

Of Sicily and Its Ripples

Sicilianamericanità and Sicilian American Literature

'N jornu ca Diu Patri era cuntenti
e passiaa 'n celu cu li Santi,
a lu munnu pinsau fari un presentu,
e di la curuna si scippau 'n diamanti;
cci addutau tutti li setti elementi,
lu pusau a mari 'n facci a lu livanti:
lu chiamarunu "Sicilia" li genti,
ma di l'Eternu Patri è lu diamanti.

—Canto Popolare Siciliano

In 1918, writing about Sicilian actor Angelo Musco for the "Cronache Teatrali" of *Avanti!*, intellectual and political theorist Antonio Gramsci noted:

For the past fifty years, our politicians have tried to create the appearance of a uniform *Italian* nation: regions should have disappeared in the country, and their dialects from the literary language. Sicily is the region that has most *actively* resisted this tampering with history and freedom. Sicily has shown on numerous occasions to have a national, more than regional character of its own. . . . The truth is that Sicily preserves its own spiritual independence. (*Letteratura e vita nazionale* 394)¹

The political unification of Italy had not yet resulted in a blending of its people, the Italian *nation*. The integration might have taken place at the level of administration, but on all other levels—economic, social, cultural, and so on—the process had failed miserably. The more to the south one traveled, the more evident it became that the Italian regional identities worked against the homogenizing imperative of the newborn state. Of all the regions, the Sardinian Gramsci singled out Sicily as the one that challenged the imposed order at its core. In fact, even though Gramsci’s analysis originally pertained to Sicilian dialect theater, it extended to identify its roots in a “spiritual independence” that he believed was a characteristic of Sicily and its people. The Italian nation’s search for its soul had stopped at the tip of the boot.

Little has changed since Gramsci’s observation, and Sicilians’ allegiance to their mother(is)land is still very strong. Sometimes this bond transcends the boundaries of a *genius loci* to become, in its most perverse articulation, an ideology according to which Sicily is its people, the island defines its population in unequivocal ways, and the two are fused together in commonplace discourses. This way of “feeling” or “being” Sicilian has been the topic of seemingly endless analyses and unresolved controversies in Italy.

The pronounced self-view and the strong sense of identity are reinforced by an outsider’s perception of Sicily, which is rarely neutral. The mere toponym, in fact, evokes in others either exotic pictures of sun, sea, history, and arts or else the crude images of a backward mafia-ridden land. Agrigento’s Valley of the Temples, Taormina’s Greek amphitheater and breathtaking views, the Baroque architectural beauty of towns like Modica and Noto, and the natural charm of some local pristine beaches, all contribute to creating an aura of magnificence for tourists. However, its endemic political corruption, the octopus-like grip of the mafia, a stunted economy, and staggering unemployment rates are only a few of the factors that might make anyone refrain from calling Sicily a paradise. All these factors together make Sicilians experience being Sicilian as either a blessing or a curse rather than mere happenstance.

To be sure, every Italian region has its own unique history, culture, traditions, dialects, foods, and the like, but there is something about Sicily that makes the claims to a distinct character echo louder: Sicily is an island. With a total area of almost ten thousand square miles and a population of about five million inhabitants, Sicily is both

the largest island of Italy—and of the whole Mediterranean—and one of its most populated regions. I might be stating the obvious, but a study of *Siciliana* that underplays the “island factor” is, at best, incomplete, and at worst, misleading. The legacy of its geography cannot be overemphasized because living on an island forces one to think of it, first and foremost, in geographical terms. Sicily is part of the broader national Italian context and of the Italian South, as it is one of the twenty administrative regional entities that make up the Italian state. These are all perfectly sensible and valid perspectives from which anyone can view and consider Sicily. However, as an island, Sicily is detached though connected to the mainland, geographically separated but politically united to the state, and this feature warrants further consideration.²

The condition of being an island is, of course, not peculiar to Sicily alone. In fact, much of what is being and will be said here with regard to Sicily also applies to a discussion on Sardinia, just to stay in Italian waters, or any other Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean island. A whole field of scholarship, namely, island studies, or *nisology*, is devoted to the study of the world’s islands on their own terms with a transdisciplinary research approach. In his article “The Geographical Fascination of Islands,” Russell King focuses on islands as a geographical phenomenon that has inspired the scholarly attention of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and literary critics. King writes: “An island is a most enticing form of land. Symbol of the eternal contest between land and water, islands are detached, self-contained entities whose boundaries are obvious; all other land divisions are more or less arbitrary” (14). According to this scholar, and many others, the geographical factor is at the core of an island’s peculiarity and, at the same time, of the commonalities among islands. In fact, although nearly everyone agrees that many factors contribute to differentiating one island from another—among them, an island’s scale, its population’s size, its landscape and weather conditions, its location and degree of isolation and peripherality, and political and administrative systems, to mention just a few, island studies scholars adopt a methodological approach that seeks to uncover the common elements that bind together islands the world over. In sum, even though each island has its own specific identity, the fact itself of being an island influences the character of all islanders in similar ways.

