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BEING ITALIAN AMERICAN:  
PERFORMING ETHNICITY IN ATLANTA

by

STEPHEN MURRAY

Under the Direction of Emanuela Guano

ABSTRACT

What does it mean to be Italian American in Atlanta? While Italian Americans have lived in urban concentrations in parts of the United States for over a century, members of this ethnic group have been living in Atlanta only in small numbers and for a few decades. Considering theories of ethnicity and performance, this study investigates aspects of Italian American ethnicity in Atlanta. The thesis provides an ethnographic insight into what it means to be an Italian American in Atlanta.

INDEX WORDS: Italian American, Ethnicity, Performance

BEING ITALIAN AMERICAN:  
PERFORMING ETHNICITY IN ATLANTA

by

STEPHEN MURRAY

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Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

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2008

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2008

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## CHAPTER 1 – Introduction

The idea behind this study came about while wondering about my own ethnicity. My maternal grandfather's parents emigrated from Cossombrato, Italy to the United States in the first quarter of the twentieth century. They arrived through Ellis Island, and settled in New Haven, Connecticut. My grandfather was born there in the early 1920s. My Italian great-grandfather died when my grandfather was six years old. After my grandfather completed high school, he joined the navy and served in the Pacific during the Second World War. After he was discharged in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, he met my grandmother. It has only recently come to my attention that my grandmother's family disapproved of her impending marriage to an Italian American. Despite this fact, my grandparents were married, and my grandfather entered college and became an engineer.

My mother was born just after World War Two, a dictionary-definition Baby Boomer, and her sister was born one year later. At the time, my grandfather worked as an engineer and a manager, and the family often moved every few years following some new work assignment. His mother, my great-grandmother, died somewhere around the time that my mother was twelve. My mother does not have any strong recollections of my great-grandmother, nor does she have any stories of being made fun of because of her ethnicity as half-Italian. Given the time frame – the Fifties – my grandfather was suppressing his ethnicity along with many other white ethnics of the time. My mother has no recollections of everyday expressions of Italianness at home, although she says she was aware of being Italian, if for no other reason than her Italian surname.

I was born in Statesboro, Georgia, in the early Seventies. I was unaware of being anything other than “white” or “American” until I was about nine years old. As the concept of identity politics of the Seventies diffused throughout the country, my grandfather began to do



things which I became aware of as being “Italian.” He had recently retired and formed his own consulting company in southern Ohio. He made friendships with other Italian business owners in the area based purely on their shared ethnicity. He joined an Italian American social organization large enough to have its own magazine. My Italian ethnicity was presented to me in the form of a green t-shirt which came with a subscription to that magazine and was emblazoned with its title, *Attenzione!* It was the first internalized experience I had of any sort of ethnicity. When asked where my father’s side of the family came from, my paternal grandfather’s mother replied, “South Carolina.” She did not have a very high level of education and was already in her eighties at the time, possibly suffering from dementia. My maternal grandmother was of Scottish descent, but it had only been contextualized through a book from which her father used to read stories to the family. It was set in Scotland and written in a Scottish dialect.

My grandfather died when I was eleven years old, and I never had the opportunity to ask any thought-out questions about family history or ethnicity as I might be able to now. My grandmother tried to expose me to a few things in the hopes that I might make some sort of an ethnic connection. The summer when I was thirteen, my family and I visited my great-great-aunt Carmelina (my Italian grandfather’s aunt) who lived in Jupiter, Florida. When she was around four years old, she emigrated from Italy to the United States within a few years of my grandfather’s parents. She recalled what she could remember of life in Italy to me, as well as her trip from Genoa, Italy to the United States and being detained at Ellis Island. She cried so much on the voyage that she was suspected to have conjunctivitis because her eyes were so red. She taught me the alphabet in Italian and about forty or fifty words in Italian. She also provided my grandmother with the names and addresses of some family members in Italy. We contacted them and made plans to visit.

When I was fifteen years old, my family and I went on a vacation to Europe, and as part of that trip we spent a couple of days in Milan. On one morning we rented a car and drove to Asti where my fourth cousins and their families lived. Only two of the approximately fifteen family members spoke any English. We spent the afternoon riding around the countryside looking for a house my great-great aunt Carmelina remembered from her childhood. We also spent time in a cemetery where relatives are buried. That evening we had a big dinner with the family and later drove back to Milan. My immediate family and I visited Italy one more time when I was eighteen, visiting the tourist highlights of Florence, Venice and Rome, but we never visited any relatives in Italy again.

In the years since then, I have tried to learn more about the history and culture of Italy as well as that of Italian Americans. Even though I have not travelled to Italy again, I have visited Italian American neighborhoods in San Francisco, New York and Boston. In learning about Italy and considering my own family history, I began to consider the generations of Italian Americans who had come before me. How had they related to Italy? Did they consider themselves Italians or something else? What was it like to grow up in or near an Italian neighborhood in the US? Until now, my studies of Italian culture and Italian American history have all been brought about because of personal motivation and interest. Now that I have entered graduate school, I have realized that I might be able to get to the bottom of some of these questions of ethnicity and identity. An internet search led me to an account of a fast growing Italian American community in the Atlanta area, and this became a jumping off point for this study. I wanted to talk to other Italian Americans in the Atlanta area to find out if they felt that this was the case. But beyond this, I wanted to find out from Italian Americans in Atlanta what they feel it means to be Italian American in Atlanta.

## **CHAPTER 2 – Literature Review**

### **Race and Ethnicity in the United States**

Fredrik Barth defines ethnic groups as those which share fundamental values and have a membership which self-identifies and is identified by others (1969:11). Some of the features of these perceived differences are food practices, family types, religion, language, and a sense of shared history. Many studies of ethnicity intersect with other aspects of an individual's identity such as class or gender, and often these studies relate to how one ethnic group compares or relates to or understands another group. Sometimes the differences between ethnic groups are not as marked, and in situations like this, when there is arguably less tension between compared groups, the "self-identifying" aspect of ethnicity becomes quite relevant. This can be the case with an ethnic group like contemporary Italian Americans living in Atlanta. In such a case when ethnicity is less contentious and the self identification as Italian American is more important, performativity becomes important as members of this group negotiate their identities. Being Italian American is something that one does as one chooses, and ethnicity can appear like a hobby or leisure activity. Multiculturalism and ethnic identity are currently seen as important features of contemporary society (Kottak and Kozaitis 2008:74). This was not always the case, though, and Italian Americans experienced a period of prejudice and oppression.

While Italians have been part of America's history since times of European exploration of the New World (Pizzo 1981), the majority of Italians came to the United States between the 1880s and 1930s. Italians were not the only immigrants in this large wave, there were others from Eastern and Southern Europe as well. People from all of these areas had immigrated to the United States already, but for the most part, their numbers were small, and they typically assimilated quickly and did not form large communities of their own. The large numbers of

immigrants and the work which they did in the United States played a large part in helping to define Italian and other immigrants as somehow different from the white population. Immigrants often took work which was considered below a white person to do. These immigrants were willing to take these comparatively low paying industrial jobs and were often exploited by the upper classes. The general consensus was that someone accepting that sort of work was somehow inferior. Additionally, cultural factors helped to isolate immigrants and cause them to be seen as racially different. A major factor in this was religion. The original settlers to the United States were mostly Protestant. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when racial divisions were being constructed in the United States, the logic was that all these only slightly ethnic groups (English, German, Scandinavian) were somehow superior to the other perceived races. If the similarities which seemed to bind the English, Germans and Scandinavians together were in fact viable, then it appears that the Irish should certainly have been considered similar enough to be white. However, during this period, the Irish were not considered to be white, nor were those coming from Eastern and Southern Europe. The major commonality that the Irish and the Southern and Eastern Europeans share is that they are not Protestant. Typically these immigrants were either Catholic or Jewish. Even though they shared more physical similarities to whites than other ethnic groups, these non-Protestants were not considered white (Brodkin 1998).

### **Italian American History**

Beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing through the Second World War, approximately twenty million migrants left Italy (Gabaccia 2001:1-2). Most Italian immigrants from this large wave of immigration were from the poorer agricultural regions of Southern Italy

which did not fare well economically after Italian Reunification (Alba 2005:46). The destinations of these migrants were varied: about half worked in other parts of Europe, about a third went to North America, and about a quarter went to South America (Gabaccia 2001:2). The remainder of Italian migrants found their ways to northern and southern Africa as well as Australia. Most of those who initially immigrated were single men who came for agricultural or industrial work and had the intention of going back to Italy to be with their families.

Italian immigrants in the United States typically lived in enclaves in the urban areas to which they originally moved – primarily the Northeastern United States, although there was also a sizable community in San Francisco that grew in response to the Gold Rush. Italian immigrants worked to send money back to Italy to their families, and in the beginning, the men would follow work (often to the United States, but also to Brazil and Argentina) depending on the season. Later on, many Italian men decided to settle in the United States, and they brought their families to America once the economic opportunities of the United States had become apparent. In other parts of the world, Italians also worked in urban, industrial and agricultural environments. In South America, Italians took part in the formation of Brazilian and Argentine nationalisms. In both countries, unlike in the United States, Italians founded and took part in multiethnic labor movements (Gabaccia 2001:6-9)

Italian immigration to the United States came to a virtual halt in the 1930s as immigrant quotas were assigned to many countries, particularly in response to the political climate arising between the two World Wars. This effectively isolated the Italians who came to the United States for work. No more new immigrants were allowed in, and those who were already here faced the dilemma that they could return to Italy if they chose, but they did not know if they would ever be able to come back to the United States. Italian immigrants who once had been

contented to remain in their own communities now had to think about integration into American society at large (Alba 1985b).

Joining American society was not an easy task for the new Italian Americans. Having remained in their own enclaves, many Italians did not learn much more than simple English. The Italians were also part of a larger wave of “white ethnic” immigration from Southern and Eastern Europe. Differences in language and religion were enough to mark these “white ethnics” as different from the Anglo-Saxon and Germanic peoples who had previously come to the United States. Soon after immigration quotas were enacted and Italians made the choice to remain in the United States, a new generation of Italian Americans was born. With no more immigrants coming in, new births constituted the further growth of the Italian American population.

