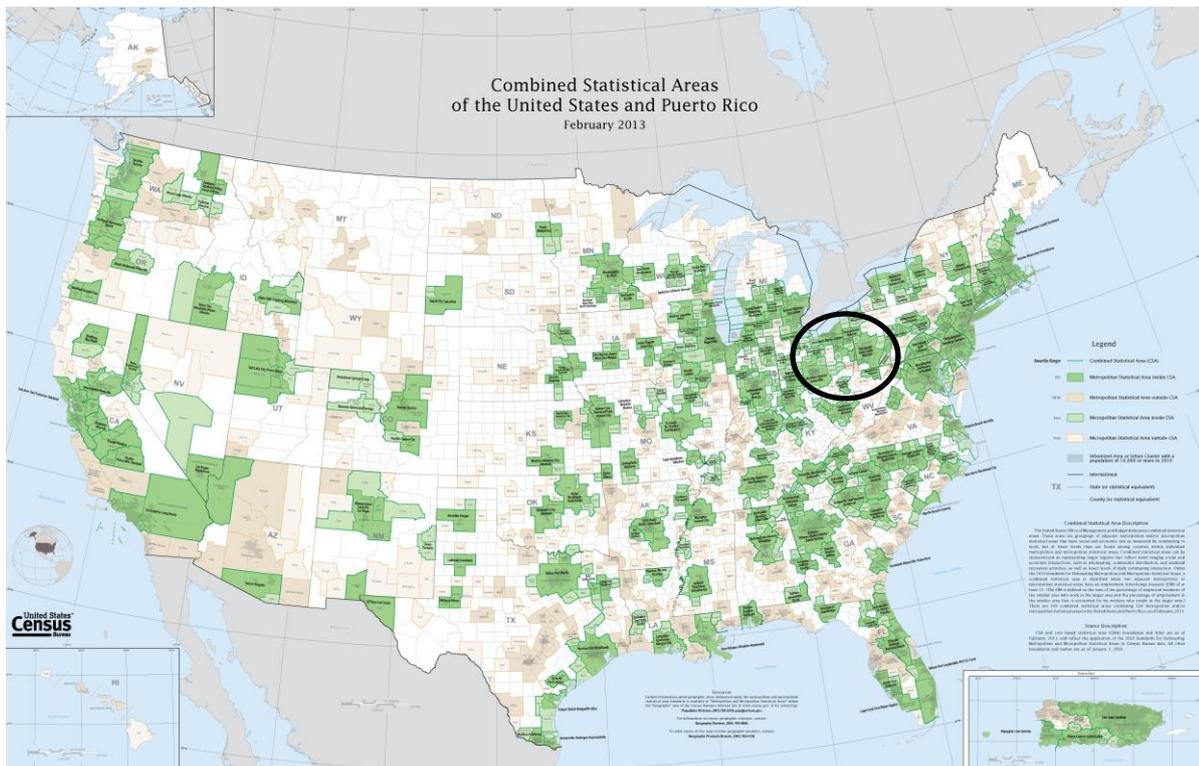
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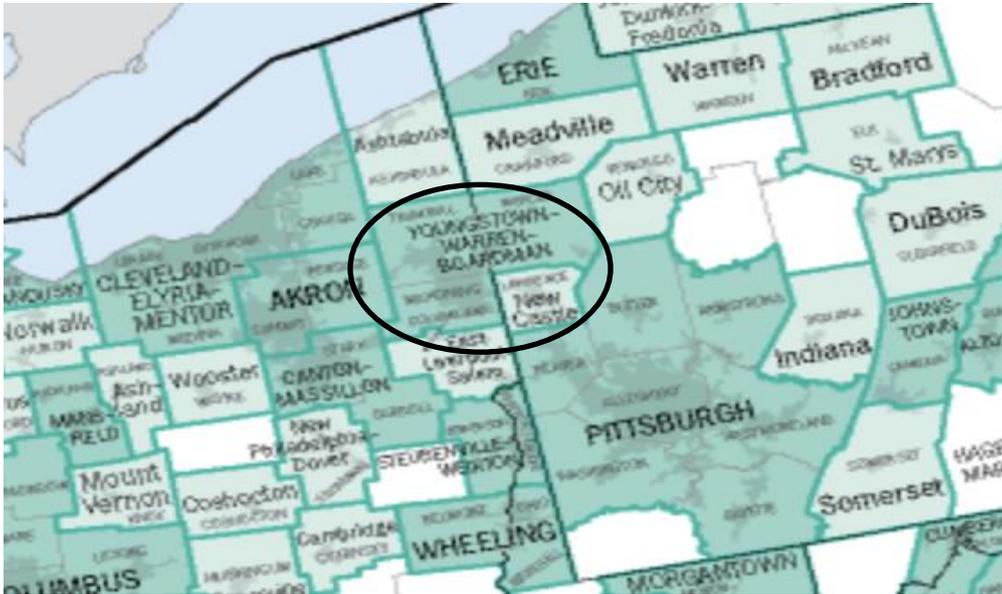
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Appendix 1. The Mahoning Valley (Ohio-Pennsylvania border region)