On cultural and social levels, the “island factor” or “island way of life” produces what some have called *islandness*, which Godfrey

Baldacchino defines as “an intervening variable that does not determine, but contours and conditions, physical and social events in distinct, and distinctly relevant, ways” (“The Coming of Age of Island Studies” 278).³ Baldacchino adds: “Geographical boundedness, historical distinctiveness, floral and faunal speciation and endemism, linguistic nuances, cultural specifics, jurisdictional adventurism . . . collectively, the evidence proclaims *islandness* as a commanding paradigm” (279). There is no fixed yardstick with which to measure the scale of islandness, and there are, of course, extreme variations among islands. The experiences of some islands are not necessarily the experiences of all others, and there is no universal Truth for all islands in the world. However, islandness is a key feature that cannot be underestimated, and it is felt by islanders as well as perceived and recognized by others.

As a case study, Sicily seems to confirm the idea that its clear geographical limits influence the way its people think of themselves. Sicilian writer Gesualdo Bufalino points out that “Sicily suffers from an excess of identity, and I don’t know whether it’s a good or a bad thing” (Bufalino and Zago v).⁴ The island’s specificity, Bufalino continues, “is not just a geographical segregation, but engenders other types: of the province, of the family, of one’s bedroom, of one’s heart. Hence, our pride, our mistrust, our modesty; and the sense of being different” (vi).⁵ Sicilians show thorough consciousness of being born and living on an island and an exasperated sense of belonging that engenders an amplified sense of community and identity, which is a form of cultural-specific islandness.

However, this islandness is not the unilateral product of geographical conditions. In fact, an inherent contradiction generally characterizes islands. If, on the one hand, their geography invites closure, on the other, the history of most of the world’s islands shows connection. Islandness, Edward Warrington and David Milne write,

may best be understood in terms of a characteristic set of tensions and ambiguities, opportunities and constraints arising from the interplay of geography and history. *Geography tends towards isolation*: it permits or favors autarchy, distinctiveness, stability and evolution propelled endogenously. *History*, on the other hand, *tends towards contact*: it permits or favors dependence (or interdependence), assimilation, change and evolution propelled exogenously. An island’s

character develops from the interplay of geography and history, evasions and invasions, the indigenous and the exotic. (383)

In fact, islands have always been, and still are, even in postcolonial times, hot spots of international political strains. Due to their usually modest size and scarcity of military and nonmilitary resources, most islands are vulnerable and have been overseas possessions for many colonizing countries and empires.⁶ Sicily is no exception; it has been, for most of its history, a territory ruled by more or less distant political centers.

Sicily's island status is essential to its identity as is its troubled history. Especially because of its geographical location, embedded as it is between Europe and Africa, and, on the east-west axis, between western Europe and western Asia, Sicily has historically been the strategic epicenter of colonizing enterprises.⁷ A "crossroad of civilizations" is the most common euphemistic definition for the island's past, for there met the interests of the Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Arabs, Normans, and Spaniards, to mention just the most influential civilizations in chronological order. There was no standard form of colonization to which Sicily was subjected; it was a settler colony under Greek rule, the first province of the Roman Empire—and, famously, its breadbasket—and an administrative colony under the Bourbons. In November of 1860, following a popular plebiscite, Sicily was officially annexed to the Kingdom of Italy, thus becoming the southernmost part of the newborn country. To some, time-wise, Italy is only the most recent offshore colonizing power to conquer the island, so much so that in the aftermath of World War II, almost one hundred years after the unification, Sicilian nationalists coded their dissent to the Italian state in the language of a postcolonial struggle.⁸ In short, armed conquest, expropriation of land, extortion of tributes, military occupation, and, most recently, *miseria*—or starvation—emigration, and high unemployment rates have played an almost uninterrupted role in the historical development of Sicily.⁹

According to some, most notably Sicilian intellectual/writer/literary critic Leonardo Sciascia, the Sicilian history of colonial suffering and exploitation, coupled with its geographical insularity—read, isolation—engendered a particular process of identity construction, as well as recognizable cognitive and behavioral patterns in the population. In his 1970 *La corda pazza: Scrittori e cose della Sicilia*, Sciascia

speculated on the perpetual insecurity of the Sicilian people, which, according to him, was the primary legacy of a history of colonization:

One can safely say that insecurity is the primary component of Sicilian history, and it affects the behavior, the way of being, the take on life—fear, apprehension, distrust, closed passions, inability to establish relationships outside of the private sphere, violence, pessimism, fatalism—of both the collectivity and single individuals. (13)¹⁰

This “historical fear,” Sciascia continues, turned into an “existential fear,” which, sociologically, manifests itself in

a tendency in individuals, groups, and communities—and, finally, in the entire region to isolate and separate themselves. At a certain point, insecurity and fear have reverted to the illusion that such insularity, with all the conditionings, qualms, and rules that originate from it, is a privilege and a source of strength, when, in truth and experience, it engenders vulnerability and weakness. Hence a sort of alienation and madness, which, in terms of psychology and customs, induces attitudes of presumptuousness, haughtiness, and arrogance. (14)¹¹