Second generation Italian Americans had their own set of problems to worry about in that they were caught between the immigrant world of their parents and the native world of other American families. Italian American children were able to develop better language skills than their parents, but many Italian children were taken out of school before completing high school. This followed what would have been likely to happen if the Italians immigrants had stayed in Italy. A formal education was not necessary for those going into farming or labor, and many Italian parents did not see the need for their children to complete high school. During World War II, along with many Japanese Americans, some Italian Americans were interred in camps as if they were prisoners of war out of fear of their possible retaliation or espionage. Despite that fact, World War II provided some opportunities for Italian Americans (and other immigrants) to prove their loyalty to their new homeland through military service. This opened up other opportunities as those returning from military service were offered educational and home-buying

opportunities. This was one of the first major steps for Italian Americans in shaking off the stigmas associated with being “ethnic” (Alba 1985b).

Through the 1960s and 70s, Italian Americans began to organize politically and had a part in immigration reforms of the time. These reforms helped to remove much of the quota system that restricted immigration from many countries, including Italy. Some research through the 1970s and 80s indicated a high level of assimilation of Italian Americans into American society, with education and income levels at or above national averages (Egelman 1987). Italian Americans are no longer located in enclave immigrant communities and have moved all over the United States. One of the major problems seen at that time was a lack of Italian Americans in high government offices (Juliani 1987), but as of the present several Italian Americans have risen to political power, most notably the two Italian American Supreme Court Justices, Antonin Scalia and Samuel Alito, and Speaker of the House, Nancy Pelosi.

It seems that, generally, Italian Americans have done well in their attempts at socioeconomic integration and fared well because of it. This parallels findings in other ethnic groups with similar backgrounds. Sherry Ortner discussed the socioeconomic changes of her own, mostly Jewish, high school graduation class (2003). Across the board she found that most of her classmates moved up in the class ladder. Some of this movement is attributable to government policies like the GI Bill or the optimism and economic boom which followed World War II. The many identity politics movements which came after World War II are also relevant to the descendants of immigrants in this country. Although later than some of the Jewish action, Italian American strategies were sometimes similar in pursuing the image of a model minority and making attempts to not stand out against the crowd and just be an American(2003:205-9).

Some authors have suggested that Italian Americans may have done too well in leaving behind their Italianness. Italian American ethnicity now exists mostly as a hobby for Italian Americans, and most Italian Americans have social attitudes that reflect the majority of American society (Alba 1985b). It should be noted, though, that the amount of research done regarding Italian Americans has waned in the past two decades. Several studies in the 1980s revealed communities of Italian Americans who continue to maintain an ethnic identity while also being “American” (Chiacchio 1987, Martinelli 1989). The ethnicity that first generation immigrants worked to subdue seems now to be a hobby activity or affectation that one can turn on or off as is advantageous. That same ethnicity that once brought discrimination can still be problematic, particularly in regards to portrayals of Italian Americans in television and film (Ferraro 2005). As an example, many Italian American organizations often voice their displeasure with the Mafia portrayals in *The Sopranos*, but little ethnographic work has been done in actual communities regarding the everyday Italian American citizen’s reaction to that show.

In the middle twentieth century, attempts were made to analyze the practices of disaffected social groups within the United States. While Italian Americans had served in World War Two and had made some social progress, they still often lived in enclaves, made less money than the average American, and did not perform as well in standardized tests. Social theorists of the time were of the opinion that immigrants had every possible opportunity in the United States, the “equal opportunities” which have become part of the American mythos, so any deficiencies must be on the part of the immigrant family. One such explanation which dealt with Italian Americans was *The Urban Villagers* (Gans 1962). This study investigated an Italian American neighborhood in Boston which was undergoing urban renewal. Gans called the Italian



Americans “urban villagers” because he felt that they were practically an isolated community within a larger urban setting. He noted that the Italian Americans operated within their own social circles and did not appear to aspire to higher social position. Unfortunately, Gans did not seem to have taken into account the reasons why this apparent separation may have existed in the first place. Previous social ostracism led this group to keep to itself, and unfair work and education opportunities would have hindered the assimilation Gans seemed to expect.

There were other explanatory models as well. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis theorized that the poor, who were often immigrants, remained so because their culture encouraged and reinforced behaviors which produced the very poverty in which they lived (1998). This model does not account for the ability of a group to enact change for itself or even from outside inspiration. In other lines of thought, social factors were not thought to be related to the economic or educational capabilities of a person. The theoretical paradigm of amoral familism was one such model used to explain the collective social and economic misfortunes of Italian Americans.

### **Amoral Familism**

The concept of amoral familism was put forth in *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (Banfield 1958). In 1954 and 1955, Edward Banfield conducted research in “Montegrano,” a small Southern Italian town where there seemed to be little social or political activity in the town outside of people’s own personal interests. Banfield wanted to analyze why people in this town seemed to do nothing to improve their personal incomes, exercise no political power to enact change, or have no interest in publishing a city newspaper. He concluded that it was possible to summarize and predict their actions based on the rule: “Maximize the material, short run

advantage of the nuclear family; assume that all others will do likewise” (1958:85). He called them and those like them “amoral familists,” and he listed many seemingly apparent behaviors that he felt his theory explained, e.g., amoral familists will not do anything for the common good unless it is good for them too to the idea that amoral familists are only apt to enter into agreements which they feel are or will be legally enforceable (1958:85-104). Ultimately, Banfield concluded that the citizens of this small town are at fault for their own squalor. Banfield’s assumptions owed much to the Culture & Personality school of thought in anthropology, which dealt with categorizing societies based on social attributes. The idea of a national character or mind-set induced Banfield to argue that the lack of a sense social solidarity in the ideas and practices of the Montegrano citizens were the cause of their lack of progress or the sense of community Banfield expected, rather than being an outcome of exploitative social relations. Because of prevalent ideas on the biological nature of racial and ethnic characteristics, Banfield’s work was used to inform policy on immigration and research on immigrants in the US. The assumption was that, since Italians and Italian Americans were “of the same stock,” the perceived deficiencies of one group would be related to those of the other group.

Contemporary academic reviews of Banfield’s work questioned whether he had made his point (N.A. 1959:185), called it overly nomothetic (Sanders 1959:522), and criticized his lack of attention to environmental factors like poor climate or harsh geography (Grinrod 1959:380-1). A more critical review questions his comparison of Southern Italy and Utah without acknowledging their unique histories, and his lack of acknowledgement that amoral familism could be an adaptation to historic, political and economic Southern Italian conditions (McCorkle 1959:133-4). Frank Cancian (1961:8-13) questioned Banfield’s assertions of the rule of pursuit of family interests. Cancian favored other explanations, like reasonable skepticism of new agricultural

techniques (as opposed to stubbornness), and political apathy due to distance from centers of power (as opposed to selfish familial concerns).

A particularly incisive review of Banfield's work was put forth by William Muraskin (1974). William Muraskin's review began by calling *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* the single most influential book used in the study of Italian-Americans (1974:1484). Muraskin then addressed the many critiques from anthropologists who had conducted fieldwork in Southern Italy, and he went so far as to use Banfield's information to bring up logical flaws in the argument. The distrust of authority figures which Banfield feels is present is better explained by Banfield's own evidence of distrustful activity on the part of said figures instead of Banfield's theory that relationships outside the family unit were not useful (1974:1487-1488). Many other material and historical factors went unaddressed in Banfield's work, such as distance from political centers or lack of access to public facilities like transportation. Muraskin ended his review by addressing Banfield's idea that the "apathetic" citizens would be extremely slow to change, believing instead that positive socioeconomic change in the town is possible, even though it might require time and effort to enact such changes (Muraskin 1974:1495).

Banfield's methodology was limited, and his theorizing did not account for all information available to him. He did not dig deeper to see if there were any other explanations for what he saw. He also showed an obvious bias against Italians and other southern Europeans in his analysis because of his assertion that apparent socioeconomic failure was the fault of the people and not any external circumstances. The theories he developed were later applied by Herbert Gans in *Urban Villagers* (1962) to Italian Americans in Boston to explain their social backwardness. Banfield's theory placed blame on Italians, and the onus was on them to improve

themselves. This logic was applied to Italian Americans and other ethnic groups in America as well.

**Recent Approaches to Italian American Ethnicity: Micaela di Leonardo's *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience***

Fortunately, theorization regarding the lives of Italian Americans did not remain so biased. *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* (Di Leonardo 1984) presents a different look at Italian immigration to the United States by looking at Italian American families in the San Francisco Bay Area. California was one of the first areas in the United States to receive immigrants from Italy, and the largest concentration of Italian immigrants was first in California before later immigration shifted the concentration to New York. The main narrative of Italian American ethnicity comes from New Yorkers now, but this book details many ways in which Italian-Californians are different from Italian-New Yorkers.

In California, many Italian immigrants were considered part of the white work-force as opposed to Asian and Mexican immigrants, and therefore did not face as much discrimination as Italians who settled elsewhere in the United States. This avoidance of prejudice extended through World War II, when Italian Americans were not considered as threatening as Japanese Americans, many more of whom were detained by the US government during part of World War II. *Campanilismo*, the identification with one's *paesani* (people from the same town or region in Italy) over others, is not a universally Italian trait, but depends on where immigrants might have settled as well as the ethnic makeup of that place. Economic opportunities were sometimes better in California, which showed that Italian Americans were capable of excelling professionally, as opposed to the East Coast where opportunities were more limited, giving the

impression that Italian Americans did not have aspirations of bettering themselves. (Di Leonardo 1984:47-95)

Di Leonardo's work shows a different version of the Italian Immigration narrative, but one which is certainly no less valid. The author approaches her ethnography by accepting the fact that there is no one single type of Italian American family as had been suggested by some researchers. She also observes that, interestingly, many Italian Americans believe in the concept of an Italian American family; however, they are often unsure of its definition, and they may acknowledge that their family is atypical (when in reality, there is not an archetype from which they can be different) (Di Leonardo 1984:65-66, 109). Di Leonardo also suggests that something is similarly true for the notion of an Italian American community – many Italian Americans have differing views on what that community would entail and whether or not they are part of it (Di Leonardo 1984:135-139).

