

# East Coast/West Coast: The Long Tradition of Italian Immigrant Performers

Giuliana Muscio

Italian cultural identity is a notoriously vexing issue. The myriad historical reasons for this have been amply discussed, but might be cynically summarized by Klemens von Metternich's definition of the country as a "geographical expression."<sup>1</sup> The matter has been further complicated by the Italian diaspora in the Americas: Italian emigrants have interpreted, imagined, exported (and at times even imported) an idea of *Italianità* that still today piques a kind of transnational cosmopolitan curiosity.<sup>2</sup> This new, global Italian identity is corrective in that it addresses the limits of national historiography: in Italian textbooks and academic departments today emigration is still largely ignored, and in the United States focus is fixed on Southern Italian immigration, overlooking the variety of origins and destinations of the Italian diaspora. Neglected too are the niches and sub-niches that developed in those different destinations, especially the little-studied tradition of immigrant stage performers among those Italians who settled in the western United States, and particularly in California.<sup>3</sup> First- and second-generation performers offered varied forms of entertainment referring to the immigrant stage to different ethnic communities in many locations, often, but not exclusively in metropolitan areas, and they warrant recognition in both Italian theater historiography and American cultural history.

At the time of the great emigration (1880-1913), Italian immigrant theater became a crucial cultural institution, a cohesive force within the community from both a linguistic and socio-cultural point of view.<sup>4</sup> These stage performers enacted and embodied *Italianità* for both the immigrant audiences and the many Americans who frequented their shows. To understand the role of Italian immigrant performers in American entertainment,<sup>5</sup> we must consider the unique characteristics of Italian immigration to the Americas, the different traditions of Italian theater (sometimes competing, sometimes merging), the Neapolitan predominance on the East Coast,

---

<sup>1</sup> Franz Herre, *Metternich* (Milan: Bompiani, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Cosmopolitanism provides a useful model to escape the "unproductive double binds of multiculturalism and an unreflective hegemonic universalism," going "beyond cultural pluralism by thinking, at one and the same time, about difference *and* a democratic common ground and cultural field of mutual influence and growth" (Tania Friedel, *Racial Discourse and Cosmopolitanism in Twentieth-Century African American Writing* [New York: Routledge, 2007], 7). See also Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). On migrations in general see Dirk Hoerder and Nora Faires, eds., *Migrants and Migrations in Modern North America*. (Durham, NC; London: Duke University Press, 2011), and Patrick Manning, *Migrations in World History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> On Italians in California see Gloria Ricci Lathrop, ed., *Fulfilling the Promise of California: An Anthology of Essays on the Italian American Experience in California* (Spokane: California Italian American Task Force, 2000), and Andrew Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants: Italian Adventures and Colonists in an Expanding America* (Niwot: Univeristy Press of Colorado, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Emelise Aleandri, *The Italian American Immigrant Theatre of New York City* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), and Lawrence Estavan, *The Italian Theatre in San Francisco* (San Bernardino, CA: Borgo Press, 1991).

<sup>5</sup> This article brings together arguments and material stemming from my most recently published research: Giuliana Muscio, *Napoli/New York/Hollywood: Film between Italy and the United States* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), and ead., "Italiani a Hollywood," in *Italia a Hollywood*, ed. Stefania Ricci (Milan: Skira, 2018), 116-81.

and the more broadly “Italian” theater scene in California. In this article, I will touch on some of the key performers who appeared or lived in California, spotlighting the Sicilians Antonio Maiori and Mimi Aguglia, the Neapolitan Enrico Caruso, Southern Italian Salvatore Ferragamo (“shoemaker to the stars”), and Northern Italian Tina Modotti. Italian film historians have not only failed to recognize the Italian performers and film professionals who worked in America before World War II, but have also neglected to address the Italian imprint left by such filmmakers as Frank Capra and Robert Vignola, both born in Italy, and second-generation Italian Americans like Gregory La Cava and Frank Borzage, whose important work in Hollywood’s silent cinema in fact benefited from their Italian heritage.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike other European immigrant groups in Hollywood—such as the German filmmakers, professionals, and performers—only a minuscule number of actors coming from Italian silent cinema chose to participate in American silent film productions.<sup>7</sup> Most of those Italians who did make it into American film credits were first- or second-generation Italians who had worked in the immigrant theater, but their stories (some of them great successes) have remained obscured by the larger marginalization still marring the history of Italian immigration in both Italian Studies and Cinema Studies.

## The Italian Diaspora

The uniqueness of Italian immigration in the Americas stems from its multi-directionality and circularity, as well as the fact that this immigration continues even today.<sup>8</sup> As Donna Gabaccia has noted: “Before 1914, the largest group [of Italian emigrants]—a little less than a third of the total—did go to the United States. But almost half of these were not immigrants; they were male sojourners who then returned home to Italy. Nearly a quarter of Italian migrants before World War I went to Argentina and Brazil, and the largest number (just under half) went to other European countries.”<sup>9</sup> The United States was thus numerically the main point of arrival for Italian emigration, but not the only one, nor necessarily a permanent one. The numbers of Italian immigrants to the United States and Latin America are in fact almost the same—about five million—but if one considers their points of origin and the timeframes of their migrations, these two waves begin to appear quite different. Large numbers of northern Italians moved to South America before the Unification of 1861, an era when Latin America still promised land and opportunity while the United States was in the midst of a Civil War. In the late 1880s, by

---

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan J. Cavallero, in *Hollywood’s Italian American Filmmakers: Capra, Scorsese, Savoca, Coppola, and Tarantino* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), addresses the issue, but with limited attention to the silent period.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Elsaesser, “Ethnicity, Authenticity, and Exile,” in *Home, Exile, Homeland*, ed. Hamid Naficy (London: Routledge, 1999), 97-123, and Peter Kramer, “Hollywood in Germany/Germany in Hollywood,” in *The German Cinema Book*, ed. Tim Bergfelder, Erica Carter, and Deniz Goturk (London: BFI, 2002), 227-37.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Choate, *Emigrant Nation: The Making of Italy Abroad* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Piero Bevilacqua, Andreina De Clementi, and Emilio Franzina, *Storia dell’emigrazione italiana*, vol 2 (Rome: Donzelli, 2001); Stefano Luconi and Matteo Pretelli, *L’immigrazione negli Stati Uniti* (Bologna: Mulino, 2008); Donna R. Gabaccia, *Italy’s Many Diasporas* (London: University College of London Press, 2000); and Nancy Carnevale, *A New Language, A New World* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009). Italian migration to the United States continued in the Interwar years, when four million people left Italy, and after World War II, when eight million Italians left home (moving also to Europe, Australia, and Canada). See Laura E. Ruberto and Joseph Sciorra, eds., *New Italian Migrations to the U.S.* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> See Donna Gabaccia, “Is Everywhere Nowhere? Nomads, Nations, and the Immigrant Paradigm of United States History,” *Journal of American History* 86, no. 3 (December 1999): 1120.

contrast, a great wave of Southern Italians immigrated to the East Coast of the United States, leaving behind the economic and social failure of Italy's Unification, looking for work in urban industrial areas. The picture becomes more intricate still if one considers the different trajectory of the Italian diaspora in California, which started as early as the period of Mexican rule (*Alta California*), and which consisted of a multiplicity of regional groups—from Liguria, North Eastern Italy, Piedmont, and Tuscany, as well as Sicily and Campania.<sup>10</sup>