Borrowing the expression from Sicilian avant-garde and Antigruppo poet and painter Crescenzo Cane,¹² who, in his turn, drew inspiration from Senegalese poet and intellectual Léopold Senghor’s concept of *négritude*, Sciascia baptized the sum of these attitudes as *sicilitudine*.¹³

Before the publication of *La corda pazzo*, Sciascia had dealt with the concept of *sicilitudine* in the preface of an anthology of Sicilian writers edited in 1967 with Salvatore Guglielmino, namely, *Narratori di Sicilia*. He further developed the topic in the book-length interview *La Sicilia come metafora* (1989), which contains the all-too-famous chapter “Come si può essere siciliani?” (“How can one be Sicilian?”), and in *Pirandello e la Sicilia*, in which he insists on the “historical insecurity” of Sicilians to justify the “Sicilian ways” (30). Sciascia’s *sicilitudine* is, to date, the most influential discourse on Sicilianness, the specific form that the islandness discussed earlier has taken for this particular island. No discussion about Sicily and Sicilians is possible today without questioning or concurring with

Sciascia's speculations. Sicilianness became, in his articulation, a "way of being," the inescapable condition of a population marked by "a history of defeats" (*La Sicilia come metafora* 6). With the concept of *sicilitudine*, Sciascia seemed to have pinned down the essence of Sicilians and unraveled their complex nature within the operative framework of cultural anthropology. *Sicilitudine* proved a most valuable grand narrative for Sicilians and non-Sicilians alike. While the former could finally resort to a well-articulated discourse to explain, in essentialist terms, their "nature," non-Sicilians found in *sicilitudine* a key to solving the riddles that the island posed—and continues to pose—to mainland Italy.

But much to Sciascia's dismay, a most complex discourse like *sicilitudine* has been readily misinterpreted by many and too often reduced to a learned source of stereotypes. *Sicilitudine* has, in fact, become so commonplace in contemporary discussions in Italy that in an article published in 2000 in the Italian national newspaper *La Repubblica*, entitled "Cent'anni di *sicilitudine*," critic and journalist Matteo Di Gesù invoked a sabbatical year during which all discussions about the Sicilian identity would be suspended. "To the difficulty of being Sicilian," Di Gesù explains, "one must add a certain intolerance that grows from being reminded of that so often" (10).¹⁴ The concept has gained so much currency in popular culture that at this point, Di Gesù adds, "*Sicilitudine* explains everything: for the most strident contradictions, blatant messes, and even the most banal crimes, there is always a self-exculpatory 'sicilianological' analysis, always accompanied by learned quotations" (10).¹⁵ Di Gesù was thus expressing his frustration over the inescapability of a situation in which a matter-of-fact statement such as "I'm (a) Sicilian" is automatically turned into an indulgent narrative.

In several academic and newspaper articles written throughout the years, Di Gesù has repeatedly questioned the presumed value of *sicilitudine* as a discourse to explain the consequences of Sicily's colonial past. The critic is especially worried about the sedimentation of what has become a cliché, "a falsely ethnographic stereotype," and a "huge 'cultural' encrustation, ahistorical and self-absolving" (*Dispatrie lettere* 72).¹⁶ So much so that, Di Gesù continues, today what is encouraged is only "a selection of memories and collective history that omits anything that does not correspond to the paradigms of the presumed *sicilitudine*, and that updates, by reiterating them, the usual *topoi* on the ontology of Sicilians" (72).¹⁷ Di Gesù, instead,

proposes to create a counternarrative to the dominant paradigm of *sicilitudine* with its emphasis on Sicily's alleged immobilism, and fatalism, starting with an alternative reading of its history.

In fact, the history of Sicily is not one of consistently supine acceptance of foreign rule. For instance, the Sicilian Vespers of 1282 can be read as an early successful episode of indigenous rebellion to resist and topple foreign domination. After the death of Frederick II, aka *Stupor Mundi*, and following the demise of the Hohenstaufen, the Angevins ruled Sicily with an iron hand. The population did not appreciate the new French rulers. In his study *The Sicilian Vespers*, historian Steven Runciman describes Charles of Anjou as a king who "distrusted the Sicilians . . . He did practically nothing to help their economy. He never visited the island except when he was on his way to the Tunisian crusade; he never personally supervised its administration" (211).¹⁸ Sicilians found an excuse to revolt on March 30, 1282, an Easter Monday, in Palermo. The Vespers were initiated by the now-legendary episode of Drouet, a French soldier who allegedly behaved inappropriately with a local woman. Runciman comments: "it was more than her husband could bear" (215). But it was actually more than the whole population could stand from the French. Soon Palermo, Messina, and other Sicilian cities and towns rebelled and declared their independence. Runciman points out that "the massacre [of Frenchmen] at Palermo and the gallant defence of Messina had been achieved by Sicilians alone. Their rising had been the result of a great conspiracy. . . . Their passionate hatred of the oppressor had given them strength enough so far" (228). Eventually, the Aragonese monarch Peter III seized the moment and, upon invitation by Sicilians themselves, entered the island, where he was declared king only a few months after the popular revolt. In sum, the Sicilian Vespers were an exemplary episode of a popular and spontaneous insurrection of a population ravaged by conquests but also willing and able to rebel.¹⁹