When considering Italian American ethnicity, Di Leonardo's *The Varieties of Ethnic Experience* is a good place to begin. While it is not the first theorization used regarding the study of Italian American ethnicity, it is one of the studies which showed that those before it were not taking everything into account. Di Leonardo shows that there is not one kind of Italian American. There are many different Italian Americans differentiated by class and gender, and, even within the San Francisco Italian American community, there are differing ideas of who and what makes that community.

Italian Americans, then, have been a subject of study for social scientists for much of the twentieth century. From modernist theories which tried to link negative traits to a person's heritage to more contemporary ideas of multiplicity within an ethnic group, many ideas have been put forth in order to describe and analyze this group's behavior. But these ideas do not

address the broader topics of ethnicity and identity or how to interpret these concepts. It is here where theories of performance become relevant.

### **Performing Ethnicity**

After realizing the diversity possible within an ethnic group, the study of performativity is then very useful in analyses relating to ethnicity. Originally conceived of when considering gender and its origins, performativity can be applied to many other aspects of life which were considered innate. Class, race, ethnicity and many other constituents of identity can be studied as performance. Performance is also handy when considering communities – the act of performance is constituted in both production and reception, mirroring and (ideally) reinforcing the social ties of a community. Even locations and objects can be conceptualized through performance, not unlike the ways in which stages and props are used in traditional theatrical performances. Given the wide analysis of social life that is possible with theories of performance, this is an ideal paradigm when considering the social life of Italian Americans.

In the 1990s, a new line of theorization regarding identity began to develop. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler posits that gender is not inherent and related to biological sex, but it is learned and performed. Just like gender, ethnic behavior is something which had also been essentialized, Ethnicity, too, was seen as being derived from the bodies of ethnics themselves (Fortier 2000:5). Given that gender can be de-naturalized and shown to be performed, then certainly many other aspects of life which were previously thought to be innate could be interpreted through performativity. Race, class, and certainly ethnicity are socially constructed and not “in someone’s blood,” despite common wisdom to the contrary. Knowing that such behaviors are learned and not innate allows for an understanding of how ethnicity works and is

constructed on an everyday basis. In his theories about “habitus”, Pierre Bourdieu shows that much of everyday life is constructed out of repetitive behaviors which can be grouped and named for analysis (1977). This raises an important question: for someone who identifies as an Italian American, what activities carry an ethnic connotation, and how do those activities form a recognizable field of Italian-American “things to do”?

One ethnography which deals directly with Italian American ethnicity and performativity is Gloria Nardini’s *Che Bella Figura* (1999). Nardini observed and took part in regular organization events and in officers’ and committee meetings of a women’s social club in Chicago, an auxiliary of a men’s Italian-American social club to which the husbands of the ladies’ club belong. She explores performative acts which use the concept of *bella figura* within the events and meetings, both within the women’s group, and in interactions with the men’s group. Nardini used both dictionaries and informants to define *bella figura*, which incorporates appropriate appearance, behavior and language. No one thing makes *bella figura*, but a disruption in presentation could lead to *brutta figura*, a socially displeasing mode of behavior. The desire to create *bella figura* and avoid *brutta figura* is central to the two main examples in the book.

Her first example involves social relations in the women’s club as she began to negotiate unspoken rules of behavior when she first became active in the club (1999:77-103). Through her own errors and those of the newly elected club president, she works out a set of rules for performing *bella figura*, at least within the social confines of the Collandia Club, within which are unspoken rules like “Be a Helper,” “Do things the Established Way,” or “Be Able to Understand Italian” (1999:98). Indirectness is also important in performing *bella figura*, and this is shown in her second example (1999:105-125). In an analysis of an interaction between the

women's club and a representative of the men's club, she watches one woman's request for financial assistance be ignored. This is because the request was not performed within the rules of the proper way to act in that setting. The woman had taken what might be considered a typical American direct approach by directly asking for funding. Another club member familiar with the social rules is able to get the same request approved by taking an indirect approach and letting the representative of the men's club offer assistance. Nardini's study is relevant not only because it shows that performance can be very influential, but it shows performance in the context of ethnicity.

Place is also relevant for performative practices, in that it can be used to generate a sense of community. In *Re-Membering Places and the Performance of Belonging(s)* (1999), Anne-Marie Fortier documents the ways in which a community of Italians in London creates a space for itself. By performing Italian cultural rites or practices in certain places, the Italians of London create a sense of community and belonging with the other Italians who take part. The annual procession of St. Peter's is one time in the year that the Italian community in London comes together to perform its ethnicity. Although some of the tradition of the event originated in Britain, it is still a time that the Italian community of London comes together to be recognized as part of multicultural London (Fortier 1999:142-149). Additionally, the performance of some individual-based rituals (e.g., Baptism or first Communion) at St. Peter's (traditionally identified as Italian, as opposed to any other Catholic church in London), adds to the Italians' sense of belonging to a group (Fortier 1999:149-153). Communal performance of ethnicity is part of what defines a group, but when the performance is attached to places and associated with traditions, the performance can go farther in creating a sense of community.



Performance is also useful when considering displays of class identity. *The Passeggiata and Popular Culture in an Italian Town* (Del Negro 2004) details the public performance of identity through the ritual of the *passeggiata*, the daily promenade that the residents of an Italian town undertake to show off their *bella figura*. Location factors into this performance as well – there is not only a place of performance, but a place to observe and learn performance. After possibly returning home to touch up their appearance, many of the town’s residents take place in a public evening promenade through which individual identities of class, gender or even personal preferences are put on display. Clothing and appearance as well as posture and gait factor into the performance. Younger women of the town use the *passeggiata* to refine their skill at expressing their own identities. Del Negro makes note that the promenade is not only about the performance, but about the reception and comprehension of that performance. Everyone in town does not perform the *passeggiata*, but interpretation of any performance is open to all who are present, many of whom turn out every day just to view the procession. Much of the performance depends on the reactions of others as well as the actions of the performer. Such displays of identity do not necessarily need to be performed within a certain “time frame” either. In some cases, simply being in public is reason enough to consider performance relevant. Another example from Italy shows women in an urban setting performing a “classed and gendered respectability to resist their exclusion from an intensely masculinized place” (Guano 2007:48). Their performance of “respectability” on a constant basis in public justifies their presence in the public sphere. Women who choose not to adhere to the rules of “respectability” may face the scorn of others.

## **CHAPTER 3 – Ethnography**

### **Ethnographic Methods**

My research question is: How do Italian Americans in Atlanta perform their ethnicity? That is, in Atlanta, a city which does not have a historical population of Italian Americans, what are the activities, holidays, or gatherings in which Italian Americans take part which they also consider to be an enactment of their ethnicity? In cities like Cleveland, San Francisco, New York and Boston with historic neighborhoods of Italian Americans, there are literally blocks at a time of an “Italian space” where there are restaurants, hotels, stores, theaters and businesses having to do with Italian culture or owned by Italian Americans. There are no such large scale Italian spaces in Atlanta. There is no historic neighborhood, and the Italian Americans who live in the Atlanta area are not particularly concentrated in any one spot. This fact, however, is not a hindrance; it merely requires a different approach. If this study were to be undertaken in an area with a historic Italian American settlement, it would be simple enough to begin in that neighborhood. In Atlanta, there are several businesses and community centers which host events which Italian Americans attend. In addition to these public places, the homes of some individuals are used for socialization. These many locales call for a multi-sited approach (Marcus 1995) rather than a community study.

In order to attempt answering my question, I have chosen to use ethnographic methods, including participant observation, interviewing, and taking life histories. Each of these methods has its own benefits and restrictions. One of the hallmarks of anthropological research is participant observation, which is particularly useful in my study as it easily allows for the study of public interactions and displays – both of which constitute a great deal of ethnic performativity among Italian Americans in Atlanta. As there was no historic Italian American

settlement in Atlanta, there are no truly Italian American spaces in Atlanta. There are, however, several places (restaurants, stores, churches, peoples' homes) which, when paired with the participation of Italian Americans, constitute a temporary, transient Italian American space, even if this is only in the minds of Italian Americans. By taking part in social club events or visiting Italian themed businesses and restaurants, I was able to observe and participate in the ways in which Italian Americans in Atlanta "do Italian things."

The main difficulty I found with participant observation is the difficulty in preserving the natural feel and flow of any given event. As the presence of audio or video recording equipment may not be conducive to spontaneous, unencumbered social interaction, I resorted to brief note-taking during events; I also fleshed out my notes soon afterward in order to capture as much detail as possible. A limitation of note-taking is that, in many cases, one cannot go back and ask people why they said or did a specific thing in a given moment without making them feel as if they are being interrogated. It is also possible to get useful information for sorting through field notes from participants via interviews. Additionally, I have elected to use pseudonyms in order to protect my interviewees' privacy and to foster a rapport with them. People are less reserved when they do not feel like they might be held responsible for a statement later.

I have conducted interviews both with individuals and with groups of two or three people as part of my research. I met these informants who consented to be interviewed at Italian-themed events, by email contact with organizations and through social networks. Individual interviews have been particularly helpful as people are usually willing to open up and give their opinions on ethnicity, but it is sometimes difficult to get people to think about, and express ideas on, themselves and their own ethnicity. I have found that it is easiest to use simple language and get more specific as I need to in order to keep interviewees from feeling as though they are being

psychoanalyzed. I have not used a specific questionnaire, but I did follow an outline of topics in order to structure what information I get from informants. I generally let my informants talk about topics as they naturally arise, but sometimes I ask a more detailed question or use the mention of one topic as a jumping off point to another topic. Using the outline also helped me to try to make sure I covered all topics with informants, but this strategy was not always successful. I was unable to cover all topics with some people due to time constraints, and other people simply felt that they had no useful knowledge about some topics.

