

The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies: Shameless Promotion of My Books, Part II

Jerry Krase (May 02, 2012)



The First Annual Forum in Italian American Criticism was held in Manhattan in 2008 at which internationally renowned scholars were invited to comment on “The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies.” After the lively event, I was given the pleasant task of lightly editing and

arranging the contributions into a volume of the same name as the 30th volume in the highly respected Forum Italicum book series in Italian and Italian American Studies published in the spring of 2012. It is well worth a read by anyone who recognizes the value of the Italian experience in America and wishes to know who are the major players in the game.

The First Annual Forum in Italian American Criticism held in Manhattan in 2008 at which internationally renowned scholars were invited to comment on “The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies” was by all our own accounts a resounding success. Peter Carravetta, D’Amato Chair in Italian and Italian American Studies at Stony Brook University did the heavy lifting in organizing the event, and I was honored with the intellectually challenging task of organizing and lightly editing its proceedings. Most difficult for me was crafting this introduction to what is a most eclectic collection of essays by many of my old, and a few new, friends, and colleagues. The Status of Interpretation in Italian American StudiesWhat brought these all too thinly disguised subjects together that cleverly masquerade as merely about Italian America and Italian Americans but which are actually boundless? After careful reading, it appeared to me that their strongest commonality was the love of the subject, and in many cases, each other’s work. As was the face-to-face interactions during the Forum in Italian American Criticism Forum in Italian American Criticism Forum in Italian American Criticism FIAC conference itself, the collection is, taken together but not as whole, a noisy celebration of melodious cacophony. While reading each of them, I felt as though I was sitting around the table, in the basement kitchen of course, where such scholarly friends are allowed to eat and drink but who would never qualify as “company.”

When Carravetta put the project in my hands I remembered that he had spoken mischievously at the opening of the forum about the contributions, as well as the contributors themselves, as being from inside and outside the “fold.” I took this to mean at least a threefold distinction between: those whose major professional identity is with Italian American Studies; those who find themselves within either the Humanities or the Social Sciences; and those who either identify themselves, or are identified by others, as Italian or non-Italian Americans. These are the three dichotomies, if not extremes of continua, that contribute to the unsettled status of the under-, perhaps un-, appreciated field of Italian American Studies today. I have yet to figure out whether I am inside or outside of any of the “folds.”

In the most curious and fascinating cases, some contributors to this volume serve as the subjects for other contributors. For good reason, Robert Viscusi (“The Ice Margin”), Fred Gardaphe (“Commedia della Morte: Theories of Life and Death in Italian American Culture.”), and Anthony Tamburri (After-hour Musings and Other Night-thoughts on Italian Americans and ‘Otherness’”) are the major recipients of this wanted attention by William Boelhower (“Renewing the Conceptual Dimensions of Italian-American Writing and Scholarship”), Djela Kadir (“Via the Margin of the Poetic”) and, only peripherally, by Martino Marrazzi (“Questioning the Traditionalism of Italian American Literature”). Another shared focus, by Stefano Luconi (“Whiteness and Ethnicity in Italian-American Historiography”) and Francesca Sautman (“Creolizing the Lack: Interpreting Race and Racism in Italian America”), is on “whiteness” and race that has led to significant insights recently in the field of Italian American Studies that would otherwise be left (for some perhaps “better”) unseen.

Historically class and culture have been the preferred vehicles for the usually less than penetrating analysis of things ethnic. The placement of my own paper (“Interpreting the Italian Look, Visual Semiotics of Ethnic Authenticity”), near the center of the collection, I felt might serve as a link between these icons and iconoclasts as well as the more discipline-bound but substantial offerings of Gerald Meyer (“Theorizing Italian American History: The Search for an Historiographical Paradigm”), Donna Chirico (“The Dog Catches his Tail: A Critical Reflection on the Value of an Italian American



Identity in Personal Development") and Ottorino Cappelli ("Does Italian-American ethnic politics exist at all?").

The Status of Interpretation in Italian American Studies was published in the spring of 2012 as the 30th volume in a highly respected book series in Italian and Italian American Studies published under the auspices of Forum Italicum. Mario B. Mignone is the Series Editor as well as the Director of the Center for Italian Studies at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. This particular collection of essays is well worth a read by anyone who recognizes the value of the Italian experience in America and wishes to know who are the major players in the game.

For more information, and to order copies, go to [The Italian Studies website](#) [2].

I should add that Judith N. DeSena and I edited earlier a very popular Forum Italicum volume (7) [none">Italian Americans in a Multicultural Society \[3\] \(1994\). This ground-breaking volume included selected essays from the American Italian Historical Association annual meeting that was held at St. John's University in 1993.](#)

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