Di Gesù further points out that

it would be very difficult to attribute certain characteristics to Sicilian identity such as immobilism, fatalism, and fear of the future if one considered that, at least during the first century after the Unification, its subaltern classes have been very vibrant, progressive, confrontational, and combative. (*Dispatie lettere* 74)²⁰

The critic briefly remembers the *fasci siciliani*, the socialist-inspired popular movements that spread around Sicily between 1888 and 1894. Originally formed in Messina, and later in Catania and, especially, Palermo, the *fasci dei lavoratori* created an important social and political platform for workers and small business owners with Marxist leanings but also, and especially, farmers. The adherence and active participation of the latter group is particularly important because, as historian Francesco Renda points out in his 1977 study *I fasci siciliani*, “the leading elements in the formative process of the organization are not the workers nor the artisans, but the farmers. The center of gravity moves from the city to the countryside” (10).²¹ The involvement of farmers with the activities of the *fasci* should not come as a surprise. In fact, they were a direct product of the great Italian agrarian crisis of the end of the nineteenth century. In January of 1893, in Caltavuturo, a town in the province of Palermo, farmers had decided to protest against treatment and conditions. But their pacific demonstration met the bloody hostility of the king’s soldiers, and the rally soon turned into a massacre. The solidarity to the farmers on the part of the *fasci* all over Sicily was immediate and uniform. Renda observes: “The proclamation of the doctrine of class struggle moved from words to facts, and the countryside revealed itself as fertile land for the penetration of the socialist message” (110).²² The political nuances of the protest especially alarmed the government, which was pressured by many to restore public order. Following the issuance of a few new policies that did not please the *fasci*, in August of 1893, the movement organized in Corleone the first mass farmers’ strike in the history of Italy. From there, the protest spread like wildfire. But once again, after Caltavuturo, in Giardinello, the soldiers met the farmers’ demands with bullets. In an ironic and cruel twist of destiny, it was a Sicilian, Francesco Crispi, the newly appointed prime minister of Italy, who decided to repress the *fasci*, and to this end, he sent an army of thirty thousand soldiers to the island. The history of the *fasci siciliani* can be considered concluded with the proclamation of the state of siege in January of 1894. However, this chapter still represents the first time that “popular and socialist-inspired organizations, born in opposition to and rising up against constituted power” (Renda, *I fasci siciliani* 144),²³ were the protagonists of history, the first time in Italy that workers and farmers *made* history. The Sicilian Vespers and the *fasci*, along with other more or less organized movements of resistance to

domination, however episodic, should be read as instances of assertion of an all-too-local identity, as well as strong statements for political self-determination enacted by the local population through spontaneous insurgence.

Based on what has been discussed so far, Sciascia's sicilitudine is certainly a controversial discourse. However, it is definitely more than a form of self-exoticism with little conceptual merit. In his 1993 *Culture and Imperialism*, Edward Said suggests the following:

in Post-colonial national states, the liabilities of such essences as the Celtic spirit, *négritude*, or Islam are clear: they have much to do not only with the native manipulators, who also use them to cover up contemporary faults, corruptions, tyrannies, but also with the embattled imperial contexts out of which they came and in which they were felt to be necessary. (16)

In light of Sicily's colonial past, sicilitudine, too, like many other essentialist projects, has much to do with "the embattled imperial contexts out of which [it] came and in which [it was] felt to be necessary." Following in the footsteps of Frantz Fanon's 1952 analysis of the "black men of the Antilles" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, Sciascia shifted his interest from the political and economic effects of colonialism in Sicily to a psychoanalytic (or pseudo-psychoanalytic) analysis of its consequences on the population. He was, then, performing the role of the intellectual who diagnosed a colonial malaise in his fellow Sicilians, and pointed to its most obvious symptoms. Critic Roberto Dainotto offers a similar interpretation in his article "The Importance of Being Sicilian," in which he identifies Sciascia as the initiator of an Italian cultural studies discourse, and focuses on the role the intellectual assigned to Sicily as a subaltern cultural model. According to Dainotto, "through sicilitudine, Sciascia had then set the background to begin his work as a critic of the hegemonic, colonial Culture to which Sicily had been subjected" (211). In other words, by creating the notion of sicilitudine, Sciascia was bringing to the political fore again, after Gramsci, the Southern question, only this time from a Sicilian *and* postcolonial angle in essentialist terms.