1. Metropolitan statistical area (MSA) of the United States and Puerto Rico which illustrates the major population centres of the USA for statistical purposes. It also shows the relatively *soft* boundaries between states, cities, towns, and villages.



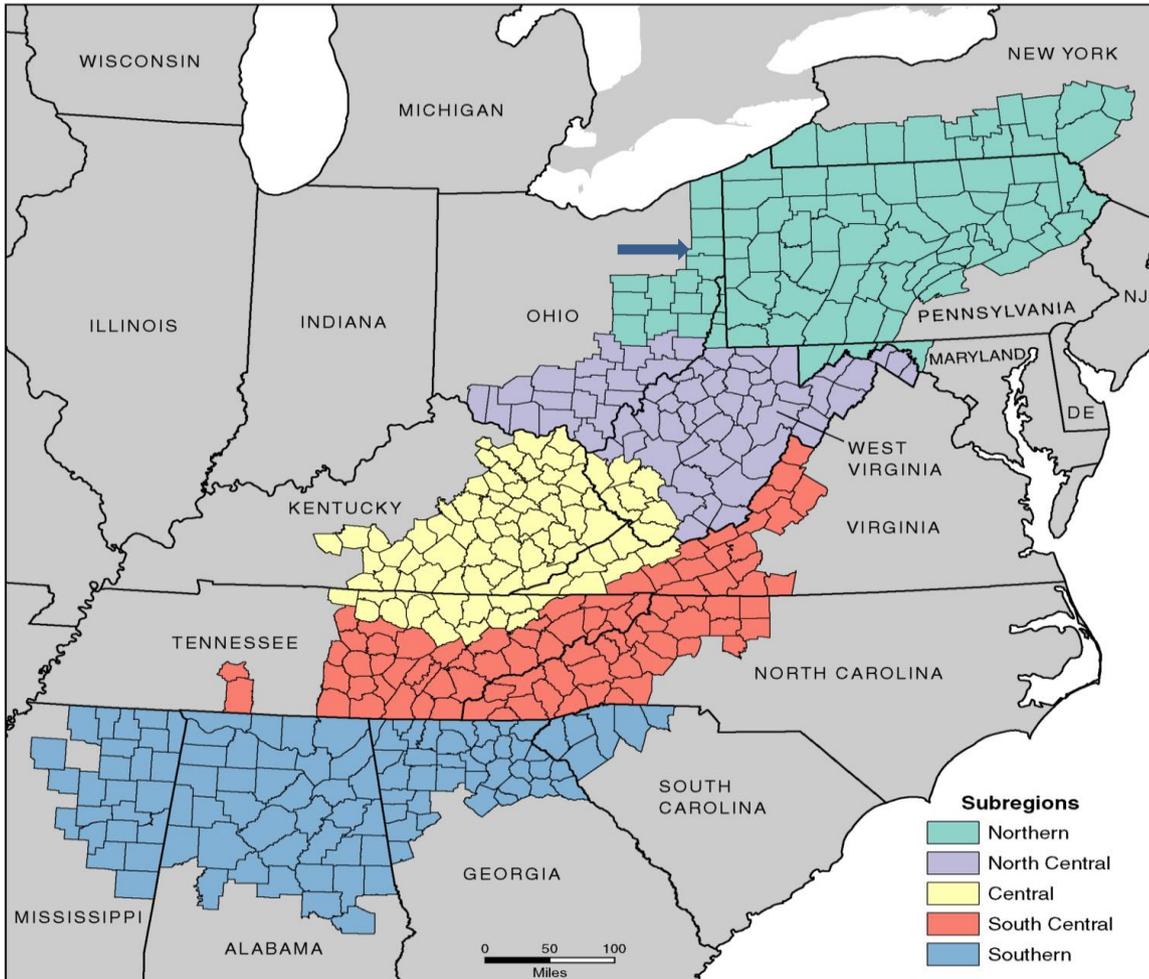
1.2 Area of inquiry: the Youngstown – Warren – Boardman MSA



Source:

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/Metropolitan and Micropolitan Statistical Areas of the United States and Puerto Rico.gif](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/6c/Metropolitan_and_Micropolitan_Statistical_Areas_of_the_United_States_and_Puerto_Rico.gif)

1.3 Appalachian Region



Map by: Appalachian Regional Commission, November 2009.