I had not intended to interview in small groups, but I did not have a choice the first time it happened. I was meeting an interviewee right after she was having lunch with another Italian American woman. I told my interviewee that I would like to talk to her friend, if my interviewee were able to set that up. I did not expect that she would set it up for that very day. I did not want to be rude or turn down the opportunity to do any interviewing, so I decided to talk to both women at the same time. It proved to be beneficial in that the two women often prompted each other to say things that would not have occurred to me or to recount shared experiences. Even though I felt that I could not ask them about very personal matters, such as personal finances or personal relationships with other members of the community, I was still able to ask general questions about their families and their activities. The social interaction between the two women provided me with information and details I would not have otherwise come up with on my own – a question about “Italian things to do in Atlanta” lead to an in-depth talk about activities these women had undertaken in their past. These small group interviews are also relevant for my study because performative behavior transpires through social practices. It not only gives me more information on what some Italian Americans in Atlanta do when they are interacting with each other, but that interaction also sparks memories and recalls details between the participants

which would not have been present in a one-on-one interview. I continued to use this tactic with some of my interviews scheduling some family members and friends together for interviews.

I have also taken some life histories of Italian Americans in Atlanta. Even though my study deals with contemporary performative behavior, life histories can be extremely helpful when working out the features and characteristics Italian Americans feel make up the Italian American community in Atlanta. By digging deeper into my informants' histories, I am able to see similarities among the population that may not be apparent simply through discussing current behaviors. Through these stories and my interviewing, I have discovered that all of my interviewees are transplants from the Northeastern United States. Almost all of my informants have moved to this area specifically because of their work, most typically industrial or corporate employment. However, I also interviewed one lawyer who had gone to law school in Alabama and then came to Atlanta, as well as another woman who moved to Atlanta to work in the broadcast industry. Two interviewees moved to Atlanta because they had family in Atlanta, but their moves were also tied to the availability of work (e.g., the woman who moved here to work in the broadcast industry – she moved here because her father was already living here, but she told me that she would not have been able to make the move had she not known she would be able to find a job in Atlanta.) Additionally, most of my informants have lived at least at one other place in addition to New England (Florida being common, but one family was from St. Louis, and several people moved around within the Northeast before coming to Atlanta). All of my informants did not have the time to sit down and give me a full life history, and some of them gave me enough personal detail within the context of interviewing that I did not need for them to give me a life history as well. I made the effort to get a life history from those who had the time and desire. I was able to take down five life histories.

As I conducted participant observation, I met people whom I decide to interview in more detail. Often when I described my study or exchanged contact information, the topic of my ethnicity came up. My last name is not Italian and therefore is not an immediate marker for my ethnicity. I made the attempt to bring my ethnicity into the discussion very quickly as I have found that it is a very useful tool for getting people to talk to me. When I talked about the things which constitute my Italian heritage (family history, contact with other family members in Italy, family traditions), it seems that the discussion was often about the ways in which my Italian experience is less than theirs. Maybe they felt bad that I missed out on my ethnic upbringing, or maybe they felt compelled to teach me something of the Italian American experience, but for whatever reasons, my less than usual ethnic circumstances (as someone native to the South who has some identification as Italian American) provided my interviewees ample opportunity to fill me in on many Italian American activities or practices which came to their minds. My initial worries of rejection or suspicion could not have been farther from the truth. It turns out that it can be a useful tool in getting people to talk about their own experiences. The only major point of difference is religion. Many people expect me to be Roman Catholic, which I am not. I was raised as a Methodist in the South, and that seems to be a worthy enough explanation for why Roman Catholic traditions were not continued in my family. This has given me an insight as to the importance of the Catholic faith in Italian American identity of my interviewees, and it gives my interviewees a chance to inform me about something else I “missed out on.”

### **Italian Americans in Atlanta**

I began looking for participants in Italian themed social clubs. In Atlanta there are social clubs for Italian American heritage, genealogy, Italian language and conversation, and Italian

cooking and food. I was most successful in finding participants in one of the heritage clubs here in Atlanta. In my background research into Italian American activities, I found two major clubs. I attempted contact with both, but I only heard back from one of them. The club with which I spent most of my time was started in order to give Italian Americans in Atlanta a place to come together and socialize as an ethnic group with a shared history or traditions. The woman who started the club had this to say:

I started this club nine years ago with about five other people because we felt that there was a need in the Atlanta area for an Italian American social club, basically, to celebrate the heritage and culture of Italians, because it was only at the time, one other group in town and they had, we had all gone to one of their meetings, and decided it wasn't for us, 'cause it was basically five core families, extended families, you really couldn't get your way in...

I later found out that the club which did not respond to my inquiry was relatively closed and centered on the activities of just a few families. The club which responded was formed by a woman who had attempted to join the first club but found its members to be uninterested in bringing in new members. I spoke to several Italian Americans in Atlanta who said that they had attended language related groups in the past, but I did not meet any informants from those groups. I also had some luck in finding interviewees in an Italian food class as well as in an Italian genealogy group. None of the organizations in which I found interviewees was purely Italian American. The Italian American heritage club was open to anyone interested in Italian and Italian American culture, and the genealogy club often had Italian expatriates who visited and offered translation assistance. Through the contacts I made in these organizations, I was also put into contact with a few of their family members.

Overall, I had twelve primary and three secondary interviewees. Primary interviewees each took part in an interview of about one and a half to two hours. Some interviewees also sat

for a second interview, either with a friend or family member. The three people I am calling secondary interviewees are people I met in the context of one of these social groups. These are people with whom I spoke for a while and got some relevant information, but for whatever reason, I was unable to arrange any further contact with those three individuals. I had nine female and six male interviewees. The ages of my interviewees ranged from mid-thirties to mid-seventies. None of my interviewees lived here prior to the 1960s, nor have I interviewed anyone who was born here. Some of my interviewees do have children who were born here, all but the oldest of whom are teenagers and they do not as yet have strong ethnic identifications. Their parents have made efforts to convey a sense of their ethnic background, but this is not a large part of the identity of those locally born. The younger people with whom I have spoken who have stronger ethnic identities have all moved here from other parts of the United States.

Among my interviewees, the first who moved here did so in the 1970s. According to my informants and the information they gave me about their friends and family, there appears to have been a regular influx of Italian Americans since then. Since the 1970s, the rate of Italian Americans moving to the Atlanta area has remained fairly constant. There is one event which seems to have factored into the sense of community in Italian Americans – the 1996 Olympics which were held in Atlanta. Although I have not noted an increase in relocation to Atlanta, the many Italian themed business which have arisen out of the cosmopolitan atmosphere of the Olympics have provided some Italian Americans living in Atlanta with a sense of community they did not have before. Since the Olympics were held in Atlanta, there are more direct flights to Italy, and several home furnishing stores, restaurants and food stores have opened. Many Italian Americans in Atlanta have also commented on the lack of cultural diversity they perceived in Atlanta before the Olympics. Many people have reported that since 1996 they are



finding “more Italian things to do,” like a rise in the number of Italian restaurants and shops, in addition to an increased number of cultural events, like Italian social clubs, Italian language and cooking classes, and Italian film organizations.

It seems that Italian Americans in Atlanta who maintain an Italian American identity tend to trace all or most of their ancestry to Italy. There does seem to be some importance placed on tracing a majority of your ancestry to Italy. Italian Americans do not doubt or question the authenticity of someone who is arguably “less” Italian genealogically (like me, only having one Italian grandparent). Rather, it seems that people who trace little of their ancestry back to Italy have less association with Italian American as an ethnic identity. As an example of this, I have at least three acquaintances who I know have at least one Italian-American grandparent. All three of them were aware of this study, yet they did not feel that it was appropriate to them. When I have presented myself to the community, my choice of identity has not been questioned. There is a wide range of ages represented in the community, but teenagers and young adults who may be the children of adults who identify as Italian American do not seem to show much interest in an ethnic identity. One of my informants made a comment regarding her perceived differences between the Northeast and the South which I found very interesting. She felt that in the Northeast, people in general have a “melting pot” mentality which allows for ethnicity to be a part of people’s lives. She believes that things are different in the South. Instead of the idea of people getting along despite their differences, she feels that the dominant mindset in the South is molded by the dominance of a homogenous whiteness. This dominant whiteness is an unmarked category (Hartigan 2005), one which is the hegemonic idea of normalcy, at least in this part of the country. Among Southern whites, ethnicity is typically not seen as culturally valuable, and those who do have ethnic identities are not encouraged to share them with others as this could

disrupt the dominant idea of what it means to be normal or white. This uniformity of whiteness is a common idea that Northerners have about the South, but her observation of a lack of ethnicity is relevant. As with immigration to the United States before the end of the nineteenth century, the numbers were few and those who did immigrate tended to blend into the population. It was not until the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century that immigrants began to form enclaves and communities within which they could practice their traditions. This is probably a better way to interpret my informant's ideas regarding the lack of ethnicity she found in the South.

When the first Italians immigrated to the United States, Anglo-Saxon whites categorized them as Southern European or Mediterranean, and decidedly not white. After a century of living in the United States, Italian Americans are now considered white. They consider themselves white as well, although it may be better described as a subset of white. Many people with whom I have spoken discuss notions of blood and biological embodiment of ethnicity, and while they do not see themselves as an Other, they do keep a separate identity within whiteness. Unlike the mid twentieth century when the majority of Italian Americans held blue collar, industrial jobs, contemporary Italian Americans are to be found in many different professions. Some of the occupations represented among my interviewees are: tape operator for a television network, lawyer, contractor, teacher, and city government administration. The Italian Americans with whom I talk here are from all ranges of economic class. I have had one informant idly comment on whether or not she would get all of her bills paid the next month, and I have another informant who is a lawyer in an affluent part of town. Additionally, there are some Italian American business owners in Atlanta who are making a very good living at marketing their ethnicity and culture in different ways. Restaurants and food-related businesses are the most

common, but there is at least one retail store which deals in home furnishings from Italy (the owner is Italian American).