Sciascia famously popularized the concept of sicilitudine in Italy, but he was not the only Sicilian writer to deal with questions of islandness. In fact, sicilitudine as a postcolonial discourse heavily

informs the literature of many Sicilian authors. Since the end of the nineteenth century, there has been a constant effort on the part of islanders to reclaim their agency by attempting to look at themselves, rather than being looked at, and to articulate their own identity. The preferred realm where this investigation has taken place is literature.²⁴ Especially throughout the 1900s, the sense of a distinct Sicilianness informed the literature of some Sicilian-born authors, who have written on the variegated history of the island and its effects on their fellow islanders. Some of them, like Luigi Capuana, Federico De Roberto, Dacia Maraini, and Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, have depicted the lives of a select few aristocrats, while some others, like Luigi Pirandello and Giovanni Verga, have focused on the middle class and, also, the lowest echelons of the social ladder to tell stories about, to use Verga's own expression, the *popolo dei vinti*. Some others, most notably Vitaliano Brancati with his notion of *gallismo*, a form of Don Juanism, have cast ridicule on what they perceived to be some aspects of Sicilian culture.²⁵ In the post-WWII period, Sicily became a metaphor for the country's ravaged state in Elio Vittorini's and Gesualdo Bufalino's novels, while the island's history and culture inform the literary production of Vincenzo Consolo. Poetry and theater made in Sicily also reflect a preoccupation with all things Sicilian, as in the works of vernacular poet Ignazio Buttitta, Nobel Prize-winner Salvatore Quasimodo, Nino Martoglio, and Pirandello. More recently, Sicilian director/screenwriter/writer Andrea Camilleri has earned a prominent spot on the bookshelves of detective fiction enthusiasts as well as literary critics, having captivated legions of fans in Italy and also abroad thanks to his Montalbano stories set in Sicily.²⁶ These are but just a few of the most prominent Sicilian writers who have written about Sicily, and all of them have contributed to this sort of obsessive-compulsive self-investigation and, consequently, to the formation of a distinctly Sicilian literary production. Thanks to literature, geography has been turned upside down, and Sicily has moved from the fringe to the center, from the periphery of Italy to its very core.

To be sure, Sicilian literature can be framed within the larger domain of island studies and island literatures. As Pete Hay points out in his article "The Poetics of Island Place," writers from the islands often tend to engage in "an identity-claiming literature of place." According to Hay, "The impact of colonial power relationships has been, and still is, distilled, concentrated on islands. . . . Much island

literature has to do with the politics of identity, with ‘reclaiming the territory’” (553). The contestatory potential of Sicilian literature lies in its refusal of the forced process of “Northernization” or homogenization according to Northern Italian standards on a cultural and literary level. The aforementioned authors have managed to enter the Italian literary panorama without camouflaging, and, more often than not, by capitalizing on their distinctly Sicilian voices. It seems like Sicily is, by choice, and more often necessity, the favorite topic of the literary production of Sicilian writers, who have engaged in a particular and recognizable process of identity construction in literature.

In the past forty years, Sicilian literature has received plenty of critical attention in the form of scholarly and nonscholarly studies, and many anthologies have been compiled by critics.²⁷ Despite its local character, which takes the form of a constant preoccupation with all things Sicilian, realistic depictions of local scenes and situations, as well as recognizable linguistic features, Sicilian literature has managed to become part and parcel of the world’s literary panorama.

Sicilianamericanità and Sicilian American Literature

Interestingly, a parallel phenomenon has emerged in the United States. Regardless of generational considerations, or interregional affiliations, some ethnic American authors have taken imaginative possession of the island and fashioned a Sicilian American identity. Many of these authors’ works specifically focus on their experience as Sicilian Americans and lay out a recognizable set of Sicilian cultural markers; these authors have produced Sicilian American literature.

The existence of a parallel process of identity construction in such distant places is due to both the perceived uniqueness of the island and the importance of its migratory movement toward the United States. Particularly during the course of the twentieth century, leaving became a significant part of the Sicilian life. It is easy to understand how the island’s finite geography translates into a lack of economies of scale, of resources, and, in most extreme scenarios, of access to decent standards of living and quality of life, therefore encouraging emigration.²⁸ Since the unification of Italy in 1861, all of the aforementioned phenomena, exacerbated by the newborn state’s failure to adequately address the different realities of the Italian mosaic, caused the whole Italian South to experience periods of intense

emigration flows to the other side of the ocean, mainly to Brazil, Argentina, and the United States. The debate around the numbers of emigration from different regions of Italy is still open. The figures are controversial and vary according to different sources that take or fail to take into consideration important factors such as the quality of immigration—that is, temporary versus permanent—and the role that illegal immigration plays in the data, just to mention a couple of scenarios that ostensibly could alter the numbers. As for the regions that contributed the greatest numbers of emigrants to the Italian diaspora, it might be appropriate to keep in mind historian Piero Bevilacqua's description of the emigration from Sicily, Campania, and Calabria as an "authentic demographic earthquake" (*Breve storia dell'Italia meridionale* 37).

