

---

Samuele F. S. Pardini, *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen* (Hanover, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2017), 263 pp., ISBN: 978-1-5126-0019-3

*Reviewed by* **Sabrina Vellucci**

Samuele Pardini's *In the Name of the Mother* invites us to radically change our perspective on how we usually think about issues such as migratory phenomena – in particular, Italian emigration to North America; the processes of racialization and the resulting discrimination that have affected certain sections of the U.S. population, such as Italian Americans and African Americans, which constitute the main focus of Pardini's analysis; the relations of power between minority groups and between these groups and the ruling classes, and, ultimately, the economic structures of the country. The notion of whiteness with regard to Italian Americans (or their non-whiteness – a concept that Pardini identifies with the formula of “invisible blackness”) has received sustained critical attention in seminal studies like *Are Italians White? How Race Is Made in America* (2003) edited by Jennifer Guglielmo and Salvatore Salerno. In the previous decade, the complicated relationships between Italian Americans and African Americans had been the subject of famous films like Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) and *Jungle Fever* (1991) – inspired by the Bensonhurst killing of Yusuf Hawkins in 1989; or, of the less well-known documentary *fuori/outside* (1997) by Kym Ragusa, who, in the film and subsequent memoir, *The Skin Between Us* (2006), recounts her experience as an Italian African American.

In Pardini's book the history of the relationships between these two groups is addressed, for the first time in such an extensive and in-depth approach, referring to an important body of literary, filmic, and musical texts and to characters that have become part of a transnational collective imagination, such as Frank Sinatra, Sammy Davis Jr., and Bruce Springsteen. What concerns the author, as he explains in the introduction, is not so much the study of race or ethnicity, nor the study of Italian American or African American identity. Rather, *In the Name of the Mother* is based on a rethinking of the concept of modernity in the twentieth century from different perspectives. In so doing, Pardini offers up a new and timely reconceptualization of Italian American studies.

*In the Name of the Mother* is a book that, to some extent, disorients the reader, starting from the title, itself rather disruptive in the feminine inflection of the well-known formula of the Catholic liturgy, and to which a subtitle is added, which joins two figures – both male – that are quite different from each other, if not antithetical.

---

What happens, the author asks in the introduction, when the “others” by definition in the American culture, namely African Americans, look at Italian Americans? What do they see in them and how do they see them? What does this tell us about Italian Americans and America? How can this approach deepen our knowledge of African American culture? Finally, what form(s) might the “otherness” of Italian Americans assume when observed through the eyes of African Americans? These are some of the questions around which the book builds its specific discourse.

In the first chapter, “New World, Old Woman: Or, Modernity Upside Down”, the thorough examination of the Madonna in southern culture – her omnipresence and her central role in the material life of the peasant class – is followed by the paradoxical observation of how this figure is actually linked to a rural past that cannot find a place in the modernity represented by emigration and contact with the New World (which is also the title of the film by Emanuele Crialese, *Nuovomondo*, of which Pardini offers a perceptive analysis). The woman, therefore, and specifically the female Italian American proletariat, which fuses concepts considered mutually exclusive, such as motherhood and sexuality, assumes a particularly subversive role in U.S. culture, becoming a figure of absence or negation. These Italian emigrants, bearers of customs and ancestral beliefs founded in a cosmic vision of the world and of life, and rooted as well in a deep sense of community and of sharing, once in contact with the American soil, immediately became an anachronism, a model that members of the subsequent generation would feel compelled to abandon in order to feel as modern “Americans”. Yet, Pardini emphasizes how, concurrently, this representation of the mother is configured as a symbol of a “Mediterranean humanism”, which contrasts the exploitative utilitarianism of a puritan style, represented paradoxically by a figure such as Booker T. Washington, author of *Up From Slavery* (1901) and advocate of the education, although still strictly professional, of African Americans.

Pardini then focuses on Jerre Mangione’s memoir *Mont’Allegro* (1943), reading it as a convergence of the ancient democratic traditions of the Mediterranean world, the political economy of immigrants in Rochester, NY, and the African roots that the author discovers in his parents’ village during the celebrations of San Calogero, a black saint whom Mangione connects to the racial “otherness” of Italian Americans and to the jazz music his family loved. This confluence, according to Pardini, offers Mangione the opportunity to show the incompatibility of white culture with the political economy of Italian immigrants in the U.S., which is based on the notion of “respect”, especially widespread in southern Italy, and privileges cooperation, reciprocity, and recognition of the other over the logic of profit. Such a vision, however, as Donatella Izzo has noted, runs the risk of endorsing “an essentialist or idealized version of the Mediterranean identity”, notwithstanding the latter’s undeniable potential for challenging the dominant culture’s ideologies of exclusion and discrimination, and for questioning “U.S. exceptionalism based on

---

the notion of *melting pot* as *whitewashing*” (“Italian American Studies: territori, percorsi, proposte”, *Ácoma*, XXV [autunno-inverno 2017], 21).

