

American Studies 348: Space, Place, & Landscape
Professor Laura Barraclough

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations.— Giovanni M. Bacarella

From Sanctuary to Cemetery:
The Fate of Astoria and the Italian Immigrant Identity
by Giovanni M. Bacarella

I. Introduction

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge—which gives us profound uncertainties—that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.

SALMAN RUSHDIE, *IMAGINARY HOMELANDS*

As a second-generation Italian-American born and raised in an immigrant neighborhood, I have developed a feeling of nostalgia beyond my years: *my hometown—Astoria, New York—is not the same as it was back in the day*. I can remember a time when fellow Borgettani flocked to my backyard for some home-brewed coffee. Now, the local grocer has no reason to import our favorite blend. Around the time I was born, the Borgetto Cultural Association of Astoria borrowed the most venerated icon in Sicily from its hilltop sanctuary in Borgetto for a procession through the neighborhood. This year, that procession moved to Whitestone, an elite residential community in Queens with a much higher median household income. Two decades ago, Italians constituted 18.1% of Astoria’s population, forming the largest ethnic community in town.¹

¹ Andrea Moore and Kristina Pecorelli, “Neighborhood Trends and Insights: Astoria, Queens,” NYCEDC Economic Research and Analysis, April 2014: 4.

Today, that percentage has shrunk to approximately 10.3%, even after suffering the largest decrease in overall population of all neighborhoods in New York City between 2000 and 2010.²

Despite these changes, Astoria has not yet shed its reputation as the Italian corner of Queens. In fact, despite the downward trend, Italians continue to outnumber other ethnic groups in Astoria. What, then, has changed? Whereas Astoria was once a place built upon the shared identity of southern Italian immigrants, it is now a heterogeneous community where Italian-American neighbors might share nothing other than the sidewalk. As many of these Italian-Americans let go of the old way of life, they lose the small-town culture that once sustained a large extended family. The sense of fellowship that stemmed from a mutual village-mindedness and parochialism evaporates, and the Italian-American ethnic identity grows independent of the immigrant neighborhood. In this paper, I will argue that the acculturation of Italian-Americans has reversed the process of transnational placemaking that once made Astoria a tight-knit ethnic enclave

II. Resistance: First-Generation Cultural Islands and Delayed Assimilation

The second great wave of Italian immigration in the United States was sparked by the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which eliminated the discriminatory quota system that had been in place since the 1920s. The rapid influx of Italian immigrants peaked in 1967, when the number of incoming Italians reached 26,565—almost a threefold increase from 1965.³ Of these immigrants, 30% listed New York as their final destination. Since the Little Italy of Manhattan was already occupied by the first great wave of Italians in the early decades of the

² NYC Department of City Planning, “Population Change by Neighborhood Tabulation Area, New York City, 2000 to 2010,” *NYC2010: Results from the 2010 Census*, 2011: 10.

³ Giuseppe Fortuna, *The Italian Dream: The Italians of Queens, New York City*, (San Francisco: Mellen Research UP, 1991) 35.

20th century, the newcomers were forced to build their homes elsewhere. These immigrants went on to settle what Giuseppe Fortuna calls the “Italian Cultural Islands” in the borough of Queens.

Motivated by the Old World mentality of *campanilismo*, this first-generation of Italian-Americans built their communities around distinct southern Italian ethnicities. Among other cultural differences that separate the macroregions of Italy, *campanilismo* is a phenomenon that translates into a southern Italian’s supreme loyalty to his or her immediate community—an allegiance that often takes precedence over national affiliation. On this side of the Atlantic, *campanilismo* inspired the village-minded Italians of the *Mezzogiorno* to shape their new homes in Queens in the likeness of their places of birth. To do so, Italian immigrants took residence alongside others from the same village or province. In his research on the early occupants of the Italian cultural islands in Queens, Fortuna notes that, “[these immigrants] regarded themselves not as Italian, but as Neapolitans, Sicilians, and so on.”⁴ Indeed, the immigrant enclave in Astoria was originally composed mostly of Sicilians, many of whom were Castrolippese and Borgettani. Hoping not to leave the rituals of their hometowns behind, these villagers stuck together and shaped the identity of their immediate communities as well as the borough they would continue to occupy. In a 1995 interview with the *New York Times*, the current mayor of Castrolippo stated that, “Over the last half-century or more, about as many people have left the village and moved to Queens as live there now.”⁵

In addition to the village-mindedness and provincial loyalty that brought these immigrants together, the common goal of subsistence in a foreign land transformed these communities into ethnic enclaves that could temporarily resist assimilation into American society. Normally, these neighborhoods are purely transitional, existing for however long it takes

⁴ Fortuna, 67.