The diversity of these waves had cultural and racial implications: while the Italian groups settling in South America and California adapted quite well within Hispanic colonial societies, the Southern Italian immigrants on the United States East Coast (as well as other “new immigrants” from southern and eastern Europe) were not altogether welcomed, finding that Americans did not recognize them as entirely “white.”<sup>11</sup> As Joseph Cosco has noted: “Approximately 80 percent of [them] came from the poor, backward southern portion of Italy known as the *Mezzogiorno*—‘the land that time forgot.’”<sup>12</sup> This description speaks to the implications and prejudices of the so-called “Southern Question.”<sup>13</sup> The product of harsh historical and social realities, the Southern Question was also an ideological construction, articulated through the anthropological theories of Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo, who introduced racial connotations that later would be appropriated by American nativists, and specifically by immigration officials. According to John Dickie, the Italian South was considered “a place of illiteracy, superstition, and magic; of corruption, brigandage, and cannibalism; of pastoral beauty and tranquility, admixed with dirt and disease; a cradle of Italian and European civilization that is vaguely, dangerously, alluringly African and Oriental [...] The barbarous, the primitive, the violent, the irrational, the feminine, the African: these and other values—often but not always negatively connoted—were repeatedly located in the *Mezzogiorno* as foils to definitions of Italy.”<sup>14</sup>

This prejudiced and contradictory representation of the Italian South “as a failed version of some scarcely defined idea of the North, Italy, Europe or civilization” was soon adopted as the image of Italy *tout court* by the dominant white culture of the Eastern United States. In *Italy in Early American Cinema*, Giorgio Bertellini argues that this biased image became the basis of the Italian stereotype through its reduction into the *picturesque*.<sup>15</sup> As Dickie has put it: “The South and its people exist primarily as a set of textual figures inserted into a grid of obsessively reiterated binary oppositions, of which the pair nature-culture is one of the most important.”<sup>16</sup> This “nature-culture” theme is indeed a significant element in the present account of immigrant performers, as we will see.

The identification of Italian immigrants as “Southerners” remains prevalent, but ignores the remaining twenty percent of Italians abroad as well as the social fragmentation within Italian

<sup>10</sup> See Lathrop, *Fulfilling the Promise of California*, and Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants*.

<sup>11</sup> On racialization see David Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness* (New York: Perseus Book Group, 2005); Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno, *Are Italians White?* (New York: Routledge, 2003); David Richards, *Italian American: The Racialization of an Ethnic Identity* (New York: New York University Press, 1999); and Thomas Guglielmo, *White on Arrival* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Cosco, *Imagining Italians: The Clash of Romance and Race in American Perceptions 1880-1910* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 3-4.

<sup>13</sup> Nelson Moe, *The View from Vesuvius. Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Bertellini, *Italy in Early American Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 3-5.

<sup>16</sup> Dickie, *Darkest Italy*, 9.

regions themselves. Rarely addressed are the diverse patterns of more successful “integration” of Italians in places like California (likewise neglected since most studies on Italian immigration in the United States continue to focus on the East Coast). But Italian immigration to California in fact started in the early nineteenth century, composed of enterprising peasants, sailors, and Jesuits, as well as painters like Leonardo Barbieri (who immigrated in 1847), and ranchers like Alessandro Repetto (a Genoese who owned five thousand acres south of Los Angeles and married a Native American woman). The Corsican-Italian Leonetto Cipriani was nominated as Consul of San Francisco in 1852. With the Gold Rush, the Italian presence intensified further, not only with the arrival of Italian gold-miners but more significantly with that of pioneers like Domenico Ghirardelli, a supplier of chocolate, and denim, a textile material coming from Genoa, that was used by Levi Strauss to make blue jeans for the miners.

The impressive list of successful Italian entrepreneurs in California continues: Amadeo Giannini founded the Bank of Italy, which would become the Bank of America, and his brother Attilio sat in many administrative positions in the film industry. Attilio Fontana started canning vegetables in a factory now known as Del Monte. Pietro Rossi and Andrea Sbarboro founded the Italian-Swiss Agricultural Colony in the Sonoma Valley, the Mondavi family a vineyard in Napa Valley, Secondo Guasti the “globe’s largest vineyard” in San Bernardino.<sup>17</sup> The D’Arrigo brothers canned vegetables, the Di Giorgio Fruit Company became today’s S&W. Joseph Maggio was known as the “Carrot King.”<sup>18</sup> The Jacuzzi brothers, inventors of an experimental airplane engine, created the hydromassage unit that would bear their name. Swiss-Italians became known for dairying, other Italians for growing grapes, olives, and oranges. Even the introduction of bell peppers, artichokes, eggplants, and broccoli to California is also traceable to Italians. By 1911, Italians in California produced “35 million pounds of fish, 9 million dollars-worth of fresh and dried fruit, 3 million dollars in cereals, 7 million dollars in potatoes and beans, and over 5 million dollars in other foodstuffs.”<sup>19</sup>

The industriousness of these immigrants, combined with California’s rich soil and an ideal climate for farming, soon made the state known as “the Italy of America.”<sup>20</sup> It was in California too that natural landscape met with another Italian cultural contribution—architectural style. Many Hollywoodians choose the “Italianate Style” for their mansions, as did several universities for their buildings. Moguls J. Paul Getty (with his museum/villa) and William R. Hearst (with his castle) took inspiration from Italy and filled their palaces with antique Italian artwork. The pinnacle of Italian architecture in California was likely the Italian Pavilion designed by a young Marcello Piacentini for the 1915 Panama-Pacific Exposition in San Francisco.<sup>21</sup>

Relatively welcomed to California because of their association with this positive image of Italy, with nature (agriculture), and with art and culture, Italian immigrants benefited from their limited numbers and from their early arrival in the state’s established Catholic-Hispanic community, leading to a markedly different history than that of the countless Southern Italian

---

Andrew Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants* (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1999), 270.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>19</sup> Most of the information in this section comes from the chapter “Italy in California: A Mediterranean America,” in Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants*, 250-94, esp. 270-74, and from Stefania Ricci, ed., *Italia a Hollywood* (Milan: Skira, 2018), 34.

<sup>20</sup> Rosa Sessa, “Influssi d’architettura italiana in California, 1900-1930,” in *Italia a Hollywood*, ed. Stefania Ricci (Milan: Skira, 2018), 41.

<sup>21</sup> Stefania Ricci, “Artisti Italiani alla Panama-Pacific International Exposition di San Francisco,” in *ibid.*, 66-79.

immigrants in the northeastern United States. The Italian diaspora in San Francisco would boast a “succession of 17 Italian newspapers” starting with the daily *La voce del Popolo* (1859).<sup>22</sup> At one point, the city had five Italian papers in operation. In 1921, the hyperactive Ettore Patrizi, director of *L'Italia* and a proud nationalist, commissioned the documentary *La visita dell'incrociatore italiano Libya a San Francisco, 6-9 novembre 1921*, with the sponsorship of the Italia-Virtus Club: the job of the movie's director was given to a young Sicilian, Frank Capra, in his first filmmaking experience. Available now on the internet thanks to a restoration by Cineteca di Bologna, this film offers a lively portrait of the life of the Italian community in San Francisco. Declaring patriotic loyalty to the Italian homeland in its intertitles,<sup>23</sup> the film depicts community social rituals in San Francisco, school children on a steamboat ride on the bay, a marathon, a soccer game, a mass, imposing shots of the Bank of Italy building and the offices of *L'Italia* and *La Voce del Popolo*. It includes an elegant banquet with Patrizi himself as toastmaster, with appearances by local film stars Livia Maggiora (winner of a beauty contest run by *Motion Picture Magazine*) and Dorothy Valerga.