During the first three decades of the twentieth century, Sicily underwent a massive displacement of its people to the United States that resembles that of Ireland during the second half of the nineteenth century and Puerto Rico since World War II. The following lines from vernacular poet Domenico Azzaretto's 1906 poem "La partenza dell'operaio per l'America" invoke the full extent of the impact emigration to the United States had on the people of Sicily:

What confusion in every town
family and home
since they started hearing about America,
everyone is getting ready to leave
some prepare their underwear and shirts
the penniless ones mortgage their houses
distressed, they all say good-bye to their families
and off to America they go! (Qtd. in Franzina 116)²⁹

In his 1963 study *L'emigrazione in Sicilia*, historian Francesco Renda reports that in 1900, about 29,000 emigrants left Sicily, of whom 21,000 left for the United States. Only six years later, in 1906, the number of Sicilians leaving the island had grown to more than 127,000, with 70 percent of them directed to the New World (48). What characterized the Sicilian emigration phenomenon and made it particularly worrisome, Renda continues, was

its element of permanence, being mostly if not all trans-oceanic, and its extraordinary growth rate, which caused

more than one million men to leave within a few years, all of whom were young men in the prime of life, in their peak of moral and physical strength. (58–59)³⁰

A hemorrhage of such proportions affected every aspect of the islanders' lives by bringing about substantial demographic, social, economic, and cultural changes.

As a result, those who left had to reinvent a bond with their mother(is)land. In his introduction to the 1967 edition of the anthology *Narratori di Sicilia*, Sciascia claimed that

From Palmieri to Quasimodo, every Sicilian who flees from Sicily will be in the condition of the exile, of the man who *cannot return*. In some, this condition fuels painful memories, nostalgia, or myth; in others, it causes a willingness to forget, distress, bitterness. (10)³¹

Whether nostalgic, romantic, or bitter, these and many other less famous exiles have passed their cultural legacy on to their offspring, and some of their descendants have felt it keenly and have written about it.

The work of Sicilian-born playwright, actor, and poet Giovanni De Rosalia is an early form of Sicilian American literature. During the first decades of the twentieth century, De Rosalia entertained the Italian American immigrant community of New York City with his farces. On stage, De Rosalia most notoriously played the role of Nofrio, a dialect- and Italglish-speaking Sicilian bumpkin who, with his antics, managed to build a large following of fans. After De Rosalia, several Sicilian American immigrants themselves and their children and grandchildren found a different kind of inspiration in their origins. In fact, in the works of Vincenzo Ancona, Jerre Mangione, Rose Romano, Ben Morreale, Tony Ardizzone, Nat Scammacca, Gioia Timpanelli, and others, Sicily plays a special role, and these writers' connection to the island is as much an emotional attachment as it is an aesthetic or inspirational source. This is not just for those who, like Ancona, were born there, or like Morreale, spent a significant part of their lives in Sicily; it is also for those who visited it later in life, like Mangione and Romano; and it is even for those who have never been there. Some of these authors, notably Mangione and Scammacca, became personally involved in the civil

struggles of the island against the two related phenomena of political and economic stagnation and the mafia. For all these novelists, short-story writers, memoirists, playwrights, and poets, Sicily and the Sicilian (is)landscape represent not just the raw material for their works but a call of sorts to which they *need* to respond. For instance, the Brooklyn-born-and-raised Ignazio (Nat) Scammacca reversed his family's footsteps by settling in Sicily to live, work, and write until his death in 2005. There, in the early 1960s, he was one of the leaders and founders of the social and poetic movement *Antigruppo Siciliano*. As he explained to critic Fred Gardaphé in a 1988 interview, "It took me two decades to give up America and two families. The remorse is still great; tears come to my eyes for what I have had to give up." Scammacca continued: "I supply myself with ideological excuses for my choices and destiny. Like Odysseus, I had to return to Sicily if life had any meaning at all" (*Dagoes Read* 201). Odysseus is a recurring theme in Scammacca's work.³² The writer identified closely with the legendary hero, the spirit of adventure that led him to his peregrinations, and finally, his journey back to his home island of Ithaca (Sicily). However, unlike Odysseus's journey back home, which lasted more or less a decade, Scammacca's took generations to accomplish. Sicily represented a strong magnet for this and many other U.S. authors who long for a home(is)land they only lived on through their Sicilian American families' legacies.