⁵ Pam Belluck, "Distant but Loyal: Little Sicily in Queens; Immigrants Congregate in Astoria But Leave Their Hearts in Castrolippo," *New York Times*, 17 July 1995: B1-B2.

immigrants populations to integrate into their host country. In his definition of these ethnic enclaves, sociologist John Logan writes, “In the beginning, people’s limited market resources and ethnically bound cultural and social capital are mutually reinforcing; they work in tandem to sustain ethnic neighborhoods. But these are transitional neighborhoods—they represent a practical and temporary phase in the incorporation of new groups into American society.”⁶ In the case of the Italian cultural islands, however, it appears that the first generation was able to resist assimilation through communal reinforcement of their culture. By settling alongside immigrants of similar origin, these Italians were able to maintain their old way of life, which was contingent on a homogenous community of like-minded people. As such, since these immigrants could help each other survive in this foreign land, assimilation into American society was not yet necessary.

Underlying this ethnic solidarity was the strict moral code imported from the Mezzogiorno: *l’ordine della famiglia*, or “the order of the family.” Adherence to this code required complete dedication to the family—any action that did not advance the interests of the inner circle was considered a betrayal. The central principle of *l’ordine* raised the stakes for everyday decisions: all actions affected the family in some way. This familism, however, was not exercised as a utilitarian means to maximize self-interest. Instead, Raymond Belliotti argues that, “it was felt as membership in a wider subjectivity: one’s identity is related directly to social context. Under *l’ordine della famiglia*, a person experienced his or her well-being as part of a larger organic entity—as part of a family in [a wide sense].”⁷ Advocating moral obligations to a hierarchy of people that included even those “to whom you tip your hat,” *l’ordine* served to tighten the bonds of extra-familial relationships in the immigrant communities. Indeed, the

⁶ John R. Logan, "Immigrant Enclaves and Ethnic Communities in New York and Los Angeles," *American Sociological Review* 67.2 (2002): 299.

⁷ Raymond A. Belliotti, *Seeking Identity: Individualism versus Community in an Ethnic Context*, (Lawrence, Kansas: University of Kansas, 1995) 34.

individualistic drive of this moral code doubled as an engine of communion with neighbors who adhered to the same moral code. By encouraging intense solidarity, this cultural import staved off assimilation: “It prevented the first generation from achieving full social integration but it also provided strong spiritual comfort in the strange new world; it prohibited many immigrants from immediate upward mobility but it simultaneously promoted the transition to a strange land.”⁸ *L’ordine* lived on because it allowed southern Italian immigrants to navigate their new home with some familiarity. At the same time, uniform adherence to the code throughout the ethnic enclaves delayed assimilation into American society.

An extension of this shared moral code was a reluctance to participate in and cooperate with wider institutions, including the government. Having witnessed years of inefficiency and corruption, peasant farmers in southern Italy learned not to trust local and federal governments. As a result, the moral obligations instituted by *l’ordine* forbade interaction with political institutions—dealing with the government would ultimately hurt the family. Instead, these immigrants survived on a strong sense of self-reliance. In New York, however, avoiding the government ironically kept the immigrants from upward mobility. A manifestation of the familism underlying their moral code, the following principle guided immigrant interaction with welfare programs: “*Essere poveru e una sfurtuna, accettare elemosina e una vergogna.*”⁹ This moral axiom advocating the seemingly irrational refusal of welfare has everything to do with the parochial moral code of Southern Italy, which was shaped by a tradition of self-reliance and acquired distrust:

The [Italian immigrant] declined the state’s tender mercies for a number of reasons: to accept charity from *stranieri* would have been tacit admission that the family network had failed; the immigrant may well have suspected that accepting the governments beneficence would saddle her with additional reciprocal obligations; she may have feared a general curtailing of her freedom by

⁸ Bellioti, 37.