Actors and singers partly escaped the prejudice aimed at other immigrants, largely due to the abiding popularity of the Italian stage tradition that unique command of body and voice. Immigrant performers represented, to American audiences, a harmonious fusion of Nature and Art, two opposing sides that were both associated with Italy (Nature for its famously beautiful and often-painted landscapes, the romantic primitivism these landscapes evoked in the European imagination; Art for the country's innumerable artistic luminaries). This said, it must be noted that prejudices existed and were visible onstage, in the form of the stereotypical characters these performers often played and the fact that their Italian-ness was not initially an advantage in casting: they were very rarely employed to play Italian characters in silent cinema (an inexplicable tacit rule that applied also to African Americans and Native Americans).<sup>24</sup>

As depicted in the Taviani brothers' 1986 film *Good Morning Babylon*, many Italian craftsmen and artisans came to California in the early twentieth century to work in construction and in the film industry. Hollywood attracted not only actors and filmmakers, but also composers such as Harry Warren-Salvatore Guaragna; directors of photography such as Tony Gaudio, Al Liguori, and Nick Musuraca; screenwriters such as Giuseppina Arezzana Romano (alias Bradley King); set designers and decorators, tailors, hairdressers, and craftsmen of all sorts.<sup>25</sup> The life of one such worker—shoemaker Salvatore Ferragamo<sup>26</sup>—highlights an important aspect of the Italian contribution to the American film industry: the westward move of the film industry from New York to California in the mid-1910s. Ferragamo had left Irpinia very young, moving to the fashionable metropolis of Naples to refine his shoemaking before immigrating to the United

---

<sup>22</sup> Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants*, 264.

<sup>23</sup> “ITALY! It is in the pure music of this name that, seeing the Libya approach the immensity of California's coast, we felt our hearts beat with joy, for we sensed the dream we had long dreamt being realized, that desire to see our glorious Flag flutter in the waters of the Golden Gate! And it is with our faith always alive in the Sailors of Italy, whose journeys spread the symbol of our stock's inexhaustible fertility throughout the World, that the Italia-Virtus Club presents this film to the Libya, not as a simple homage to its short stay among us, but as what could be described, in the splendors of the home country, as a love-hymn in which pulses our faith in the glorious Navy of Italy.”

<sup>24</sup> Ian C. Jarvie, “Stars and Ethnicity: Hollywood and the United States, 1932-1951,” in *Unspeakable Images. Ethnicity and the American Cinema*, ed. Lester D. Friedman (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), and Laura Browder, *Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

<sup>25</sup> Muscio, “Italiani a Hollywood,” and Roberta Ferrazza, “Il saper fare italiano a Hollywood,” in *Italia a Hollywood*, ed. Stefania Ricci (Milan: Skira, 2018), 80-116.

<sup>26</sup> Salvatore Ferragamo, *Il calzolaio dei Sogni* (Milan: Skira, 2010).

States in 1914, joining his brothers in Boston. Soon he left the city and his job at the Plant Shoe Factory because it was not receptive to his idea of selling hand-made shoes. He joined his other brothers in Santa Barbara, at the time a very rich town due to both oil drilling and the film industry that had moved there in 1913-14. It was making boots for the Westerns shot in the hills and canyons surrounding that city that Ferragamo made his entry into the annals of film costume and fashion. He was soon making shoes for the films of D.W. Griffith and Cecil B. DeMille, as well as personalized shoes for young stars like Mary and Lottie Pickford. In 1923, he decided to follow the local filmmakers when they moved to Hollywood. On Hollywood Boulevard, Ferragamo opened the Hollywood Boot Shop, immortalized in King Vidor's 1928 *Show People*, where Marion Davies' subjective view of the store's sign signals her arrival in the Mecca of film. The shop was designed as an elegant and cozy living room with columns and damask armchairs, making its upper-class clientele feel immersed in the art and culture of Italy.

Ferragamo's work was in its own way a combination of Nature and Art. In college, he studied the anatomy of the foot, securing patents for several footwear inventions, both orthopedic and aesthetic. In 1927, he went back to Italy intending to look for artisans who could hand-make shoes quickly, but he decided to remain in Florence, settling in the beautiful Spini Feroni medieval palace, which still houses his *maison* and a museum about his work. Ferragamo's example reminds us of the circularity of Italian emigration, how many Italians returned home. As Gabaccia writes, "No other people emigrated in so many different directions, reaching numbers so elevated both in relative and absolute terms, and few others showed an attachment so visceral to the region of origin or returned in such a large percentage."<sup>27</sup> Indeed, according to Francesco Cerase, 58.6 percent of Italian emigrants returned home from the United States, while from Latin America the percentage was 44.5. William Uricchio puts the number at 73 percent between 1907 and 1911.<sup>28</sup> These figures should compel us to radically revise our cultural analysis of the Italian diasporic community. When returning home was a pre-established plan, it did not encourage linguistic assimilation and reinforced an attachment to tradition. Such nostalgia is conventionally considered a conservative and regressive attitude, but in this case, it stimulated the industriousness that led Italian immigrants to bring their food to American cuisine and agriculture, to make their contributions to the American film industry.

In the next section I will look at a phenomenon that is central to the Italian contribution to not only film but also theater, dance, opera, and even circuses and religious events: the *cultura dello spettacolo*. Although remaining quintessentially Italian, the *spettacolo* (show, performance) did not resist a kind of grafting with American culture, interacting with other ethnic and racial communities as Italian performers found their place in the New World (first in New York and then in California). The *spettacolo* defies the normal binaries (Southern-ness or Italian-ness; Italian-ness or American-ness), instead exemplifying an "in-betweenness"<sup>29</sup> that speaks to the situation of the immigrant performers themselves.

---

<sup>27</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *Emigranti* (Turin: Einaudi, 2003), 73 (translation mine).

<sup>28</sup> William Uricchio, "L'Italia Americana, l'America di Valentino" in *Valentino*, ed. Paola Cristalli (Ancona: Cinegrafie, 1996), 94. The data come from Francesco P. Cerase, "L'onda di ritorno: i rimpatri," in *Storia dell'emigrazione italiana*, 1:116.

<sup>29</sup> Roediger, *Working toward Whiteness*, 57-132.