There are several ways in which Italian Americans in Atlanta perform their ethnicity. One of the most typical ways this occurs is within the context of social clubs which have some theme of Italian culture. Some clubs are focused on a notion of Italian/Italian American Culture (with topics ranging from genealogy, history, food and wine, and film), while others are more specifically dedicated to film, Italian language conversation, Italian cooking or Italian genealogy. None of the groups restricts membership on ethnicity; however they are open to anyone of any ethnic identity who shares an interest in Italian Culture. It just so happens that there are not many people who are not of Italian ethnicity who have an interest in Italian genealogy. There are several Italian Americans in Atlanta who attend more than one of these groups, and this is what first caused me to notice the personal importance of these social activities in relating to a subject's identity. This certainly is not to say that there is a circuit of Italian American social organizations which people regularly attend. Most people are not attending every Italian cultural social activity available at any given time. They attend based on their interests and availability of time, but when asked about the "Italian things" that they do, members of social organizations always report. Additionally, contemporary Italian Americans in Atlanta also have more opportunity to interact with native Italians than they may have in the recent past. This has come about both through immigration reform in the 1960s and 1970s and ease of travel in contemporary times. Another common site of social interaction among Italian Americans is family gatherings. In Atlanta, more often than not, this involves family dinners, relatives coming to visit, or occasionally religious services.

## **Material Culture**

The purchase and consumption of Italian goods is a recurrent theme when I am interviewing Italian Americans on their ethnicity and everyday life. Material culture is something which I intended to consider as relationships, even tenuous ones, exist between ethnicity and material culture (Anagnost 2004). Margaret Hobbie (1992) gives several examples of the types of things which can be associated with Italian Americans: textiles, clothing, tools, books, musical instruments, and photographs. I decided to pay close attention to what types of objects came up in questioning. Occasionally I was able to visit the home of an interviewee, and I would make note of any Italian or Italian American cultural artifacts.

The material objects which my informants referenced most often when talking about ethnicity are foods. These range from olive oils, preserved meats and other ingredients imported from Italy to mass-market produced foodstuffs which bear the colors of the Italian flag (e.g., frozen pizza and canned pasta). The importance to some people of a food item having been produced in Italy is epitomized by a comment from one woman I interviewed. We were discussing the relative attractiveness of various food products, and when I mentioned frozen pizza, she said that she did not think that was “very Italian”. I assume that this related to the idea that others have proposed, that Italians/Italian Americans have some appreciation for freshness in food, but this particular interviewee did not clarify her response. I mentioned to her that I had recently seen frozen pizzas in the frozen foods aisle of the Kroger bearing a logo touting “Made In Italy”. She responded that she just might have to try that. Again, I believe the implication being made is that if a product is made in Italy it must have some sort of connection to authenticity it would not have otherwise had.

Foods are not the only products Italian Americans in Atlanta consume with consideration of ethnic identity. Typically, as I visited someone's home, I would be shown some object that my interviewee felt related to their ethnicity somehow. Usually these objects were home décor or kitchen related – ceramic bowls, terra cotta items, sometimes appliances. One person showed me an Italian Barbie doll (According to Mattel's Barbie Collector website, [barbiecollector.com](http://barbiecollector.com), "Her red, white, and green skirt match the colors of her nation's flag. A blue apron with white fringe adds an extra dash of color, as do her red shoes. Rounding out this wonderful ensemble are a matching straw hat and purse."). In contrast, there was one household I visited in which no Italian or Italian American objects were displayed or easily identifiable and no such objects were shown to me.

One thing that several Italian Americans seem to be taking advantage of is the relative easy access to Italian goods available to them in contemporary Atlanta. It is quite easy in Atlanta to buy imported meats, linens, and ceramics. Many people with whom I have spoken have talked about the increase in the number of Italian shops and restaurants in Atlanta, especially since the Olympics. Over half of my informants mentioned the new availability of Italian goods, even if only half of that group (four out of the total fifteen informants) ever really talked about buying Italian goods (as opposed to just remarking that it was nice that they are available). Overall, while material culture is relevant to ethnicity, it is not, at least in the case of Italian Americans in Atlanta, as important as other things, like the idea of passing down family traditions.

## **Food**

The most common topic mentioned among my interviewees was food. In every one of my interviews, food always came up when talking about what it means to be an Italian American. This is not really surprising as food traditions are commonly associated with ethnicity and ethnic identity (Girardelli 2004:312). Food traditions also serve as markers to identify groups of people (Mintz 2002:109). Additionally, food traditions play an important part in Italian ethnicity and nationhood (Capatti and Montanari 2003, Counihan 2004, Heltosky 2004). Among my interviewees, cooking is the most common expression of food and ethnicity. Cooking itself can be a site of gender politics. Sherry Ortner notes a frequent alignment across many cultures in which home cooking is the job of women (1974:80), and typically the only cooking done by men takes place in the public sphere with men either taking cooking as a profession and becoming a “chef” or possibly through the display of cooking known in America as “grilling.” All of my interviewees talked about cooking, men and women alike. All six of the men I interviewed for this project talked not just about the importance of food in their idea of Italian American ethnicity, but all of these men cook as well. Many American men do not typically talk about cooking prowess beyond grilling, but every one of my interviewees told me something about how they cook certain foods for their friends or families. It is this cooking in the private sphere which marks the difference in cooking which my interviewees did. One man makes his own spaghetti sauce; one man told me about the dishes he makes when his family comes to visit, and another man told me about the candies he makes for his co-workers at Christmas. This last example was perhaps most interesting, because my other examples had men cooking typical Italian American dishes for their families. In the last example my informant was making something not specifically Italian for a group of non-Italian Americans. This sounded

like some of the comments that some of my female participants gave. All of the women talked about cooking Italian dishes for family, but there were also many comments about “just liking to cook” or “loving to feed people”. It seems that food and cooking is something important to Italian Americans in Atlanta, but it does not have to be specifically related to Italian recipes or just family members. Another comment from a female restaurant owner runs along these lines: “Italians just have a good sense about food...what’s fresh and where to get it. You know what I mean, it’s just important to us.” She and I had been talking about food, freshness and quality, and I found it interesting that she drew the connection between understanding those things and being Italian (or more specifically Italian American). It turns out that I am not the only one to find this. A 1996 survey for the National Restaurant Association showed “simplicity”, “rusticity”, and “authenticity” to be key associations with Italian food (Girardelli 2004:308).

Also, Italian Americans talk about the recipes they cook and where they got them from. Some recipes and traditions come from family members, while others are invented and are considered Italian because of the ingredients or the method of preparation. One example of this “invented Italian” came when I was interviewing a father and daughter over dinner. The daughter had invited me over to dinner so that I could meet her dad and get his perspective on Italian American activities in Atlanta. She told me that, “of course I’ll be making Italian!” I was excited, because I wanted to see what her ideas of Italian food were. She served chicken fingers, which she justified as Italian food because she used parmesan cheese and “Italian” breadcrumbs when she prepared the dish. I found this very interesting, because I have not read of any Italian dish which is analogous to American chicken fingers, so her justification seemed to come from the addition of Italian ingredients. This phenomenon is not unique: Eric Hobsbawm speaks of the “invention of tradition” in which a set of practices or symbols is specifically aligned to

establish “continuity with the past” (2003:1). There are examples of purposefully changing ideas about food beyond those reported by my informants. A description of an Italian festival in the United States reveals foods which are renamed as Italian in order to foster the ethnic atmosphere of the event (Magliocco 1993). I found this to be in stark contrast with the comments made by the restaurateurs. Clearly the ideas of freshness and knowledge of food are not universal among the Italian Americans I interviewed. However, consistency was found in the ideas about food, that food and cooking are important, and that food and cooking have social or ethnic aspects.

I also asked many people about what they thought of restaurants in the Atlanta area which claim to be Italian or Italian American. I tried to leave this field as broad as possible in order to get a wide range of ideas and opinions on what constitutes Italian food and how authentic some of these restaurants are. One of my interviewees said that he never eats Italian out because it was “all that nouveau cooking and it’s not what I grew up with.” On further inspection, he was talking mostly about some of the many new Italian restaurants which have opened in Atlanta recently. Most of these are offering Italian cuisine as opposed to Italian American cuisine. He did tell me of a few “*American Italian*” restaurants he has gone to. There are a few restaurants in the Atlanta area which bill themselves as Italian American, and these are the ones to which he relates. He sees the Italian restaurants as something new and different. This viewpoint wasn’t unique. Several of my informants commented that they felt that there was a definite difference between Italian and Italian American cultures. It is how individuals relate to one or both of these cultures which is more variable. That is, even though all informants see a difference between the two, some informants showed an affinity for both cultures, and some only relate to Italian American culture.



For those Italian Americans I interviewed who worked in restaurants or food related businesses, freshness and authenticity were most frequently mentioned as important or relevant. Freshness is difficult to disagree over, but authenticity was an interesting idea, even among the food professionals. One woman got her training in Italy and had very specific ideas about the way in which things are done. She will even correct patrons to her store who use what she calls “bad American Italian”. Her example was that of Italian Americans entering her store and asking for “pro-shoot” instead of “*prosciutto*”. On the other hand, the restaurateur I interviewed offered an “authentic” *carbonara* dish on her menu. On closer inspection, the recipe was not the Italian version, but a modified version which has become the stand-by in the United States. There is obviously some room for interpretation in the definition of “authentic” cuisine.

In one of my group interviews of two friends from the social club, I was fortunate to get a conversation going about restaurants and their authenticity. The notion of a hierarchy of tastes becomes apparent, and it is consistent with Bourdieu’s findings regarding social class, education and personal tastes (1984).

SM: What’s your take on Maggiano’s or I don’t know if you’re familiar with Buca di Beppo, or Olive Garden.

Bianca: It doesn’t bother me...if the food is good and they try to duplicate what we do in their restaurants then more power to them because they’re keeping our culture alive.

SM: Some places try to practice authenticity...

Angela: I don’t think...to me I don’t think they do. Olive Garden for sure doesn’t. I haven’t tried the Buca di Beppo, my family has...

Bianca: I haven’t been there.

Angela: Maggianos’ to me is, I guess it’s traditional Southern Italian, you know what I mean? Spaghetti and meatballs...what do you think Bianca?

Bianca: I love Maggiano’s, but I also have a small bias. My mom worked at the one in Buckhead. She was a hostess, and I ate a lot of their food because she brought it home,

and those people were real good to us, but even so, now that she's gone, now that my mom's gone, I still go there a lot 'cause I like the food, I like the atmosphere, I feel like I'm in an Italian restaurant, I don't feel like it's a chain thing, like Romano's Macaroni Grill, ooh, shudder at the thought. But not because I'm against restaurants like that, it's just that's a horrible restaurant. (Angela laughs)

Angela: To me, I put all the chains in the same category. It's like the McDonald's of Italian.