⁹ Translated from Sicilian as, “Being poor is a misfortune, but accepting charity is a disgrace.”

her new benefactor and she may have been exhibiting a touch of the arrogance of the poor. In any event, the immigrant responded from a harsh background of generations of oppressive relations with the state that had finely sharpened her abiding distrust of government.¹⁰

Again, since the first Italian-Americans were able to build a self-sustaining welfare network that was rooted in a strict moral philosophy, they remained isolated in their ethnic enclaves—sometimes to their own detriment.

Indicative of its high degree of ethnic separateness, the Italian population found ways to preserve distinct regional cultures even in the context of American pluralism. At the heart of *campanilismo*, the local church exerted a centripetal force that held villages together in the Old World. Each parish was the hub of town culture and tradition. In Queens, however, the immigrants encountered impersonal territorial parishes that were situated in neighborhoods according to diocese geography. According to Silvano Tomasi, this resulted in a schismatic compromise:

Unable to participate on an equal footing in the existing English-language parishes and other religious structures of American society, the immigrants rallied around their own saints and priests to protect their self-respect and their piety [...] The ethnic parish was born as a compromise between the demands of immediate assimilation and the resistance of immigrants to abandon their traditional religiosity.¹¹

The new ethnic parish was not considered equal in power to the territorial parish according to the Catholic Church, but it allowed immigrants to participate in an American institution on their own terms. Eventually, the Italian-Americans built a network of ethnic churches that catered exclusively to their group. It was not unlikely for clubs such as the Borgettano Cultural Association of Astoria to organize processions and feasts for holidays that were celebrated

¹⁰ Bellioti, 77.

¹¹ Silvano M. Tomasi, *Piety and Power: The Role of the Italian Parishes in the New York Metropolitan Area*, (Staten Island, NY: Center for Migration Studies, 1975) 2.

locally in small southern Italian villages. When describing the role of Italian parishes in the New York metropolitan area, Tomasi writes,

The church structures functioned to maintain the ethnic personality type by organizing the group around religious and cultural symbols and the behavioral modes of the country of origin [...] The immigrants conceived their ethnic identity in terms of concrete and particular symbols. For them religion was fused with all the institutions and roles of society. It was more a way of life than a prescribed set of beliefs and practices.¹²

Brought into geographic proximity by this old way of life, the Italian immigrants gained enough influence to continue practicing their religious traditions. In turn, the ethnic parish further strengthened the bonds in neighborhoods such as Astoria by appearing to the immigrants as a clear manifestation of a common ethnicity. As a result, the local ethnic parish not only allowed for continuity between the Old World and the New World, but also admitted the ethnic enclaves into American consciousness by giving them a public and communal sense of ethnic identity.

Tomasi continues,

This newly formed solidarity absorbed many internal conflicts, developed ethnic leadership and an institutional network, which the established social system had to take into account. Of the several institutions developed within the Italian ethnic community, the church had a unique double function of linkage with the past, where the immigrants' *weltanschauung* was formed, and with the present, where new social and cultural roles were learned.¹³

Ironically, this particular mode of entrance into American society was another form of resistance to assimilation. In order for the first-generation Italian-Americans to compete in American society, they had to transform themselves into a spatially-oriented community, "at least at the local level of the neighborhood."¹⁴ This gave them legitimacy as an "ethnic other" in New York society and kept them out of the melting pot.

While membership in this community is publicly displayed during processions and religious feasts around the local parish, it is also manifest in residential landscapes throughout

¹² Tomasi, 3.

¹³ Tomasi, 8.