## The Italian *Cultura dello Spettacolo*

Italian performers had grown up learning the long-standing traditions of the *spettacolo* through forms like the *melodramma*, the *opera buffa*, and the *commedia dell'arte*, all characterized by a structural relationship with music, by the preeminence of performance over text (as in oral cultures), and by a cross-class openness. While melodrama—with its use of music and its sweeping emotions—is immediately identifiable in the Italian contribution to American entertainment, the impact of *opera buffa* has been less prominent. Its birthplace, Naples, stood “unrivaled throughout most of the [eighteenth] century. It played a crucial role in shaping the new genre of comic opera which was at the core of Enlightenment ideas about theater.”<sup>30</sup> In contrast with the solemnity of *grand opera*, the “simplicity” and lightness of *opera buffa*—with its character-types and easy-to-sing music (often rooted in folk tradition)—added to its global popularity across the classes. Influencing the most talented of European composers (e.g. Mozart), Italian opera brought this form of *spettacolo* out of the private courts and theatres, endearing it to the new middle class with its pleasant *cantabilità* and modern sensibility.

*Commedia dell'arte*, in addition to being the first theatrical form to include women, introduced to the stage the use of *maschere*, of psychological and social types, characters from all around the Mediterranean world (Arabs, Turks, Jews), always within an inherently Mediterranean cosmopolitanism. Characterized by regional Italian accents and costumes, it was based around improvisation (again a remnant of oral transmission), and, “[as] the most popular theatre form of its day, provided a platform for intercultural contact among different ethnic communities.”<sup>31</sup> The *comici* (comedians) were traditionally organized in families of travelling players. “The basic fact that the performers needed to find different audiences made it necessary for them to lead a nomadic lifestyle and encouraged them to reflect both their high-born and plebian audiences.”<sup>32</sup> Indeed, the work of the *comici* required a knowledge of the classics, both tragedy and comedy, basic competence playing an instrument (mandolin, guitar), singing and often dancing, and sometimes acrobatics, as in the case of Harlequin. (Jean Renoir’s *Carrozza d’oro* [1952] gives a romantic portrayal of a troupe of *commedia dell’arte* performers, led by Anna Magnani, venturing into the wilds of Peru in the eighteenth century.)

It was in seventeenth-century Venice that the first public theaters in the modern Western world operated, taking stage performances out of the private courts and out of the city squares, creating cross-class lay audiences.<sup>33</sup> But in Italy the market for these performances was small, on the one hand encouraging a mixing of comic and tragic elements in the same program (combining stately performances with variety-show fare), and on the other hand necessitating the tradition of travelling companies, visiting a wide range of exotic destinations, including (later on) diasporic communities. But this cultural phenomenon, which for centuries would spread the Italian stage tradition to distant lands (influencing and being influenced by the locales visited), is

---

<sup>30</sup> Tommaso Astarita, *Between Salt Water and Holy Water: A History of Southern Italy* (New York: Norton, 2005), 229. See also Judith Chaffee and Oliver Crick, eds., *The Routledge Companion to Commedia dell’Arte* (London: Routledge, 2017), and Erith Jaffe-Berg, *Commedia dell’arte and the Mediterranean* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015). Jaffe-Berg argues that “themes of travel, conversion, shifting identity and intercultural contact with Mediterranean peoples are abundantly present in the scenarios and in the lives of the actors who performed them” (4).

<sup>31</sup> Jaffe-Berg, *Commedia dell’arte*.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>33</sup> The first public theater was opened in San Cassiano in 1637, but by 1700 there were twenty public structures housing performances of opera or *Commedia dell’arte*. See Carmelo Alberti, *Teatro nel Veneto: la scena del mondo* (Milan: F. Motta, 2003).

rarely discussed. A possible reason for this omission might be the high esteem enjoyed by other modern forms of Italian *spettacolo*, namely cinema. Indeed, in both the silent era (with its divas and melodramas and historical spectacles), and later with Neorealism and auteur film, Italian cinema has been valued for its artistic components in a way that elides its hybridity, its ability to combine the high and the low. Likewise, the meteoric popularity of an actor like Rudolph Valentino—Italian-born but not instructed within traditional Italian stage tradition—does little to represent the work of most immigrant actors. A better picture of this hybridity can be recovered through the study of diasporic experiences, the examination of the filmographies and biographies of lesser-known personalities, the appreciation of their impact on American media. To this end we are indebted to resources such as the Rose Library of Performing Arts in New York, the Library of Congress, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Library, and, above all, film archives like those of UCLA, the New York MOMA, and the Library of Congress.

Such institutions keep alive the work of figures like Sicilian Antonio Maiori, the first significant figure of the Italian immigrant stage in New York.<sup>34</sup> Coming from the articulate multimedia form of the pantomime, Maiori started reciting Shakespeare in Italian in the Bowery in the late nineteenth century, soon drawing the attention of American critics, who called him “The Salvini of the Bowery” (referring to Tommaso Salvini, the actor who together with Eleonora Duse and Ernesto Rossi created the archetype of the Great Italian Actor, inspiring Stanislavski in formulating the Method).<sup>35</sup> Maiori created his own company and traveled the United States (including the Bay Area), at first finding success with his “Italianized” adaptations of Shakespeare. But despite Maiori’s efforts to continue performing the classics in Italian and to create a lasting Italian theater in New York, by 1915 the popularity of Italian dramatic theater had begun to dwindle, forcing him to offer vaudeville programs too. He even accepted the role of a *mafioso* in the film production of *Poor Little Peppina* (dir. Sidney Olcott, 1916), alongside young American star Mary Pickford and immigrant musician Cesare Gravina. Whereas Gravina, with no ambition to perform tragedies, would soon become a significant figure in American silent cinema, this appears to be the only film role Maiori played. This reflects how early immigrant Italian performers treasured the history of their craft and its ancient, multiform roots, only gradually moving from the stage to the cinema. Another example of this is the experience of Mimi Aguglia.

Mimi (Gerolama) Aguglia embodied the southern tradition of the *verismo* (realism) school, and was a uniquely versatile, intense, and beautiful actress: “Audiences had flocked to see her, composed mainly of people who did not understand Italian; but so universal was her appeal, so eloquent her gestures, facial expressions and vocal intonations that her performances had no need of translation. She reminded the critics of Duse, Réjane, Bernhardt; and they marveled that one so young [...] could have achieved so much in her art.”<sup>36</sup>

Aguglia started performing at age of five in her parents’ company; by twelve, she was able to support both the family and the company. With her younger sisters Sarina and Teresa, she performed as a singer in Naples and its vicinity. Aside from singing she was a skilled dancer, and could act in both the Neapolitan and Sicilian dialects as well as standard Italian. Such versatility, as well as the connections to both Naples and Sicily, was characteristic of the Southern Italian stage. At twenty, Aguglia became the leading lady of the prestigious Nino Martoglio Company, which included key figures from the realist tradition such as Giovanni Grasso and Angelo

<sup>34</sup> On Maiori see Aleandri, *Italian American Immigrant Theatre*, and Estavan, *Italian Theatre*.

<sup>35</sup> Konstantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor’s Work: A Student Diary* (London: Routledge, 2008).

<sup>36</sup> Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 83-84.

Musco. Their repertoire included *Cavalleria rusticana* and *La Lupa* by Verga, *Zolfara* by Giusti Sinopoli, *Malia* by Capuana (her most famous early role), and a Sicilian adaptation of D'Annunzio's *La figlia di Jorio*. Aguglia left Sicily with Giovanni Grasso's company, visiting European capitals, North Africa, and North and South America. Once back in Europe, "[f]or a tournée in Germany, Austria and North America she was offered conditions similar to those given to Duse."<sup>37</sup> The Aguglia-Duse comparison is as recurrent as that of Maiori-Salvini, both of them underscoring the spectrum of high and low culture, as well as the association between Southern Italian culture and the spreading international picture of Italian-ness.