Bianca: My thing is more like I wanna get it where I can, 'cause I would agree with you about it being the McDonald's of Italian food, but at the same time, if I feel that it's made very authentically and I can have it...

Angela: But it's like in New York where Bianca's from and where I'm from, it was so easy to find a mom-and-pop, and I don't think a Maggiano's could survive in a community like that. It wouldn't, because you have so many other authentic choices.

Bianca: But you know what? I think I had to adapt because of moving.

Angela: Right.

Bianca: I think that's what it was for me more so than not, you know, being OK with that whole thing.

Angela: When I had moved to Orlando, Florida, there was one Italian restaurant, authentic, the guy was from Rome. He just recently died too, but his name was, like, worshipped in Italy. It was you were like in Italy sitting at that table. . But then the restaurants that made all the money were like Olive Garden. You know places like that.

SM: Yeah, I think it might be interesting to sit down and actually do a demographic study of who goes to what. And see if you can actually put a correlation....

Bianca: I mean, these places are not my first choice. But...

SM: Yeah, if you're with a bunch of people who want to go to Maggiano's...you're OK with that.

Bianca: But, I even like Maggiano's on my own, whether or not I'm with a group of people. So to me it's about the food. More than if it's a chain or a mom-and-pop. You know? But of course, I prefer mom-and-pop restaurant, because I mean, not only is the food better...the atmosphere, everybody knows your name...it's like Cheers.

Angela: Because chances are, you're not getting the person who studied Italian cooking or who knows the recipes...it's just some line cook. I understand the Olive Garden, everything is in a can or a jar and all they're doing is mixing it up.

In *Distinction*, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) analyzed the connection between class and taste. Through an analysis of class and taste in 1960s France, Bourdieu shows that high, middle, and low class tastes correlate to the high, middle, and low economic classes. Additionally, the classes perpetuate their tastes through relatively separate social mechanisms. Education and opportunity in the higher classes are different than those in the lower classes, and this is part of what creates and perpetuates the different class tastes. In my example, the higher educated and classed Angela, who is a lawyer, shows disdain for chain restaurants which are associated with mass consumption. In comparison, Bianca only has an undergraduate education. Her father is a mechanic, and even though she works for a large television network, she still identifies herself with the “working class”. Additionally, her mother worked for one of these chain restaurants before she died, so this is another way she relates to the ostensibly lower class restaurants. This conversation sums up the many attitudes expressed to me regarding food. There is a spectrum of authenticity for the production of Italian foods, and different people will place themselves or their preferences somewhere on that spectrum. Mom-and-pop restaurants, places where people have studied cooking and using fresh ingredients place a restaurant higher on the authenticity scale. This seems to be fairly universal. The acceptance of lesser quality food establishments varies on the individual, but Bianca’s comment about moving a lot provides an interesting insight. She moved a lot growing up because her father was in the army. It may also be the case that she has had to learn to live with lesser quality restaurants through living in different parts of the country. Angela, on the other hand, lived either in New York or Miami until she was in her thirties. As Miami is populated with many transplants from the Northeast, maybe Angela had more opportunities to experience more family-run restaurants. There is still a great deal of subjectivity in these conversations, for example, is it reasonable to expect that in an authentic

Italian restaurant you will feel a familial atmosphere where people know your name? Perhaps it is or perhaps not, but a single answer to that question is less interesting than the multiplicity of ideas on food and its authenticity represented in the Italian American community. All of my respondents seem to realize that food is an important feature of ethnicity, specifically Italian American ethnicity, but together all of their answers form a very broad field of food related ideas.

### **Family and Tradition**

Only one other topic was spoken of as often as food and cooking: that of family and tradition. I naturally asked people about their families as part of the interview process, but the amount of conversation about family and tradition which I did not bring up myself was indicative of the level of importance of such notions to these Italian Americans. Like food, all of my interviewees had something to say about family, often about the idea of a big family, even if those ideas may not meet everyday definitions of a large family. One of my group interviews was with a father and daughter. The wife/mother had died several years before, and the only other immediate family member was a son/brother who also lived in Atlanta. They still considered themselves part of a large family, including many aunts, uncles and cousins of whom they spoke. None of these people live in Atlanta, and they may only see each other once a year. But they do talk frequently, and what is most important, they all have the idea that they are of a large family, even if, critically, their main justification is that they speak to each other frequently on the phone and via email. Another of my interviewees could be said to be of the same mindset. He is married and has two children. His wife's non-Italian family lives nearby, but his

Italian family is all in New Jersey. Again, they only get together about once a year, but he described himself as having a large family.

This looseness of definition also carries over into ideas about traditions. One of the first traditions I wanted to investigate was whether or not any of my informants spoke Italian. Every one of my respondents expressed an interest in learning Italian, despite the fact that none of them has actually done so. A few of my respondents have taken some classes, and one woman told me about her Italian word-a-day calendar. Many recollect older generations using the language, but it was not taught to younger generations.

No, I wasn't brought up to speak Italian. Like, the grandparents, once in a blue moon they would speak it...they would speak it to teach other, but they didn't teach it to my parents, and they didn't teach me...if I asked, oh, yeah, I would be able to, but it wasn't common. I'm guessing because they wanted us to speak English, you know, since everybody else did. As far as everything else, oh yeah, one hundred percent traditional.

This sort of story was not unique. Other Italian Americans have recollections of Italian being spoken in the home but not knowing it themselves.

My mother actually spoke the language, but didn't speak it to my brother and I, she only spoke it to her siblings and her parents. And her extended family. But didn't speak to us. My father can't speak, but he understands it.

I knew that the language had been given up by previous generations in order to assimilate into mainstream United States society, but I wondered if any of my interviewees had a sense of why this was. "Assimilation is very, very important, and that's probably why we didn't learn Italian growing up. And see if I wanted to learn it, they were all for it, my parents were all for it." So there does seem to be some awareness that a conscious decision not to pass on language was made at some time in the past. "I think we all had the same experience...our parents wanted us to learn English." Fortunately, families are supportive of younger generations learning Italian.

Many of the people with whom I spoke have made some effort to learn to speak Italian, even though I have not yet encountered anyone who considers themselves fluent.

Were there other traditions that had been left behind? Or had there been any effort on the part of families to pass on traditions? Several women with whom I spoke mentioned that their grandmothers used to knit or sew or crochet. None of them had acquired that tradition. There was no clear explanation as to why this happened, but everyone said that there was no regret in their families that these sewing traditions had been left behind. The most important tradition that was spoken of and cherished was cooking, but the skill was not always acquired from a family member. When asked why she learned to cook from her family, one informant responded that her grandmother said, “I’m not gonna be around forever...who’s gonna make this when I’m gone?” Obviously in this case there was a desire in the family to keep that tradition going. Another woman responded, “My mother was a big cook, she always made a lot of big Italian meals, and she never showed me how to make any of them. I took up that interest on my own.” Here the desire to continue the tradition rested in the younger generation. But either way, it seems reasonable to say that maintaining food traditions in the home is important. The motivation to learn is the major difference: sometimes it is passed down through the family, and sometimes it is learned later in life in order to make sure that the tradition is maintained.

Many informants talked about Italian Christmas Eve traditions they practiced growing up. These traditions range from attending church services to specific food traditions like not eating meat on Christmas Eve or participating in the “Feast of the Seven Fishes”, a Christmas meal traced to Southern Italy with few rigid rules as to exactly which fish dishes are served but which uses themes similar to Lenten traditions of abstinence. I expected the food to be the outstanding feature of holiday practices, since food is often involved in the social construction of memory

(Sutton 2001). Among my informants, families prepare meals and eat together. Recipes and methods are passed from one family member to another. The most extraordinary detail reported about contemporary Christmases is a large family gathering. No special Christmas dishes or religious services are currently undertaken by my interviewees. This seems to be mostly due to families growing smaller as older adults die and traditions are not maintained as strictly. Additionally, it appears that Italian Americans who do not marry other Italian Americans do not carry on these Christmas Eve traditions.

Talk of the American holiday of Thanksgiving was interesting. I wondered how Italian American families would deal with a holiday that they might not relate to. There were no internal conflicts regarding celebrating the holiday (e.g., whether Italian Americans relate to a holiday that is about English settlers from years before Italians came to the United States en masse), and many Italian-American families reported a sort of blended holiday mixing the typical American Thanksgiving with other Italian things — a meal of turkey and pasta on the side was often talked about.

The only major holiday in the United States associated with Italian-Americans is Columbus Day. Some cities with historical populations of Italian Americans even have celebrations on major saints' days. Outside of the historical areas of Italian immigration to the United States, these types of holidays are not widely celebrated, but many Italian Americans in Atlanta fondly remember family celebrations from their youth and parades in their hometowns. Members of an Italian-American social club I have visited have spoken of recent attempts they have made to start a regular Columbus Day celebration here in Atlanta.

And our club, last year, tried to re-instill some interest in Columbus, so we had a Columbus Day Dinner. We had someone to talk about the food, and then a person to talk about what was just going on in the days of Columbus, as he was exploring the New World. And our menu consisted of foods that Columbus would have had on his journeys,

prepared in the traditional way...we had the recipe books...I wish it had been more successful, though...we had about thirty-five people...we wanted to keep Columbus an annual event...

Another Italian American social club in Atlanta pairs up with a local Catholic church for a few saint's day celebrations. Outside of the Italian American community, Columbus Day might be seen in a negative colonial aspect, and maybe this makes it tough to spread this tradition into other areas of the United States. Whatever the reason, one person with whom I spoke talked about her perceptions of the few Italian Americans who had been in the South for several generations. In Atlanta, there is no historical Italian American neighborhood, but some Italian Americans relocated to Birmingham, Alabama at a time when Birmingham was much larger than Atlanta and Birmingham's steel industry offered jobs similar to those Italian Americans had been working in the northeast.