¹⁴ Tomasi, 179.

the Italian-American neighborhood. Indeed, in some parts of Queens, it is possible to read the ethnic composition of the neighborhood based on the organization and decoration of highly conventionalized, small front-yards. In his visual analysis of Astoria and other Italian-American neighborhoods in New York City, Joseph Inguanti zooms in on these “landscapes of order” and their contribution to the process of place-making: “With their symmetrical plans, sheared shrubs, religious statues, and fig trees, Italian-American landscapes proclaim the ethnicity of homeowners and knit neighborhoods together with a shared horticultural and design idiom.”¹⁵ A common sight for most denizens of New York City, these landscapes reflect an ecclesiastic manipulation of space:

Rectangular form, religious iconography, contained plant materials, rigorous bilateral symmetry, and neatness of space are all attributes this landscape shares with Catholic church altars and some home shrines. Even the mat of artificial turf under the statue and the black-railed fence call to mind the analogous structures of altar cloth and altar rail. [...] The composition serves as religious “signage” announcing the belief of the owner. It announces their devotion to the Holy Family at the home: the site of the most important institution of Italian-American life, the family. Moreover, the park-like setting and obvious upkeep under the protective gaze of religious figures create a sacred landscape out of a small front yard.¹⁶

This landscape design mirrors the behavior that motivated the creation of ethnic parishes: Italian immigrants brought with them the fundamental principles of southern Italian residential ornamentation and learned to apply them within the boundaries of a structure that is representative of American urban development. Individually, these landscapes serve as a public display of membership in the Italian-American community. Using the canvas of their neighborhood, the keepers of these front-yards paint into existence a landscape that they all once knew. Thus, collectively, these front-yards are a tangible symbol of a neighborhood’s ethnic character.

¹⁵ Joseph J. Inguanti, "Landscapes of Order, Landscapes of Memory: Italian-American Residential Landscapes of the New York Metropolitan Region," in *Italian Folk: Vernacular Culture in Italian-American Lives*, (New York: Fordham UP, 2011) 83.

¹⁶ Inguanti, 85.

III. Reconditioning: Generational Tensions and the Acculturation of Italian-Americans

Although these homogenous Italian neighborhoods originally eliminated the need to assimilate into American society, they later failed to produce the same conditions for the younger generations of Italian-Americans. Faced with the challenge of preserving their parents' rich southern Italian culture within an American incubator, the children of immigrants naturally became bicultural. While acculturation resulted in the adoption of some aspects of American culture, it did not immediately lead to complete assimilation. Referring to this period of hybridity as the "twilight of ethnicity," Richard Alba argues that, "Ethnicity does not stand on its own but stands because it is draped over the skeletal structure of inequality."¹⁷ Once groups like the southern Italians in Queens entered the educational, occupational, and marital mainstream, Alba says, the degree of their ethnic separateness decreased, and social integration ensued. Due to its layered nature, however, the Italian-American identity would not join the melting pot in one sweeping motion: while younger generations may have shed the provincialism and parochialism of their ancestors, they retained a more general association to Italy as a nation. Fortuna writes, "As the period of settlement wore on, self-identity as Italians or Italoamericans replaced labels such as Neapolitans or Sicilians."¹⁸ Unfortunately, membership in the ethnic enclaves of Queens, which was based on town-village affiliations, has declined, since the Italian-American ethnicity does not inspire the same *campanilismo* that once held these neighborhoods together.

Tracing the history of this acculturation in the Italian-American community, it seems that the immediate source of cultural friction for children of the southern Italian immigrants in New York was *l'ordine della famiglia*, which was enforced by a spatial reality in which everyone knows everything about everyone. Born into conditions of greater equality for immigrants, the

¹⁷ Richard D. Alba, Italian Americans: Into the Twilight of Ethnicity. Englewood Cliffs, (NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1985) 12.

¹⁸ Fortuna, 71

younger generations received a taste of the freedom of American society and the big city, leading them astray from the narrow *via vecchia*, or the “old road.” Commenting on the role of *l’ordine della famiglia* as it passed down to new generations of Italian-Americans, Belliotti writes,

It grounded the second generation’s personal identity but intimately exacerbated tensions between the immigrants and their children [...] With rapidly developing transportation and communication systems, intermarriage, greater educational opportunities, and the alleviation of brutal economic and social oppression, *l’ordine della famiglia*, in its most uncompromising forms, was doomed to extinction in the United States.¹⁹