Scandalous and exotic in her emotional excess, Aguglia enjoyed impressive commercial and critical success abroad. Although recognized as an international star, she continued to be labeled as the "Sicilian actress" by the mainstream American press. "Solely and completely a Sicilian actress," wrote Estavan, "all nerves and passion, a *volcano*—full of the fire of the native Sicily."<sup>38</sup> The association of Southern Italians with volcanoes is common: full of fire, spectacular, dangerous. But "Sicilian" also carried connotations of the *verismo* tradition:

Signora Aguglia displayed well her gifts of facial play and expressive gesture as an emotional actress. Jana, who is, as portrayed by the leading lady of the Sicilians, but a little virago and spitfire at best, reveals the depths of her nature in act two [...] The girl, who is supposed to be possessed by an evil spirit, alternately prays to and blasphemously reviles the image of the Virgin [...] The girl has a violent fit of hysteria, in which she gasps, wriggles, and squirms upon a chair, uttering inarticulate sounds; then, her sexual instincts overcoming her, she ardently clings to and presses herself against Cola.<sup>39</sup>

Passion and realism, excessive gesture, a stirring physicality only partially controlled by a sublime performance style: in Aguglia's work these things combined with the triad of "love, jealousy, and homicide" so often associated in reviews with "*Sicilianità*," the reviews sometimes betraying more than a trace of disapproval.<sup>40</sup> Although Aguglia gained immense popularity in Latin America, her first performances in the United States, in 1909, did not attract large audiences. According to Charles Dranton "the Italian colony fail[ed] to back them up."<sup>41</sup> Likely, the prominent—the powerful leading class of the immigrant community—were wary of the "Sicilian-ness" of the performers, while the lower classes for their part were not interested in *verista* drama, increasingly more drawn to vaudeville performances.

While the "Sicilian Players" never entirely abandoned Sicilian dramas, from 1910 onwards the company broadened its repertoire to include more "legitimate" Italian theater. This "Italianization" coincided with the Italian colonial war and the consequent wave of nationalist sentiment. The "Sicilian Players" in fact travelled to North Africa at the request of the Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, performing their act in Tripoli.<sup>42</sup> Their "colonial adventure" illustrates Mark Choate's argument on the strong links between colonialism and emigration. What "Italian theater" was capable of doing was building and holding together a sense of

<sup>37</sup> *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo* (Rome: Le Maschere, 1954-62), 185.

<sup>38</sup> Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 85 (italics mine). On the implications of the volcano as a recurring image associated with Southern Italian culture, see Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*.

<sup>39</sup> New York, Rose Library, Aguglia Clipping Files, "The Latest Theatrical Sensation."

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> New York, Rose Library, Aguglia Clipping Files, Charles Dranton, "The Sicilian Players," *Stageland*, May 1909.

<sup>42</sup> Argentina Brunetti, *In Sicilian Company* (Boalsburg: Bear Manor Media, 2005), 66.

national identity both in North Africa and in the United States. Perhaps sensing the power of this, Aguglia, in her career, moved decisively away from the association with regional (Southern) culture and toward the promotion of a generalized, nationalist Italian identity.

In 1913, Aguglia left again for New York, performing both within the “Italian colony” and on Broadway. In July of 1914, she visited San Francisco, where the Italian stage was still quite amateurish. Her repertoire there included a different play each night: D’Annunzio’s *La Figlia di Jorio*, Sardou’s *Fedora* and *Odette*, Benelli’s *La Cena delle Beffe*,<sup>43</sup> *La dame aux Camélias*, and “her” *Malia*. According to Estavan her success confirmed that, “first, [...] there was an American public in San Francisco interested in fine acting, regardless of language; second, that there was also a public interested in Italian contributions to the world theatre; third, that among the Italian colony there were many who regarded the Italian theatre as a vital instrument for the preservation of their cultural heritage, of their Italianità [sic].”<sup>44</sup>

After World War I, Italian immigration came to almost a complete halt with the American imposition of entry quotas, and the audience for immigrant shows began to shrink; at the same time, movies were enjoying a growing popularity among the working and middle classes. Aguglia decided to try the new medium, in 1924 playing a small, uncredited cameo role in *The Last Man on Earth* (dir. John Blystone).<sup>45</sup> In the 1930s, she performed in the Spanish versions of important American films,<sup>46</sup> and later had a successful film and television career, interpreting memorable roles such as Guadalupe in Howard Hughes’ *The Outlaw* (1943). Her name, however, remained associated with her early stage work, while her American film roles would be ignored in most biographies. In 1934, on the invitation of Ettore Patrizi, the (fascist) director of both the newspaper *Italia* and the Dante Alighieri Society, Aguglia returned to San Francisco to star in both classical and popular plays. In the 1934-35 season, the Aguglia Company, now renamed Teatro Italiano, moved to the prestigious Community Playhouse in an attempt “to appeal to both the Italian and American audience.”<sup>47</sup> For the inaugural performance of the Teatro (December 12, 1934), Aguglia proposed Sem Benelli’s *Cena delle beffe*, she herself performing the male role of Gianetto (a common practice by female actresses of the time).

Coming to be identified with that generalized Italian national identity, the Teatro Italiano’s first season exhibited “to the public the most representative and significant works of Italian genius,”<sup>48</sup> like Niccodemi’s *Scampolo*, D’Annunzio’s *La Gioconda*, Goldoni’s *La locandiera*. The company premiered Pirandello’s *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore*, which according to Estavan marked “the most important art event in San Francisco theatre.”<sup>49</sup> No longer amateurish, San Francisco theater was now on the map, competing even with Rome in terms of important Italian premieres. For its second season, Aguglia’s Teatro embarked on an ambitious program of Italian works, including Pirandello’s *Il piacere dell’onestà* and Chiarelli’s *La maschera e il volto*. In the 1936-37 season, they performed Pirandello’s *Ma non è una cosa seria*, Adami’s *Felicita Colombo*, and Aldo De Bendetti’s *Due dozzine di rose scarlatte* (the drama selected by

---

<sup>43</sup> “Known as ‘The Jest’ in English, it was later performed by the Barrymore family in 1919” (AMPAS, Herbert Brenon Clipping File, undated item).

<sup>44</sup> Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 88

<sup>45</sup> Brunetti, *In Sicilian Company*, 108.

<sup>46</sup> With the arrival of sound, studios began to make Multiple Language Versions (MLV) of their pictures, using the same script translated in various languages, with the same sets and costumes but different actors speaking in Spanish, French, etc.

<sup>47</sup> Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 96.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

Mussolini to start the series of the *Sabati Teatrali* in Italy).<sup>50</sup> For Aguglia, this repertoire was the ideal vehicle to exhibit her talent and exceptional versatility,<sup>51</sup> and the Teatro's success encouraged other members of the company—namely Aguglia's own daughter, Argentina Brunetti—to continue to work in San Francisco.