Angela: But you know in a place like for example Birmingham where I went to law school, there's a lot of Italians there, because they came for the steel industry, but the Italians I met in those communities, they were different, it wasn't like growing up in New York, and their traditions were dissipating really quickly.

Bianca: They weren't as interested in taking it up as us maybe?

Angela: No, I think it's because you're competing with the Southern Culture which is very strong. The Northeastern Culture, not that there is one, there's the Italians, then there's the New England, I mean you could split it up into those categories, but here we are in the South, and there's the Southern Culture which...

Bianca: Maybe that overtook it.

Angela: Maybe it overtook it...so therefore, I met this girl from the Italian community, and I was really shocked, they seemed so much more Americanized than I did.

Bianca: But would you say that the culture in the Northeast is that "everybody's culture is our culture"? 'Cause we used to say even if you're not Italian, but if you love everything Italian, then you're Italian too. The culture up there is everybody's culture...like the melting pot. And even when you talk about the Northeastern states versus New England, it's still the Northeast. I think those people categorize we're all Northeasterners, not necessarily New Englanders or from Vermont, or Pennsylvania...



Angela: I was thinking, New England has a particular culture...

Bianca: Right.

Angela: But they still consider themselves as Northeasterners too, as well as New Englanders too, you know what I'm saying? I know where I grew up, everybody participated in everybody's culture, that's what the culture was in my hometown. Everybody participated in everything.

SM: So when there was a Greek holiday everybody went down and did the Greek holiday thing?

Bianca: Oh, yeah. The Polish celebration every year, everybody came out for it, it didn't matter who you were... You know, how some people are like, "I'm Irish for the day" on Saint Patrick's Day? It's the same kind of thing where I grew up.

Angela: I think what I'm trying to say is in the South I notice ethnicity is not kept up as much, and I don't know why that is. The only thing I could explain is that the Southern Culture is very strong.

A conversation about Italian Americans in the media and the film *Moonstruck* led to an interesting conversation about the tradition of the Italian American family living all under one roof. In *Moonstruck* there is a conversation about why Cher's character would no longer be living at home once she remarries. This led to talk of when people moved out of their parents' houses.

Yes. I was, uh, I moved out the day before my twenty-ninth birthday. 'Cause I was still not married, and I said, you know what...I gotta go, but I was so afraid to tell my mother. That I got an apartment, and I waited until my best friend, who was Italian, came down to visit us, and I told my mother with Anita sitting right there, for support, and she said, "How could you do this to me?" Because it was such a dramatic thing for me to leave the house.

Living at home for such a long time uninterrupted was not that common though. Another woman in the conversation noted that she had originally moved out partly at the request of her mother. Her mother wanted her to get out and have some experiences for herself. After she had been living away from home for a while, she decided to move back home for financial reasons.

My mom wanted me to have the experience, not because she wanted me to go. See, what happened was, when I finished school, I had every expectation of moving out, and so did they. But I couldn't get arrested here (Atlanta). You know? [This odd comment refers to my interviewee's inability to find work. She felt unnoticed, and this is how she expressed that sentiment.] And I had twenty thousand dollars in student loans, my parents couldn't pay for my college, not that they wouldn't pay; they *couldn't* pay. So, you know, I was making five dollars an hour in the mall, couldn't get arrested here, so I went back to my hometown, I was offered a job after I went to a funeral, my grandmother's funeral, so I then I got a TV job, and I was starving to death because I was making a dollar over minimum wage, so I asked if I could come back, so that was my experience with the living at home as an adult thing, it wasn't that I wanted to leave in the first place, I needed their help afterwards. Now, if I came back and didn't live with them that would have been just fine too. Because they were more concerned with me being nearby, physically being nearby, than being in their house, you know, even if I was in Florida or Alabama or North Carolina or something, they still consider that being close by. So, that's what they wanted more, to be able to see me, not that I had to be in their house.

All of these examples show that the idea of family is important in the Italian American community, although there is no single common family experience that all of my interviewees report. The same can be said of ideas of tradition among Italian Americans. One interview in particular highlighted the importance of this idea of tradition. I had been interviewing one man for about an hour at his home, and several times over the course of the interview, he talked about maintaining family traditions. I became curious as to what he meant exactly. Some of my other informants more specifically referenced events like Christmas meals when talking about traditional things. Upon one mention of "the traditions", I finally decided to ask, "Which ones? Can you be more specific about the things you'd do?" He responded, "Oh, you know, the traditions." I reminded him that I did not grow up in a home that practiced many of these traditions, so, no, I did not really *know*. He did not answer immediately, so in order to move the conversation along, I interjected that some people had told me about Christmas dinners with traditional dishes. "Yes, things like that," was his response. I did not press him any further on the topic as I sensed a reluctance to continue, so I turned my questioning to the less sensitive line

of travel. Obviously, he had difficulty defining just what these traditions were that are so important. Ultimately, this ties back to the general importance of the idea of family and tradition in the Italian American culture. These things are important to talk about, even if there is not a single definition of tradition or if these practices are not really practiced anymore.

## **Media**

Media is also an available item for consumption. This is typically contextualized through television or film, but I was also shown books, magazines and music CDs. Although I did not meet anyone who has this service in their homes, I had one person comment that they like a local restaurant because they show Italian satellite television, specifically because he is a sports fan and they show many Italian soccer games. Many of the books and magazines people showed me were travel oriented, but one book was called *A Goomba's Guide To Life*, and it was written by Steven Schirripa, a famous Italian American known for his role in the Mafia themed TV show *The Sopranos*. It was presented to me in a sort of half-hearted way by one of my interviewees who is a big television and film fan. My informant indicated that she “didn’t take it completely seriously, but that it was still a good book. I guess he *was* in *The Sopranos*. This comment led me to looking at commentary my interviewees had made about films and television shows.

In reviewing all the comments that people made about television programs and films, there were just a few stand-outs. Every person with whom I spoke mentioned two topics: *The Sopranos/The Godfather* and *Moonstruck*. Every once in a while someone might mention another show or movie, but not very often. The portrayal of minorities and ethnic groups in the media has become a contentious issue over the past decades, and Italian-Americans have not escaped offenses in film and on television (Ferraro 2005:126). I never had to directly mention *The Sopranos* or *The Godfather*. Any discussion of Italian Americans in the media immediately

yields a discussion of these two popular entertainments, and talk of one invariably leads into talk of the other. Among those with whom I spoke, *The Sopranos* is typically unwatched or generally panned, although there is a small number of Italian Americans who like the program. It is the association with organized crime that is the only reported dislike. Even Italian Americans who have watched the show but do not care for it remark that the portrayals of Italian Americans are often very accurate...sans the crime. It may be that the contemporary nature of *The Sopranos* is problematic. It is possible that *The Godfather* is being taken in a more historical context and is somehow a little more distant in the imagination than *The Sopranos*. *The Godfather* is cited as another association of Italian Americans and organized crime, but it is not as disliked as *The Sopranos*. But discussion of *The Godfather* often brought up a conundrum:

And then they were directed by an Italian man, Francis Ford Coppola, so I wonder if we feed into it ourselves, you know? If Francis Ford Coppola hadn't directed those movies, would there have been, not that there wouldn't be interest in the Mafia, not that they would associate with us, but maybe it would be a little less?

Does the fact that an Italian American produces something mitigate the sting of the stereotype? "Yeah, like *The Sopranos*, half that cast is either full-blooded or half Italian..." Maybe it does not take it away, but it certainly seems to further problematize media portrayals of Italian Americans for Italian Americans.

When asked for a good portrayal of Italian-Americans in the media, every person asked gave the same answer: *Moonstruck*. It was the favorite movie of several interviewees. One woman said, "I could watch it over and over and over and over again. I know almost everything by heart. I swear to God." She then went on to prove herself by quoting a scene from the film that had to do with families living together under one roof. This was proven to me again at a meeting of the social club. It was decided that since there had not been a meeting in a while, that they would have one for Valentine's Day. The theme was romance, and they decided to show

*Moonstruck* for their program that night. I noticed several people performing the dialog along with the characters, and a few times the woman sitting next to me tapped me on the shoulder to make sure that I was paying attention, “because the scene coming up is real good, real accurate.” Another respondent commented that she felt like she knew all the characters. She told me that they reminded her of people she knew, and the film reminded her of situations with which she was familiar. I did notice one oddity about favoring *Moonstruck*: Cher, who won the Academy Award for Best Actress for *Moonstruck*, is not herself of Italian descent. The logic seems to be that positive portrayals of Italian Americans are welcome from anyone, but the only way a negative portrayal can be tolerated is if an Italian American is involved.

## **Travel**

Travel is yet another way for Italian Americans to experience their ethnicity. Almost two-thirds of my interviewees said that they had been to Italy, and all of those who had not been expressed an interest in doing so. Many people talked about travelling to where their families came from, and sometimes people want to look up relatives in Italy. Everyone with whom I spoke told me about some personal aspect of the trip beyond simple tourism. This ranged from one man spending several days in the town where his grandfather was born and meeting his third and fourth cousins to more common responses of people visiting the places where their families came from for an afternoon. Some people had been to Italy more than once, and in those cases some trips were purely recreational. It seems that people whose families maintained contact with family members in Italy, or whose families remained very close in America are more likely to travel to Italy with the intention of searching for family.

Angela: First time I went, my mother took my brother and I to where her family is from. So we could meet our cousins. Which was really awesome.

SM: Which part of Italy is that in?

Angela: It's a little island off the coast of Sardinia, really remote...that was the sole purpose of that visit; really, to see where my mother was brought up...she spent part of her youth there. Even though she was born in the States, the family went back and forth for many years. She went to kindergarten there...

Bianca: Really?

Stephen: That's fascinating!

Angela: And she hasn't been back!

SM: Really?

Angela: It's been like fifty years!