While the moral code instilled an intense devotion to the family for most second-generation Italian-Americans, it failed to provide clarity as to what was best for the family. Growing up in New York City, one does not develop the same level of self-reliance and distrust of outsiders as in southern Italy. Thus, the children of immigrants arrived at a cultural impasse: they were forced to choose between strict observance of a displaced moral code or integration into their native society. Fortuna describes this juncture as the beginning of acculturation,

They recognize that an adjustment to a new culture is needed. A crisis, a cultural shock jolts the people into questioning the values of old habits. They know that the culture of the approached group has its own history, which can be accessible to them, but that it will never be an integral part of their lives. They can share the present and the future with the approached group but they remain excluded from its past. They approach the new cultural patterns as disinterested observers, but they know that sooner or later they will probably transform themselves from disinterested observers into members of the new group.²⁰

Stuck in the middle of this transformation, the children of immigrants often found themselves at odds with parents who made demands they perceived to be unreasonable, such as getting a job over going to college.

In her novel *The Right Thing to Do*, Josephine Gattuso Hendin draws from her own experience growing up in Astoria to tell a story about the generational and cultural conflict between a cosmopolitan young woman and her village-minded Sicilian father. Having entered

¹⁹ Belliotti, 37.

²⁰ Fortuna, 3.

into a constant struggle against the “American other,” Nino Giardello cannot understand why the younger members of his family are drawn to a society that is so obviously void of morals. In his usual polemic tone, Nino pontificates to the son of a family friend:

You want to be one of them. You want to follow their rules instead of ours. But what are their rules? Premarital sex with contraceptives? Marriage vows you can change your mind about three weeks later? Contracts for everything that show you mistrust everyone you deal with? When we want to change we don't put our trust in other people's rules. We assume the burden. Look at Carlo Tresca! Look at your uncle Sal! Remember your cousin Gesuele! That is individualism like Seneca praised—personal responsibility for the good of others.²¹

Perceiving American rules to be the complete opposite of his own, Nino chastises any attempt to break from the cultural isolation of the Italian community. His role models are Italians who advanced the interests of their family and his moral compass points in the opposite direction of freedom of expression and independence. As such, he engages in an oppressive form of surveillance by following his daughter Gina into Manhattan. When he senses that she has abandoned the family, Nino feels personally accountable as protector of the moral code. He draws a connection between his own failure and the fact that he could no longer rely on support from a neighborhood of *paesani* who shared the same culture, noting that Astoria has become “another country.”²²

While Nino wishes he could return to the Astoria of his memory, Gina seeks to get further away: she imagines Manhattan as a place that grants anonymity and shelter from the oppressive gaze of family members and neighbors. Ultimately, Gina finds herself at home in the impersonal streets of “the city,” which inspire in her a sense of adventure and freedom. At the end of the novel, Gina leaves in the middle of her father's funeral to walk across the Queensboro Bridge into Manhattan. In this final act of defiance, Gina frees herself from the destructive force of a moral code that chained her to the stifling community in Astoria.

²¹ Josephine Hendin, *The Right Thing to Do*, (Boston: D.R. Godine, 1988): 19.

²² Hendin, 4.

Hedin's novel is symptomatic of a transitional period in the history of ethnic enclaves like Astoria. While the younger generation of Italian-Americans could not escape their Italian upbringing, some were later forced to discard the features of their culture that obstructed integration in American society. It was these features, however, that originally held together the isolated and homogenous Italian communities in Queens. In an interview with the *New York Times*, Joseph V. Scelsa, former director of the John D. Calandra Italian-American Institute at the City University of New York, said that, "In recent years, many of those tightly knit communities have become 'watered down,' more generically Italian-American. The immigrants already here have aged, and legal immigration from Italy has slowed to a trickle."²³ As the villages and provinces of the Old World grow more distant in the minds of Italian-Americans, some members of the younger generations grew out of the distinct southern Italian culture that caused friction with American culture. They were left with the more "generic" aspects of Italian-American culture, as Scelsa puts it.