Despite this success, Aguglia's reputation remained split in a way that illustrates the disparity, in her era, between Italian and American attitudes toward emigrant performers. Italian sources continued to represent her as a dialect actress and singer, while the mainstream American press compared her with Duse and Bernhardt. There was, in short, a plainly differing perception of diasporic actors on the two sides of the Atlantic: Americans saw them as representative of European High Culture and the elegant Italian stage tradition, while Italian theater critics ignored their work abroad (looking down on these performers' "emigrant" status with unapologetically upper-class posturing, opposed to popular and vernacular culture, especially when performed by Southern Italians). In this respect, American audiences were more open to the "in-betweenness" of Italian performers. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Gilded Age of the United States was characterized by a sort of Italomania: diasporic Italian performers, actors, and musicians enjoyed a privileged status to the point that they did not need a visa to enter the country, their work being valued by the prevailing upper classes for its connotations of the high art of the Old World. Soon, however, the great emigration provoked a virulent Italophobia, an intense prejudice rooted in the distant past.<sup>52</sup> An enduring split thus developed, in the United States, between high society appreciation for Italian culture and latent prejudice toward Italian immigrants. This split runs parallel to the divide between that standardized image of Italian-ness that was spreading globally, and the true origin and heart of the *spettacolo* tradition that caused this spread: the southern regional theater of Naples.

### The Neapolitan Hegemony and Music

An ancient metropolis with a cosmopolitan tradition deeply rooted in Mediterranean culture, by the late seventeenth century Naples was "the largest city in Italy and the residence of a rich aristocracy" with "a large diverse public," and "many commercial theatres."<sup>53</sup> The term "Naples," however, does not simply mean the city, but, as Giuseppe Galasso writes, "a synthesis, in ethnic as well as social terms, of the entirety of Southern Italy," a regional metropolis characterized by a fundamental "continuity between the city and the countryside."<sup>54</sup> It was in music that Naples established its artistic hegemony: in addition to the many composers it produced and its flourishing music publishing industry, Naples was the home of four traditional Italian *conservatori*, where countless orphans were raised and taught to play musical instruments, creating a steady supply of (Southern) Italian musicians, music teachers, street-band players, and recording soloists in opera and symphony halls worldwide. This tradition—even more than the

---

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Performing in New York and in San Francisco, in both high and low theater, dancing as Salome, singing opera in Cuba.

<sup>52</sup> Emilio Franzina, "Italian Prejudice against Italian Americans," in *Mediated Ethnicity: New Italian American Cinema*, ed. Giuliana Muscio et al. (New York: John Calandra Italian American Institute, 2010), 17-32, and John Paul Russo, "From Italophilia to Italophobia: Representations of Italian Americans in the Early Gilded Age," *Differentia* 6-7 (Spring/Autumn 1994): 45-46. See also Richard H. Broadhead, "Strangers on a Train: The Double Dream of Italy in the American Gilded Age," *Modernism/Modernity* 1, no. 2 (1994): 1-19.

<sup>53</sup> Astarita, *Salt Water and Holy Water*, 233.

<sup>54</sup> Giuseppe Galasso, *Il Mezzogiorno nella storia d'Italia* (Florence: Le Monnier, 1977), xiii-xiv.

influence of Italian composers—is why still today sheet music notations are all in Italian, irrespective of where they are published or played. In addition to the *opera buffa* form and many leading *bel canto* performers, Naples produced the important “Neapolitan song,” a mix of popular (rural) traditions with elements of *romanza* and *opera verista*,<sup>55</sup> underscoring the class-mixing that characterized the musical tradition of Naples.

The champion of this tradition was Enrico Caruso. An unmatched ambassador of Italian high culture, having created a world-wide identification between opera and Italian melodrama, Caruso was also a diasporic performer. Multidirectional in his movements (travelling to America extensively, as well as other parts of the world), Caruso’s long contract at the Metropolitan Opera established the primacy of Italian opera among the American upper and middle classes, while at the same time generating public awareness of his links to Italian immigrant communities and performers (thus doing much to legitimize newly-arrived Italians in the eyes of Americans). Despite his fame, he was in many ways typical of the Italian immigrant performers of his era, returning frequently to his home country and always maintaining a repertoire of Neapolitan songs.

The hallmark of Caruso’s singing was its own form of *verismo*—a modern naturalism to his performances, an expressiveness and clarity to his recordings. This style earned him accolades such as “The greatest tenor the world ever heard” (as Victor Red Seal promotions called him),<sup>56</sup> and introduced Italian opera to the living rooms of the upper and middle classes. At the same time, his recordings of popular Neapolitan songs created a uniquely cross-class audience for his work. Much of this was owed to the fact that he was the first modern “media star.”<sup>57</sup> Even before coming to the United States, Caruso proved himself to be remarkably savvy in the use of new recording technology. He carefully controlled the use of his own photographic image (from portraits to newspaper images), even drawing numerous witty caricatures of himself and other famous musicians (printed in both American and Italian newspapers). Aside from making Victor the world’s most successful record label (selling one million copies of *Vesti la giubba* alone), he also promoted various products independently, from musical instruments to food and cigarettes.

Caruso’s enterprising spirit also took him to the movies. He appeared frequently in newsreels and participated in early experiments with synchronized image and sound. His personal interest in machinery and new media technology even led him to shoot comical home-movies. Most famously, in 1918 Caruso accepted the Famous Players-Lasky Corporation’s exceptional offer of \$200,000 for two films—*My Cousin* and *The Splendid Romance*—to be shot in New York.<sup>58</sup> Set in Little Italy, *My Cousin* stars the tenor in a double role as both Tommasso [sic], a poor Italian immigrant *figurinaio* (sculptor), and as his famous cousin, a great singer named Caroli. (Although the latter is the less central role, sequences of “Caroli” singing *Pagliacci* are notable for showing the old Metropolitan Opera House stage.) Compared to the acting styles typical to opera and silent cinema, Caruso’s naturalistic interpretation here is

---

<sup>55</sup> Roberto de Simone, *La canzone napoletana* (Turin: Einaudi, 2017); Simona Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014); and Goffredo Plastino and Joseph Sciorra, *Neapolitan Postcards* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016).

<sup>56</sup> As documented in the Metropolitan Opera Archive.

<sup>57</sup> Paul Fryer, *The Opera Singer and the Silent Film* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2006), and Giuliana Muscio, “Caruso First Modern Media Star,” in *Divinità canore. La canzone napoletana e lo spettacolo popolare*, ed. Enrico Careri and Anna Masecchia (Lucca: Libreria musicale italiana, Quaderno del Centro Studi Canzone Napoletana, forthcoming).

<sup>58</sup> Muscio, *Napoli/New York/Hollywood*, 33-43. In June 2010, I had the opportunity to curate the exhibit “Starring Enrico Caruso” for the Bologna Cineteca.

markedly modern. And yet, due largely to the fact that his famous singing cannot be heard (such that he is onscreen more as an Italian immigrant than as an opera star), *My Cousin* was a commercial flop, to the point that Caruso's second film, *The Splendid Romance*, was not distributed in the United States and the tenor's brief film career is rarely remembered. However, the 1918 newspaper coverage of the two films' productions attests to his active role in the Little Italy community of Italian immigrant artists and performers. On the set, immigrant actor Cesare Gravina is present as Caruso's personal acting coach, while popular actor Guglielmo (William) Ricciardi is seen playing the role of the restaurant owner in *My Cousin*. This sort of collaboration, common among Italian immigrant performers, is also seen in Caruso's recording of *Core 'ngrato*, a Neapolitan song composed in New York by his friend, journalist Alessandro Siska (alias Cordiferro).