Source :

<https://www.arc.gov/about-the-appalachian-region/>

Appendix 2. Lazarus, Emma

“The New Colossus” (1883)

Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glow world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
“Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!” cries she
With silent lips. “Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

Appendix 3. Springsteen, Bruce

"Youngstown" (1995)

Here in northeast Ohio
Back in eighteen-o-three
James and Dan Heaton
Found the ore that was linin' Yellow Creek
They built a blast furnace
Here along the shore
And they made the cannonballs
That helped the Union win the war

Here in Youngstown
Here in Youngstown
My sweet Jenny I'm sinkin' down
Here darlin' in Youngstown

Well my daddy worked the furnaces
Kept 'em hotter than hell
I come home from 'Nam worked my way to scarfer
A job that'd suit the devil as well
Taconite coke and limestone
Fed my children and make my pay
Them smokestacks reachin' like the arms of God
Into a beautiful sky of soot and clay

Here in Youngstown
Here in Youngstown
Sweet Jenny I'm sinkin' down
Here darlin' in Youngstown

Well my daddy come on the Ohio works
When he come home from World War Two
Now the yard's just scrap and rubble
He said "Them big boys did what Hitler couldn't do."
These mills they built the tanks and bombs
That won this country's wars
We sent our sons to Korea and Vietnam

Now we're wondering what they were dyin' for

Here in Youngstown
Here in Youngstown
My sweet Jenny I'm sinkin' down
Here darlin' in Youngstown

From the Monongahela valley
To the Mesabi iron range
To the coal mines of Appalachia
The story's always the same
Seven hundred tons of metal a day
Now sir you tell me the world's changed
Once I made you rich enough
Rich enough to forget my name

And Youngstown
And Youngstown
My sweet Jenny I'm sinkin' down
Here darlin' in Youngstown

When I die I don't want no part of heaven
I would not do heaven's work well
I pray the devil comes and takes me
To stand in the fiery furnaces of he

Appendix 4. Italians Mad At Food

view previous replies 50 OF 55

 **Michelle** [redacted] Then what is carbonara in your opinion?
Like · Reply · 23h  1

 **Massimo** [redacted] Carbonara is not an opinion.
Like · Reply · 23h    38

 **Italians mad at food**
@italiansmadatfood · Community [WhatsApp](#)

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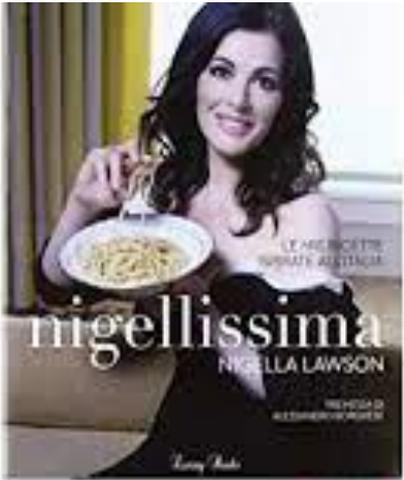
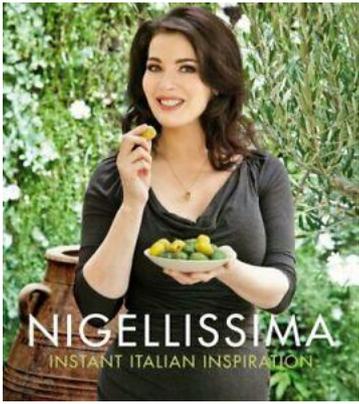
About [See All](#)

 "Food snobs". "Food elitists".
"Pretentious as*holes".
We are here to get mad, we do not have any actual talents.