Correlated with the absorption of provincial Italian identities into one amorphous Italian-American ethnicity is the fact that more second- and third-generations are joining national cultural associations that celebrate *italianità* rather than the specific traditions of a southern town or village. Fortuna observes that,

The new self-identity brought into existence new organizations not tied to a particular region of Italy, e.g., The Order of the Sons of Italy in America (OSIA) and an increased interaction across provincial and regional lines. Such new interaction created federations or coalitions, which are umbrella organizations, composed of a union of societies or associations. Indeed, as I have already reported, in the 70s and 80s have emerged the Federations of Queens, Bronx, Brooklyn, The Italian Americans for Better Government, The Coalition of Italo-American associations (CIAA) and the Federation of Italian American associations in Queens.²⁴

²³ Belluck, B2.

²⁴ Fortuna, 67.

Once second-generation Italian-Americans like Gina Giardello abandoned the provincialism of their parents and raised children of their own in an ethnic household void of the “authentic” culture and traditions from the Old World, this third-generation found communion in a broad Italian identity—characterized perhaps by more superficial traditions, such as the celebration of Columbus Day rather than the celebration of a patron saint’s feast day. According to Jack Como, former chairman of the board of Americans of Italian Heritage, this lack of a personal connection to ancestral villages and their distinctive cultures explains why the newest generations of Italian-Americans favor national cultural clubs over the smaller ones: “The old-timers, they're more interested in themselves, getting together and talking about the old tales and the villages, hearing the old stories over and over and over. Eventually, all the small clubs go down the drain.”²⁵

IV. Relocation: The Astoria Diaspora and Place-Independent Ethnicity

While the “generic” Italian-American ethnicity still provides a sense of community, it lacks the spatial orientation of the more distinct village identities that served as the glue in ethnic enclaves like Astoria. Essential to one’s identity as a Borgettano, for example, is a village-mindedness that translates into an affinity for homogenous small towns. Thus, as these identities fade into an Italian-American ethnicity, the immigrant neighborhoods that formed in Queens have begun to disaggregate: some members of the younger generations migrate to wealthier suburbs as they become more affluent, while others that remain grow further apart from each other.

Still, while Astoria and other Little Italies in New York City have seen a large decrease in their Italian population, they somehow retain their reputation for being the “Italian part” of town:

²⁵ Belluck, B1.

these places are the location of a favorite Italian restaurant, or where old Italian men meet on weekends to play *bocce*. Despite the ongoing diaspora of Italian-Americans to other cities and wealthier suburbs deep in Long Island, the original Little Italies remain “Italian” in public consciousness. In his essay “The Spatial Semeiotics of Little Italies and Italian Americans,” Jerome Krase observes that, “even though the most celebrated Little Italies are actually teetering on the brink of extinction, virtually they linger on as models in the American ethnic collective consciousness.”²⁶ Thus, despite seemingly retaining their “Italian” identity, Krase argues that all Little Italies are nonetheless at some stage of development toward structural assimilation. While some neighborhoods have already been forgotten and have thus reached a state of oblivion, others are in ruins—that is, old signs and monuments mark an ethnic presence in the neighborhood that has since dispersed. Although Italians may still occupy the space, the bond that brought them together and gave the neighborhood character as an ethnic enclave has diminished. Other Little Italies have become what Krase calls “ethnic theme parks.”²⁷ These neighborhoods live on due to the appreciation of tourists. The most prominent example of these neighborhoods is the original Little Italy, located in Manhattan: “Mulberry Street and the Feast of San Gennaro takes place in an Asian neighborhood decorated with ‘Italian’ store fronts, street furniture, and outdoor cafes where restaurateurs recruit ‘swarthy’ waiters from Latino communities.”²⁸

While Astoria is certainly “in ruins,” it may also be considered an ethnic theme park of a smaller scale. The neighborhood has become a popular destination for sophisticated Italian restaurants, especially as parts of Queens become gentrified. Moreover, although local cultural

²⁶ Jerome Krase, “The Spatial Semeiotics of Little Italies and Italian Americans” in Industry, Technology, Labor and the Italian American Communities, (Lowell, Massachusetts: American Italian Historical Association, 1995) 98.

²⁷ Krase, 105.