However, if on the one hand there is, on the part of these authors, an emotional identification with the island of their forebears, on the other there is a revisitation of the bond from the perspective of an ethnic American experience. Especially for second-, third-, and even fourth-generation writers, the island of Sicily had been mapped out and imagined in strict accordance to the authors' personal Sicilian American network but also in comparison to the United States. For instance, Sicily's natural beauty, orange groves, and patches of wild chicory made it the antithesis of metropolitan American cities, with their skyscrapers and pavement. The culture of the island's proud people, characterized by dignity, frugality, humility, and collectivism, clashed with the core principles of American culture that favor a more individualistic worldview and encourage rising through ambition and determination. Also, especially at the turn of the twentieth century, the acritical defense of everything Sicilian contrasted with the image conveyed by media and American society at large of Sicily as a land dominated by organized crime, whose people turned to private

forms of justice to settle controversies, and whose intense bouts of jealousy and wrath were resolved with the use of a knife or, worse yet, a sinister organization that promised to “take care of it.” With all of this information combined, the common denominator of many Sicilian American writers is a strong attachment to the island and, at the same time, a desire to reconcile their Sicilian origins with their American citizenship.

Therefore, *sicilianamericanità* is a self-ascriptive enterprise born out of discursive practices of both Italy and the United States. In this sense, it is not the answer but a response to, on the one hand, to paraphrase Gramsci, the “Sicilian question,” and, on the other, the American ethnic question. Sicilian American writers feel the pull of roots, but they are the product of routes traveled by themselves or their immigrant families. The different, and at times conflicting, acts of representation, self-representation, and writing strategies of these Sicilian American authors allow for a multifaceted reading of the Sicilian American Self(ves). In fact, *sicilianamericanità* reveals, in all its weakness, the fallacy that a relative space can only subsume a relative identity, contained, and easily identifiable. In this sense, there is no such thing as a “representative,” let alone “authentic,” Sicilian American writer. Rather, each author has elaborated in his or her text(s) an all-too-personal notion of Sicilian ethnic identity within the context of Italian American literature at large.

Consequently, *sicilianamericanità* in literature can take many disparate forms. It can range from naturalistic depictions of local traditions and folklore to more lyrical representations that tend toward the (re)evocation, through memory or imagination, of the Sicilian socio-cultural dimensions both in Sicily and in Sicilian communities in the United States. The ethnic component of *sicilianamericanità* might allow some authors to achieve a critical distance from any essentialist discourse on identity, while others might perceive their American Self(ves) as threatening cultural disintegration, and therefore, they might reinforce the already-pronounced tendency to insularity. While some Sicilian American authors may succeed in questioning the values generally ascribed to Sicilians, others uncritically resort to the most stereotypical modes of representation and self-representation. Certain themes, concepts, symbols, and language features in their texts signal that a Sicilian American consciousness is at work, and questions of ethnicity and identity construction surface in the form

of syntheses between Sicilian and American epistemological systems and literary traditions.

For instance, one of the characteristics of Sicilian literature is its oral substratum. Oral communication was for centuries the most immediate and valuable instrument of expression of the Sicilian population, and traces of orality surface in the works of Luigi Pirandello as they do, some eighty years later, in the most recent novels and short stories by Andrea Camilleri. Orality plays an important role in Sicilian American literature, too, especially for Mangione and Timpanelli, as well as for Ardizzone and Marotta, as it reflects that cultural system out of which Sicilian American authors operate. However, functioning as they do within a system reliant on the written word, Sicilian American writers must ultimately find a way to bridge the cultural gap they inhabit by creating new hybrid positions for themselves and their texts.

Also, the linguistic aspects of some texts reveal the construction of a hybrid Sicilian *and* American identity. Sicilianamericanità draws its material from the daily life of Sicilians in the United States, and, as such, it speaks Sicilian and American English. In his 1963 study, *Storia linguistica dell'Italia unita*, Tullio De Mauro calculated that at the moment of unification in 1861, only 2.5 percent of the Italian population was italoophone, in the sense of being able to read and write in what was considered “standard” Italian without a significant effort (37). As for the rest, the greatest majority of Italians resorted to their own local dialects for everyday transactions as well as any form of artistic creation. De Mauro also adds that “in absolute and relative numbers emigration especially weighed upon the regions with the highest rates of illiteracy, and, therefore, upon dialect-speaking areas” (57).³³ The linguistic choices of Italian American writers place them in a specific position with regard to the sociological and regional varieties of the Italian language, and Sicilian American texts abound with words and expressions that are style markers of the Sicilian dialect. The poems of Vincenzo Ancona, Antonino Provenzano, Lewis Turco, Emanuel Di Pasquale, and Maria Famà betray at first glance their Sicilian roots.

Sicilianamericanità is, to some authors, a sort of political program through which they position themselves as commentators and critics of both the Italian and the U.S. power structures. The contestatory potential of Sicilian American literature lies in its refusal of the

forced process of homogenization to Northern Italian standards and of conformity to mainstream American literature on a cultural and literary level. This one strategic aspect of *sicilianamericanità* is especially helpful, for it allows readers to reconsider Sicilian culture as a complex system within the Italian context, as well as Italian culture at large as a multiform ethnic alternative to Anglo-American mainstream culture. Rose Romano, along with Dodici Azpadu, Rachel Guido De Vries, Josephine Gattuso Hendin, and other Sicilian American writers challenge many of the assumptions of both Italian and American systems, especially regarding gender and sexuality issues.