It is interesting that those family members who emigrated from or spent time in their youth in Italy wanted to try to make sure that their children got some taste of that experience, but then many did not make other plans to go back. Many of the generations born in Italy continue to make trips back in order to maintain some sort of connection. Genealogical curiosity drives some of this interest. I have spoken to a few members of a nationwide Italian genealogy society. They meet monthly to discuss their personal research and share resources, but they often feel that the best resource is travelling to Italy to conduct research there. Even though many people travel to Italy in order to find out more about their families, Italian Americans do not see themselves as Italians. My Italian American informants all talk about the ways in which things are different in Italy like the "slower pace of life" as reported by several informants and differences in food preparation. The few Italian Americans I interviewed who have not made the trip to Italy express some reservations about the cultural differences which they might experience. One woman worried about what she had heard about the proper behavior of women in Italy and

whether she might offend anyone if she held the door for herself (something which an American woman might do) or whether she should be more accepting of men offering their assistance to her (which was an idea she had picked up from some old travel magazines).

Atlanta's position as a major airline hub provides easy access to travel to Italy, and the only two interviewees I had who had not yet made the trip did not feel that they could afford it. As an alternative or companion to travel, talking about Italy or Italianness online is also something that a few Italian Americans do. There are several groups which the website Yahoo hosts, and a few of my informants belong to one of these called "Portal Italy". "Portal Italy" bills itself as being open to anything related to Italian culture, and many people use it for travel information and a place to ask general questions. One of my informants uses Portal Italy to post words from her Italian "Word-a-Day" calendar for those who do not already speak Italian. This is also where my informant who was concerned about the proper behavior of women posted her question in order to get an idea about contemporary life in Italy. Italian Notebook ([italiannotebook.com](http://italiannotebook.com)) is also visited by another of my informants, and it presents articles on life and tourism in Italy. These are in addition to other general information sites which my informants might use to find out specific information about Italy. An example of this is the Fodor's Guide travel site ([fodors.com](http://fodors.com)). It has travel information for much of the world, but at least three of my informants mentioned using it and sites like it, even when specifically researching Italy.

### **Contemporary Sentiments on Ethnicity**

One last thing I was curious about was the presence of discrimination or prejudice in the lives of contemporary Italian-Americans. Historically this has been a problem, and I was curious

as to whether or not contemporary Italian Americans had similar experiences with job discrimination or intolerance because of their ethnic identity. I heard a few second-hand stories of discrimination, mostly from the father or an uncle of the interviewee.

My father, I'm telling you, he's so sure that he felt that prejudice in his early twenties. He said it was very real. In fact, something happened to me with an Irish lawyer who I has a conflict with, and I was telling my dad about it, and excuse me for saying this, but he said, "that Irish bastard". And I'm like, "Dad, after fifty years!" You know, he just can't get it out of his brain! It hurt him very deeply because it was rampant at that time.

There was only one incident that had happened to the person I was interviewing.

And one of the professors, from Birmingham, about seventy-five years old, a crotchety guy...instead of saying my name, he would call you by your name, to stand up and talk about this case, and he used to call me Miss Mafia...  
And I reported him to the Dean...

Fortunately, that put a stop to the name-calling. I asked her what her thoughts were on her professor's motivation. Did he think he was joking or that it was somehow acceptable to say something like that?

I just think that he was very small-minded. You know, and maybe the experiences he'd had in his life...maybe he didn't know any Italian families...I mean, there were some people with that impression...that if you have an Italian background that you are connected to a criminal organization.

So it seems that open racism is not currently a problem. There is however still some pervasive idea, at least in the South, that Italian Americans are somehow "different". One of my interviewees was particularly aware of this difference, and had a story to tell me. Although I had not noticed it on my arrival to her restaurant, the site of our interview, she pointed out to me a picture of her with one of the actors from the television program *The Sopranos*. She reported that a great number of her customers ask her "if that's my ex-husband or something. I say, 'No! Would you keep a picture of your ex lying around?' I don't think so!" She then said that the response is almost always the same: "Oh, I thought it might have been different with *you*." It



turns out that what was meant by “you” is Italian Americans. She does not seem to be seriously offended by comments like that, but then she might not have mentioned it if she did not feel that it was somehow relevant to her experience.

A comment I overheard comedienne Joy Behar make on *The View* one morning led me to ask a question of one of my interviewees. The topic of conversation on *The View* was whether or not hyphenated or qualified descriptive terms describing people might be somehow offensive. Terms like “African American” and “Adopted Daughter” were discussed, but when Joy Behar, an Italian American, was asked about the term Italian American, she replied that it was “no big deal”. She went on to explain that she did not feel any negative reaction if she were called Italian American. Someone who is adopted may resent that fact being brought up. Given the history of slavery in the United States, it is not surprising that the qualification of African before American might cause anxiety. It is interesting that, given the history of Italian Americans, Ms. Behar does not feel any negativity associated with that identity. Granted, she is a celebrity and lives in New York City, but the comment is still interesting. I wondered what response I would get here, so I directly asked one of my informants, “What does it mean for you to be Italian American in Atlanta?” His response: “It don’t mean shit.” After talking with him further, I sorted through what he meant by that comment. He was certainly missing the idea of an ethnic community, something which he grew up with in Utica, New York. He liked the idea of people sticking together based on their ethnicity, the idea that there was “someone you knew you could count on.” Further questioning did not reveal any distaste for other ethnicities or Southerners, and he did not report to me any discrimination or bad events directly related to his time in Atlanta. It was all about him feeling the loss of something he had felt before in his hometown.

## **CHAPTER 4 – Conclusions**

Given the background of my respondents, in that they all come from the Northeastern United States, many Italian Americans in Atlanta seem to perform their ethnic identities in order to reclaim some sense of community that they had where they grew up. All of my informants have come from places with large numbers of Italian Americans, and they have all commented on the lack of a sense of community here in Atlanta. I have not found many individuals who have been here more than a few decades, and the number of Italian businesses was not considered notable until after the 1996 Olympics. Several of my informants have commented on how they noticed “more Italian things to do” after the Olympics. This includes things from getting a “real” cannoli from a good bakery to being able to speak or at least hear Italian spoken in language classes to having a social club where they can meet other Italian Americans. This newfound availability of venues gives Italian Americans more opportunities to perform their ethnicity.

It appears that Italian Americans perform their identities for three groups. Firstly, they perform their ethnicity for and with other Italian Americans. This is directly related to the desire to create a sense of community, a community of people with whom you share something in common. Performing ethnicity as a group reinforces the social bonds that create a sense of community for Italian Americans in Atlanta. Ethnicity is also performed for non-Italian Americans. The Italian clubs, stores and events in Atlanta are not exclusively Italian, so in Atlanta, public Italianness is not ever “pure,” as one might venture to say that Little Italy in New York is. Several of my informants who have been to other cities with Italian American neighborhoods comment on the lack of such a place here in Atlanta. There are always people of other ethnicities around, often taking part in the same activities, as opposed to just observing.

This contrast seems to provide further reinforcement of an Italian American identity. Italian Americans for the most part enjoy the fact that their cultural heritage is easily accessible to many people, but there is also a sense of pride in being connected to these things in ways in which other ethnicities are not. Lastly, it appears that Italian Americans perform their ethnicities for themselves as individuals. While the public performances certainly reinforce ethnic identity, private performances factor into this as well. In their homes, by themselves or with immediate family, Italian Americans continue to perform their ethnicities through things like cooking, reading about or keeping up with Italian culture, or sometimes travelling.

Some of my findings seem to parallel Micaela Di Leonardo's analyses (1984). Despite the fact that all of my interviewees share the same ethnic identity, their actual lived experiences all vary somewhat. Just as there is no single Italian American narrative in the United States, there is no single story of Italian Americans in Atlanta. There are many similarities among my informants: all came from the Northeast, and all talked about the importance of food and family. Part of this similarity comes from the initial lines of questioning in finding informants. Some of my questioning was framed in the notion of community, so it is possible that I may have been speaking to someone who felt an Italian American identity but did not feel a sense of community, and perhaps I missed out on possible informants. It is extremely relevant, however, that all those people I interviewed who had an idea of a community came from areas with historical communities. Again, it seems that this is something that these people felt in their hometowns, and it is something they miss, despite the varying notions on what the state of the community in Atlanta is.

Richard Alba finds contemporary Italian American ethnicity to be almost a hobby or recreational activity, something that one can enact when one chooses (1985a). He also finds that

ethnic activity is centered on cultural symbols. This statement seems rather accurate when considering the Italian Americans I interviewed here in Atlanta. This idea of symbolism is resonant with the idea of the “commodity-sign” as proposed by Baudrillard (1970) and used by Davide Girardelli in his analysis of Italian food in the United States (2004). Girardelli believes that “some important aspects of contemporary food practices share significant traits with the notion of consumer society, such as a tendency toward symbolic consumption, homogenization, and commodification.” (2004:309) Although all of Italian American ethnicity in Atlanta does not revolve around food, it does rely heavily on symbols. Whether it is a place to go or a thing to do or buy, these symbols are consumed or displayed purposefully with ethnicity in mind.

Italian American identity is certainly voluntary. I have several acquaintances who were aware of my project and whom I would have considered viable for my project, yet they expressed no interest in participating. Everyone who can lay claim to this identity does not choose to do so. Italian American ethnicity is performed when possible and convenient among those who choose to do so. Food, family and the idea of tradition are symbolic of Italian American ethnicity in Atlanta, whether these are practiced fully or not. And possibly most interesting is the direct correlation of Alba’s observed leisure time activities to the ways in which Italian Americans enact their ethnicities here. This also ties into my informant who does not think that being Italian American means anything anymore. It has become something to be turned on and off when convenient, and maybe he feels that this trivializes his ethnicity to some extent.

So, in the end, what answer do I have for my question, “what does it mean to be Italian American in Atlanta?” Sometimes it serves as a bond between people of the same ethnic identification, and at other times this is for private, nostalgic reasons. This nostalgia is at least

two-sided. The first object of nostalgia is the sense of community that my respondents had in the places from which they came. My informants, all being from the Northeastern United States, grew up in areas with Italian American communities and neighborhoods, and this is something they seem to miss. There is another sense of nostalgia, though, directed at an imagined idea of what it means to have Italian heritage. For my respondents at least, it comes down to the manipulation of certain symbols for the purposes of displaying ethnic identity. These symbols may be tangible like food or linens or pottery, but they can also be more abstract concepts like family and tradition as signifiers for a slow-paced imaginary homeland that offers a temporary refuge from the challenges of life in a hyper modern society.

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