²⁸ Krase, 105.

clubs such as the Borgetto Cultural Association are struggling with membership, they still organize events that are open to the public, such as summer fairs and religious processions. While the neighborhood is no longer an Italian ethnic enclave, the Italian characteristics that persist are a desirable component of the neighborhood culture. This might explain why residents of Italian descent are still the largest ethnic population in Astoria. In his study of ethnic enclaves, Logan posits the existence of a new type of neighborhood: “For some, the ethnic neighborhood is a starting point; for others, it may be a favored destination. We use the term ethnic community to refer to ethnic neighborhoods that are selected as living environments by those who have wider options based on their market resources.”²⁹ Astoria seems to have become one of these ethnic communities—a place where Italian-Americans choose to live, despite being able to afford other options, simply because of some lingering ethnic characteristics. This would indicate that Italian-Americans have not yet completely assimilated into American society. Indeed assimilation theorists argue that it is when Italian-Americans are no more likely to live with one another than with non-Italian-Americans that they have fully entered American society.

Although many Little Italies appear to be moving toward this fate of structural assimilation, many Italian Americans have relocated together in suburbs further east in Queens and Long Island. These neighborhoods often recreate some of the traditions and events organized by the original immigrant communities, such as the procession held in honor of La Madonna di Romitello. Still, this mass migration is motivated not by a shared identity. Rather, it is correlated to the increasing affluence of the Italian-American community on average.³⁰ When explaining the differences between today’s Italian-American populations and the first immigrants, Krase calls our attention to this recent migration:

²⁹ Logan, 320.

³⁰ Krase, 103.

Should we expect that these post-modern, post-industrial Italian Americans have created the same kind of neighborhoods as their stereotypical traditional, family-centered, central city, less educated, blue-collar, working class counterparts? [Alba, Logan, and Crowder] note that Italians have many large neighborhoods, but on average, their central-city neighborhoods have contracted. While the number of suburban Italian neighborhoods fell, their scale increased markedly. The proportion of Italians residing in these neighborhoods increased as well. By 1990 there were more Italian neighborhoods in the suburbs than there were in the central city.³¹

Krase's rhetorical question highlights exactly why the suburb communities he describes cannot successfully recreate the central city immigrant neighborhoods that once existed. It was the "stereotypical traditional, family-centered, central city, less educated, blue-collar, working class counterparts" that made these neighborhoods what they were: a home base that provided security for "ethnic others" as they adjusted to their host society. While some may argue that the choice to migrate to new Italian communities constitutes "ethnic behavior," the fact remains that the ethnicity in question is markedly different than that of the first Italian immigrants. Fortuna makes note of this when predicting the fate of the Italian Islands:

Unfortunately, today fewer and fewer Italians are immigrating to the United States. This means that fewer people are coming to the U.S. to perpetuate and revitalize the Italian culture. Moreover, today more and more Puerto Ricans, Blacks and other Spanish or Asian groups are surrounding the old 'Italian Island,' while more and more Italian immigrants, as soon as they achieve a better economic situation, move somewhere else. The old 'Italian Islands' will probably be dispersed and recreated somewhere else, and perpetuated by old Italian immigrants or Italoamericans with American values. The new Italian communities will then become a 'surrogate subculture,' a mixture of old Italian and American values, a surrogate subculture very often adapted to the needs of American society with a merely symbolic ethnicity.³²

In other words, without a constant flow of Italian immigrants to sustain the Italian culture, the Italian community will inevitably become Americanized. Moreover, the new Italian-American ethnicity that is absorbing the distinct regionally-grown identities of the first generation belongs to a subculture of American society—it is not an Italian import found in smaller towns, but an American product that exists everywhere.

³¹ Krase, 103.

³² Fortuna, 79.

V. Conclusion

While Italian-Americans may indeed be experiencing the “twilight of ethnicity,” Alba does not mourn what Inguanti calls the “forgetting of authentic material, culture, practice, and symbolism and the adoption of a corporate fiction of Italian-American ethnicity along the lines of an Olive Garden television commercial or HBO’s *The Sopranos*.”³³ Alba argues that ethnicity of the past was a taken-for-granted feature of daily life—imposed on the individual who happened to be born in an Italian household. Instead, the symbolic ethnicity that arises once Italian-Americans assimilate is “private and voluntary.”³⁴ As such, Alba believes that the melting pot preserves the pleasures of being Italian-American.