Along with Caruso, the Italian immigrants in New York constructed their own cultural world between the 1880s and World War II. Excelling in the worlds of legitimate theatre (Maiori and Aguglia), dance (Rosina Galli), and opera (Giulio Gatti Casazza), they would also leave a huge impact on the music scene—yet another facet of the (Southern) Italian *cultura dello spettacolo*. In New Orleans, Sicilians taught African-American musicians how to read music and play instruments, a partnership strengthened by the marginalization both groups suffered. From the 1920s onward, as the Neapolitan musical style influenced the music of the Americas (from Tango to American Pop), Italian American composers were in turn influenced by the music of African Americans, Cubans, and Latin Americans. This influence even reached the Italian homeland: many “birds of passage”<sup>59</sup> (musicians and performers who came to America and later returned to Italy) brought the sounds and rhythms they had heard in the New World back to Naples.

As the Neapolitan *cultura dello spettacolo* became the Italian American *industria dello spettacolo*, the social spaces it occupied became more varied. The diasporic community of New York performed not only in grand theaters and films, but also on smaller stages, in recording studios, in local cafes. Newspapers—both Italian and American—helped to publicize Italian performers, and the music publishing industry likewise flourished both in New York and Naples as a result of the diaspora. In the 1930s, traditional Neapolitan songs were heard by a wider audience on American commercial radio than they were on the public radio of fascist Italy. In addition to these songs, the immigrant community adapted the popular Neapolitan forms of the *macchietta* (a comic musical number) and the *sceneggiata* (a popular drama with songs) to the American setting. These traditional formats were rooted in the Italian stage traditions, the *macchietta* deriving from *Commedia dell'arte* and *opera buffa*, and the *sceneggiata* coming from the “dramatic songs” and from Italian melodrama. Both forms used music to accompany popular dramatic narratives of romance, irony, and social commentary, while the euphonic Neapolitan dialect—the *lingua franca* of Southern Italian popular folk culture<sup>60</sup>—made the songs widely comprehensible to newly arriving Italians. Among the composers of *sceneggiate* was the Neapolitan Francesco Pennino, grandfather of Francis Coppola, who paid homage to his forebear's work by including Pennino's most famous composition, *Senza mamma*, in *The*

---

<sup>59</sup> Frasca, *Italian Birds of Passage*.

<sup>60</sup> This fact, along with the development of “Napolglish”—an Italian American dialect developed on the East Coast—does much to explain the widespread perception of Southern Italian culture as “Italian” culture. On this important synecdoche see Giuliana Muscio, “Guido Trento: From the ‘Neapolitan Synecdoche’ to *Italian American-ness*,” in *Re-Mapping Italian America*, ed. Anthony Tamburri, Carla Francellini, and Sabrina Vellucci (New York: Bordighera Press, 2018), 229-46.

*Godfather II*. The most popular *macchietista* was Eduardo Migliaccio, alias Farfariello, whose work would influence a remarkably broad range of musicians, from Jimmy Durante, Louis Prima, and Dean Martin up to even today's gangsta rap.<sup>61</sup>

### ***Teatro Italiano in San Francisco***

Although many of the performers who visited San Francisco came from either Southern Italy (Antonietta Pisanelli) or the East Coast circuit (Maiori, Aguglia, and Caruso, who was even in San Francisco during the 1906 earthquake), the Bay Area also developed its own inter-regional theatrical tradition. According to Lawrence Estavan, early twentieth-century historian of San Francisco's Italian theater tradition, "Shakespeare found an important place in the repertoire of the Maiori Company. There was at least one 'Italianized' version of Shakespeare performed each week. In the course of their season at the Washington Square, practically all of Shakespeare's works were given. The favorites with the Italian public, quite naturally, were those with Italian themes or Italian settings."<sup>62</sup>

San Francisco's musical scene was becoming ever more vibrant: the city was visited by legendary opera composers like Pietro Mascagni and Ruggiero Leoncavallo, saw performances by famous opera singers like Adelina Patti and Luisa Tetrazzini, and by orchestras like the San Carlo Opera and the Pellegrini Opera Company (which staged the city's first opera in 1851). And much like Naples before it, San Francisco possessed a surplus of talented musicians: "When people for the chorus were needed, impresarios would go to the wharf and hire 'Eyetalian' fishermen."<sup>63</sup> But San Francisco stood out from places like New York in that its immigrant theater community cultivated a more generalized portrayal of Italian-ness, using less regional dialect and favoring the standardized Tuscan. This led to the rise of influential northern Italians in the Bay Area, most notably Tina Modotti.

Born in Friuli, south of what was then the Habsburg Empire, Modotti was an Italian with a touch of cosmopolitan middle-Europeanness.<sup>64</sup> Friuli had a long history of migration, both seasonal and permanent, first within Europe and later to Latin America and the western United States. Modotti was still a child when she moved with her family to Carinthia, southern Austria, a relocation typical of Friulians before the Italian Unification. Despite her working-class background, Modotti attended elementary school, thanks to Friuli's mandatory schooling. But even with her good grades, at twelve she had to go to work in a textile factory in Udine. In 1913, she immigrated to California to join her father and her sister in San Francisco, already a favorite destination among Northern Italians. Like innumerable other immigrant women, Modotti found work in the textile industry, alongside her sister Mercedes. Independent-minded and beautiful, Tina tried to improve her station by modeling for the Magnin department store. In 1915, the Panama-Pacific International Exposition made a strong impression on her, leaving her artistically inspired and full of pride for her homeland. Living close to Washington Square, Modotti began frequenting the Italian theaters, first as a spectator but soon as a performer. When she began an intense romantic and intellectual relationship with painter Roubaix de l'Abrie Richey—

---

<sup>61</sup> Giuliana Muscio, "Scorsese Rocks," in *A Companion to Martin Scorsese*, ed. Aaron Baker (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2011), 259-76.

<sup>62</sup> Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 43.

<sup>63</sup> Rolle, *Westward the Immigrants*, 261.

<sup>64</sup> Margaret Hooks, *Tina Modotti. Photographer and Revolutionary* (London: First Glance Books, 1993); Valentina Agostinis, ed., *Tina Modotti. Gli anni luminosi* (Pordenone: Cinemazero, 1992); and Gianfranco Ellero, *Tina Modotti in Carinzia e in Friuli* (Pordenone: Cinemazero, 1996).

“Robo”—she was introduced to the world of San Francisco’s bohemian artists, a dynamic network preaching love, peace, and revolution.