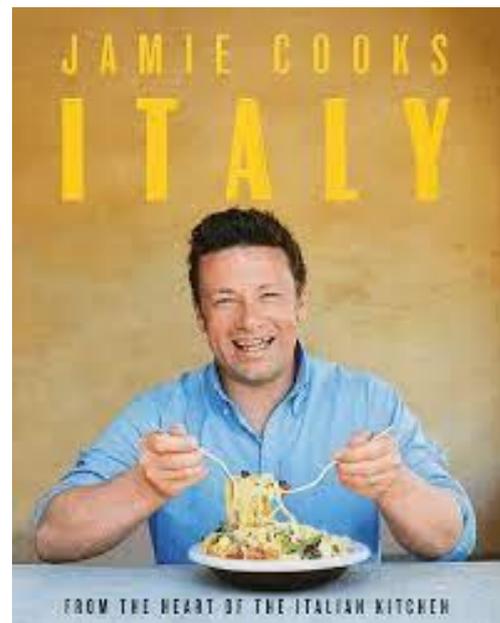
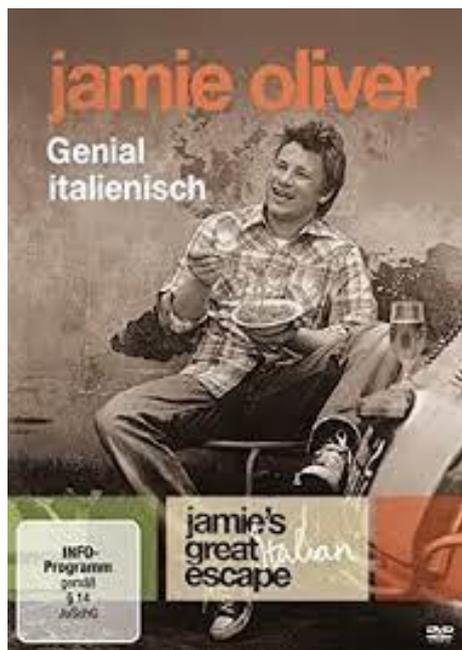
 **Create Post**

 Photo/Video  Check in  Tag Friends

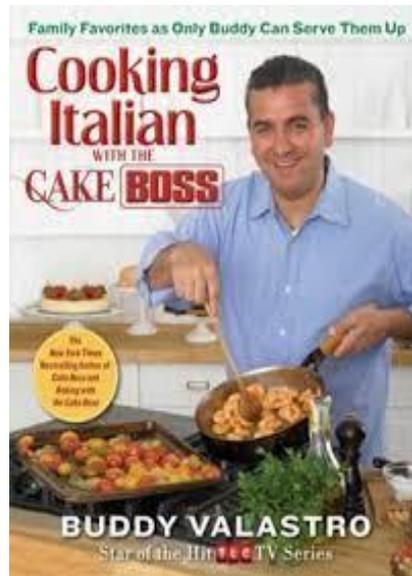
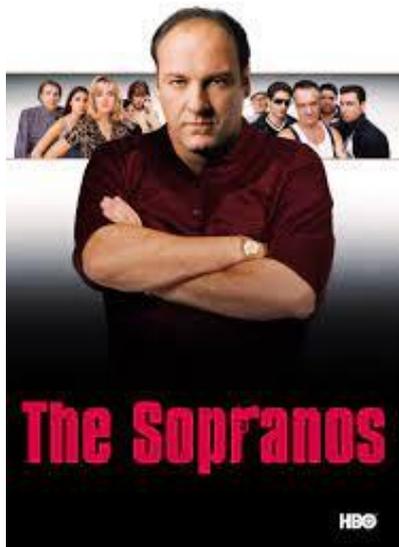
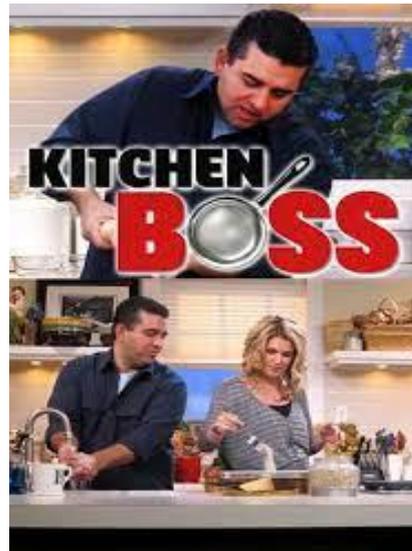
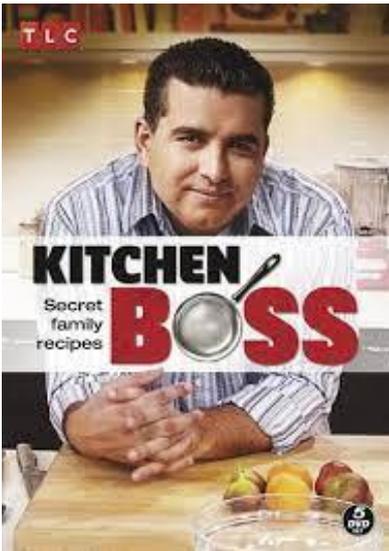
Appendix 5. Nigella Lawson



Appendix 6. Jamie Oliver



Appendix 7. Buddy Valastro





Appendix 8. David Rocco