In the chapter “Structures of Invisible Blackness: Racial Difference, (Homo)sexuality and Italian American Identity in African American Literature during Jim Crow”, Pardini addresses a group of writers such as James Weldon Johnson, Bruce Nugent, Sterling Brown, and James Baldwin, whose works feature Italian immigrants and Italian Americans in order to renegotiate the relationship between the notions of norm and difference in the age of racial segregation. Given the presence of Italian American themes and characters in the African American literature of the period, Pardini ponders the reason behind this “investment” by such authors. Namely, he examines the centrality of the Italian American presence as an authorial strategy to deal with the issue of the relationship between race and the processes of modernization in the twentieth century. The thesis that Pardini develops in this chapter is that, through Italian American male characters, these writers reinvent blackness as something not exclusively linked to skin color. Thus, the function of Italian Americans in the texts is to “signify” blackness. They act as a screen on which aspects of a complex humanity are projected, and from which they are reflected, precisely because the stereotype of the “black” as “Uncle Tom” has been reduced to a formula – a cliché against which an intellectual like Alain Locke wrote the most convincing pages of his anthology, *The New Negro* (1925). The Italian Americans, therefore, reflected the African American difference; they made it visible, but in a different light.

The chapter “In The Name of the Mother: The Other Italian American Modernity” focuses on different female characters named Maria in novels such as *Wait until Spring*, *Bandini* by John Fante, *Like Lesser Gods* by Mary Tomasi, *Maria* by Michael DeCapite, *Ghost Dance* by Carole Maso, and in some songs by Bruce Springsteen. Characters named Maria are recurrent and “ineludible” in Italian American literature, writes Pardini: “Her repeated manifestations recuperate and adapt the Mediterranean, popular Catholic sense of the communal reality of men and women, their shared destiny, and their mutual responsibility and reciprocity”, what Robert Orsi effectively defined as “the Italian Americans’ ‘abiding respect for things as they are, a humility before the givenness of reality’” (170). Far from being the symptom of a lack of agency in the face of facts, this position, Pardini argues, “entails participation in the form of an active faith in the possibilities of human life and the recognition of the opportunities and limitations of such a life in the modern world” (170). For this reason “the Maria trope ... recalls the personal and collective history of the poor and dispossessed in the form of places, cultural traditions, and fictional characters, as well as of an evolving self-realization of a working-class, specifically Italian American female identity that resists cultural and class oppression” (170-71). In this way, the protean character of Mary crosses the color line and embraces the “other” as a possible version of herself, giving voice to a heterogeneous class of people and creating a bridge that unites the individual

---

differences related to social condition and historical context without denying them. The figure of Maria, Pardini affirms, builds the house that “the (Italian) American modern man” (and, I would add, woman) continues to desire and seek (171).

“Home” is, in fact, a fundamental concept in Italian American and women’s literature. It is a key notion that assumes ambivalent connotations, as the desire to have a place and hence feel at home coexists with the need not to feel at home anywhere: for the third and fourth generation authors, in particular, a safe house is always – and only – a process, never a point of arrival. In this regard, Pardini quotes Janet Zandy, who defines the idea of home as “an inner geography, where the ache to belong finally quits, where there is no sense of ‘otherness’ and where there is, at last, a community” (171). Writing is also, of course, a way of locating oneself. Pardini endorses this notion of “home” as “internal geography”, adding that he considers both the concept of “belonging” as well as that of “otherness” as two instruments necessary to achieve and maintain it. Only in this way, he argues, can one avoid the risk of any ahistorical and homogenizing definition of community.

Pardini also points out how the American novel has been a particularly difficult terrain for women and mothers, especially for issues related to both ethnic/racial and gender identity. A less investigated aspect is the religious and class component of such hostility towards the feminine (an element that Leslie Fiedler identified in his famous volume *Love and Death in the American Novel* [1960]). Developing this idea in the analysis of Fante’s *Wait until Spring, Bandini* (1938), Pardini demonstrates how the character of Maria is the bearer of yet another modernity: Maria is a figure who resists assimilation; she excoriates and subverts the conceptual foundations of twentieth century U.S. culture. Repeated manifestations of this character in literary texts retrieve and adapt the non-doctrinal meaning, typical of Mediterranean Catholicism, of the idea of a reality common to both men and women, of a shared destiny and of mutual responsibility.

The study concludes with a reflection on how the characteristic body language of performances executed by duos composed of an African American and an Italian American trigger an imaginative process that subverts the symbolic domination of U.S. racial policies. The case studies are those of Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, in the 1958 television performance titled “Me and My Shadow”, and the photo of Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons on the cover of the famous album *Born to Run*, as well as the kiss the two artists exchanged in their live performances.

*In the Name of the Mother* is characterized by a comparative approach that defeats any claim of cultural insularity. As the author states in the introduction, taking up the lesson of another founding text of African American literature, Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, “We are never what and who we think we are. Our identity depends just as much on how others see and think of us as it depends on how we

---

see ourselves” (2). I believe Pardini succeeds in showing that “the value of studying how different people choose to represent each other and what defines them as human beings is to help us to better understand ourselves and, consequently, gain a deeper understanding of the country we inhabit and the world around us” (19).