In 1917 Modotti became a regular member of the “Città di Firenze” stage company, directed by Alfredo Aratoli.<sup>65</sup> Her performances were soon praised, in particular by Patrizi’s *L’Italia*, which gave high marks to her performance in *Stenterello ai bagni di Livorno*. With World War I raging and members of her family, including her mother, still in Friuli, Modotti began to give benefit shows for the Red Cross and for local socialist organizations. Indeed, politics and theater often mixed in the immigrant performer community, political activists often improvising shows for fundraising while established performers sang and acted for unions and charity organizations. Modotti’s theatrical career continued to grow under the direction of Bruno Seragnoli in the “La Moderna” company, where she met Frank Puglia.<sup>66</sup> She played leading roles in popular Italian dramas such as *Scampolo*, *La lettera smarrita*, *La nemica*, and the nationalist drama *Amore nel tempo di Guerra* (*Love in the Time of War*). At the same time, she acted in radical political dramas like *The Factory Strike* and *The Russian Revolution*.

By 1919, Modotti was performing less regularly on stage. She had changed her looks, shortening her hair as well as her skirts, more in line with the “flapper” image constructed by the silent films and advertisements of the time.<sup>67</sup> She gradually developed her own style, drawing on her training as a model, her ability as a seamstress, and her connections to San Francisco’s artistic circles (Robo himself in fact designed patterns for her). In the early 1920s, already contemplating a move into film-acting, Modotti moved to Los Angeles with Robo. The city was not only the site of a developing media industry, but also bursting with a unique cultural energy, animated by revolutionary intellectuals, oriental mystics, artists, and photographers, including Edward Weston, whom she soon befriended. As Modotti started reading Freud, Nietzsche, and Tagore, she and Robo began spending time with the politically radical community of Mexican exiles.

In 1920, Modotti’s film career began with her role as the protagonist of *The Tiger’s Coat*, directed by Roy Clements. This melodrama presents a stark picture of Hollywood’s racism in that era: Modotti plays a Mexican maid, mistakenly thought to be a Scottish lady by a rich American man, who falls in love with her, but leaves her as soon as he discovers that she is “a peon of low origins” belonging to a “despised race.” Later on, she reappears in his life as a successful (and sexy) performer, and the two finally embrace.<sup>68</sup> Modotti’s film performance was from the beginning a naturalistic, modern approach, avoiding the mannerisms that might be expected from a young actress of the immigrant stage, or the excessive style of the Italian *diva* films (notwithstanding roles that might have encouraged it). Modotti would again play Latin American women as Rosa Carilla in the western *Riding with Death* (dir. Jacques Jaccard, 1921), and as Carmencita in the comedy *I Can Explain* (dir. George D. Baker, 1922). She was conscious of the racial bigotry of the scripts and casting of that era, but as Edward Weston wrote in one of his *Daybooks*, he and Modotti would laugh together at the stupidity of American filmmakers:

---

<sup>65</sup> On Modotti’s stage work see Estavan, *Italian Theatre*, 60-62.

<sup>66</sup> According to Estavan, he was an “accomplished actor recently arrived from New York, with his wife, Irene Veneroni, whose younger brother, Guido Gabrielli, would later marry Tina’s younger sister, Yolanda.” (ibid., 29). Although both performers moved to Hollywood at the same time (1920), this connection between Modotti and Puglia has not yet been studied.

<sup>67</sup> Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, eds., *The Sex of Things* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

<sup>68</sup> The point of contact between Modotti herself and the character of the Mexican maid she played was a matter of racial labelling: in the 1920s, mainstream America considered both Italians and Mexicans to be “white” in terms of the broadest categories of naturalization, but nonetheless treated them both with a marked ethno/racial prejudice.

“The brains and imaginations of our movie directors cannot picture an Italian girl except with a knife in her teeth and blood in her eye.”<sup>69</sup> Nonetheless, Modotti gave indications that she wanted to push back, in 1920 telling an interviewer from the Los Angeles newspaper *Heraldo de Mexico* that she “tried to avoid giving offense in her movie scenes about Mexico.”<sup>70</sup>

Modotti started posing for Edward Weston, initiating her involvement, both professional and romantic, with the famous photographer. Robo left Los Angeles for Mexico, where he wanted to be part of the cultural revolution his friends were starting there. Modotti eventually decided to join him, having become dissatisfied with her film career and in crisis with Weston, but in 1922, Robo died suddenly of smallpox. Nonetheless, Modotti went through with her plans to move to Mexico: as Mulvey and Wollen summarize, “for Tina Modotti, Mexico represented the cause both of a quick politicization and of a rapid evolution as a photographer.”<sup>71</sup> In her disappointing encounter with American silent cinema, Modotti had come face to face with the culture of Hollywood and its often racist productions, which clashed with the artistic and political inclinations she had picked up from both her modern and rebellious circle of friends, and from the humanist and socialist ideals of her Italian family. Mexico opened doors to new professional and political experiences, giving Modotti a tumultuous new life in which she would leave a far deeper cultural impact than she would have as an actress in the United States. The trajectory of her path—from poverty in northern Italy to the bohemian chic of San Francisco, from Hollywood actress to party militant in Mexico—dramatizes how migrants (in this case a woman and performer: a cultural mediator *par excellence*) shaped and accelerated transnational and transcultural processes in the twentieth century.

For Italian emigrants from the 1930s on, the concept of Italian-ness was formed by two very different forces: in the United States, the many contributions Italians were making to American culture, and from fascist Italy, the regime’s more active role in casting the diaspora as the establishment of global outposts for Italian propaganda. The results of these two influences were obviously mixed. On the one hand, the vital role of Italians in American labor and politics was highlighted by figures like Angelo Rossi (Mayor of San Francisco), Vito Marcantonio (progressive congressman), and Fiorello La Guardia (Mayor of New York). On the other hand, after the attack on Pearl Harbor (December 1941), the presence of nationalist and pro-fascist personalities on Italian radio came under heavy scrutiny, leading to purges, arrests, deportations, and the shutting down of several radio stations. Journalist Ettore Patrizi was “relocated” from San Francisco to Reno, Nevada.<sup>72</sup> Guido Trento, stage and film actor first in Naples and then in San Francisco, key protagonist of the far-reaching Italian presence in Hollywood, was arrested and imprisoned in the Fort Missoula Internment Camp.<sup>73</sup> By 1942, the U.S. government branded more than 695,000 Italian immigrants “enemy aliens,” which, for many, resulted in constant surveillance and discrimination, and, for those deemed most dangerous, imprisonment. Such exclusionary measures further complicated the already shifting popular identity of Italian

---

<sup>69</sup> Hooks, *Tina Modotti*, 51

<sup>70</sup> Helen Delpar, *The Enormous Vogue of Things Mexican* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1992), 171.

<sup>71</sup> Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, “Radici e movimenti,” in *Tina Modotti. Gli anni luminosi*, ed. Valentina Agostinis (Pordenone: Cinemazero, 1992), 91-92, 94.

<sup>72</sup> Stefano Luconi, “The Voice of the Motherland,” *Journal of Radio Studies* 8, no. 1 (Summer 2001): 174.

<sup>73</sup> Lawrence Di Stasi, ed., *Una Storia Segreta: The Secret History of Italian American Evacuation and Internment during World War II* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2001).

Americans, including those who so profoundly shaped American culture, like the immigrant performers described in this article. Fascism and World War II affected Italian immigrant performers and Italian American popular culture generally in ways that scholars have only begun to make sense of and remain to be studied in order to further understand the cultural history of Italians in the United States.