Alba’s conclusion, however, neglects the benefits of an ethnic identity rooted in place. Having been raised in a household with both first- and second-generation Italian-Americans, I have experienced a glimpse of what Astoria used to be like and how it has changed. While my grandmother participates in all religious processions and is active in the local parish, my mother goes to mass on most Sundays and attends the parish she happens to be closest to when the church bells ring. While my grandmother has instructed me never to sell our house in Astoria, my mother plans to move to Long Island once I graduate. Although my mother still identifies as an Italian, she did not inherit my grandmother’s affection for Astoria. For my grandmother, being Sicilian in Astoria has allowed her to continue living by her old habits in what was once an unfamiliar place. Her identity gave her access to a community that was just as tightly knit as the one she left behind. When Astoria was bound by a self-sustaining network of southern Italians, the neighborhood helped mitigate the sacrifice she had to make for a better life. Of course, this experience only applies to early immigrants.

³³ Inguanti, 105.

³⁴ Alba, 173.

Still, for someone like me, who is far removed from the villages where his ancestors were born, the relics of the immigrant community in Astoria offer a meaningful connection to the past. By participating in religious processions that parade through Astoria and lay claim to its streets, I can feel what it was like to be a resident of a small village in Sicily. By observing how my grandmother interacts with other Italian immigrants in the neighborhood, I get a sense of what my father was like before he passed away. Most importantly, by perpetuating the traditions of a culture that has blended into a “generic” Italian-American ethnicity, I have retained a connection to my father’s birthplace in Borgetto, Sicily. Ironically, the ruins of Old Astoria have provided me with a cultural awareness that allows me to feel at home in a foreign place.

In his novel *Astoria*, Robert Viscusi identifies the memory of his beloved immigrant mother with his childhood neighborhood. Having grown up in Astoria, he was able to use his imagination to envision what his mother’s Italy was like. Now, he finds himself capable of recreating that reality all around him, bringing his mother back to life in the process:

This place of migration, of loss, of exile, of wreck is also for me the dawn of an Italy entirely visionary, a prospect of pleasure and assurance to which I remain entirely attached as if something glorious were waiting for me inside the painting if only I could find myself somewhere there. And I have done so. I have been painting it around me for years now, thinking to offer it as patrimony to my children, who, of course, may not want it at all.³⁵

For Viscusi, Astoria is at once both a time machine and a teleportation device. It connects him to a past that he buried with his mother, and brings him to a land that exists only in his imagination. As a town, he says, Astoria is “the physical form of *la storia*, the shape in English recollection of an Italian reality.”³⁶

Like Viscusi, I worry that the magic of this place will soon vanish—not because it has to, but because future generations “may not want it at all.” We can no longer pause the gears of

³⁵ Viscusi, 46.

³⁶ Viscusi, 46.

assimilation like the first Italian residents of Astoria, nor can we reverse the process of acculturation. Astoria will change whether I like it or not. Unlike Alba, however, I believe that there is value in holding on to the past. If not for appreciation of our ancestors, the preservation of old traditions affords a consciousness of our present identity. One day, when I have my own children, I expect to walk with them in our own procession through the streets of Astoria. I will point to my grandmother's house, and explain that the statue of St. Francis in our front-yard was placed in memory of my father. Similarly, I will point to the front-yards of our neighbors, who also used religious statues to honor a deceased loved one. I will explain that being an Italian immigrant in Astoria meant not that you were on your own, but that you were in it together with all of your neighbors. Although I may not have experienced Italian Astoria in its prime, I still feel that I can walk through the neighborhood and identify as a Borgettano. I actively seek communion with my neighbors—whether Italian, Greek or Egyptian—to recreate at least a small piece of Old Astoria. Moreover, I have reached back into the past to preserve old traditions of a near-extinct culture in a mental scrapbook, hoping to keep the memories alive by eventually handing them down. Indeed, as any Borgettano will remind you, the first step to becoming a Borgettano is never forgetting.

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