One of the most common themes in many of these writers' works, not surprisingly, is the mafia. Since the mid-1800s, mafia is a word that has been used—and misused—with great frequency, and it takes on a multiplicity of meanings. Today, in its broad sense, it is used to refer to specific forms of corruption, especially in the presence of close ties between politics and criminality, made explicit by favoritism, clientelism, and so forth. It also is used when referring to the activities of other ethnic-specific forms of organized crime, as in the case of the Russian mafia, Chinese mafia, and so on. However, despite its international usage, when asked to locate on a world map the island of Mafia, anyone's finger would go to the Mediterranean and point at Sicily rather than wandering in the ocean waters off of Zanzibar, where a small island of approximately forty thousand people happens to bear that infamous name.

Interestingly, in Italy, the term first appeared in print around 1862/63, when Giuseppe Rizzotto and Gaetano Mosca wrote the drama *I mafiusi della Vicaria*, set in the cells of the famous jail in Palermo. In its early printed appearances, the term already carried negative connotations, as it was used to refer to bandits, to isolated individuals, who, for different reasons, refused the social and political orders—thieves, murderers, and so on.³⁴ Then, during the decades of social and political unrest that would eventually lead to the unification, especially on the western side of the island in and around Palermo, the mafia will acquire the profile of a network that unites the political, social, and criminal segments of society, namely, high- and low-profile politicians, landowners, sulphur mine owners, *gabellotti*—or middlemen of *latifondi* estates—and *campieri*—or field guards—brigands and the like.

However, only a couple of decades later, the word “mafia” made an early appearance in the United States in connection with the

bloodiest episode of the history of Sicilian immigration in that country: the New Orleans lynching. The 1891 execution was carried out by a mob of several thousand people against eleven Sicilians who were accused of the assassination of New Orleans police chief David Hennessy. On that occasion, the American press printed the word in capital letters to warn against the dangers of including in its society members of a primitive civilization who could not easily adapt to modern forms of justice. The *Leslie's Weekly* reported:

[P]robably no reasonable, intelligent, and honest person in the United States regrets the death of the eleven Sicilian prisoners in the New Orleans jail, Saturday, March 14. Whether they were members of the law-defying mafia or not, they belonged apparently to the lowest criminal classes, and on general principles deserved, and no doubt expected, to meet a violent death. (Qtd. in LaGumina, *WOP!* 84).

Subsequently, the decades following the murder of Hennessy were the most intense in terms of emigration numbers. Author of the 1993 *Storia della mafia: Dalle origini ai giorni nostri*, historian Salvatore Lupo writes: “The mafia families, just like the natural ones, separate and reunite again in a web of relations that cross the ocean in both directions” (151).³⁵ This is a crucial period for Sicilian American mafia, which found a profitable niche in U.S. society and built its business in connection with the island. Things have changed dramatically economically, socially, and politically in Sicily and in the United States since then, and the practices of mafia have adapted to the times and changes in both contexts. The various anti-mafia movements, especially those arising after the infamous killings of judges Giovanni Falcone and Paolo Borsellino in 1992, have done a lot to weaken its power, but the mafia still maintains a strong grip on the island and outside of it. Therefore, every discussion about Sicily and all things Sicilian calls for a consideration and deeper understanding of the consequences of this criminal organization on the local population and its offspring abroad.

In fact, if a history of the mafia and its developments transcends the scope of this study, its repercussions on American public opinion, and therefore, on the life, and especially the literature, of Sicilian Americans is at its core. The stereotype of an archaic society that resorts to violence and intimidation to resolve interpersonal

conflicts and achieve its goals, whatever they might be, is still a difficult one to eradicate and one that Sicilian Americans have had to confront.³⁶ Many Sicilian American writers tried to fight this partially distorted and potentially self-damaging perception. Jerre Mangione and Ben Morreale were especially affected by the mere existence of the phenomenon and wrote about it. Sicilian American women writers have also felt the same sting. In her poem “Mafioso,” Sandra Mortola Gilbert wonders:

Frank Costello eating spaghetti in a cell at San Quentin,
 Lucky Luciano mixing up a mess of bullets and
 calling for parmesan cheese,
 Al Capone baking a sawed-off shotgun into a
 huge lasagna—
 are you my uncles, my
 only uncles?
 Mafiosi,
 bad uncles of the barren
 cliffs of Sicily—was it only you
 that they transported in barrels
 like pure olive oil
 across the Atlantic? (Barolini, *The Dream Book* 348–49)

Some Sicilian American writers were personally affected by the mafia and chose to write about it in a most candid way. It is the case, for instance, of Karen Tintori’s 2007 *Unto the Daughters: The Legacy of an Honor Killing in a Sicilian American Family*. In this half-fictional, half-true story, Tintori tries to solve the mystery of the disappearance of her great aunt who, in 1919, had the courage to defy the rules of family, honor, and tradition by refusing to marry the man her father had chosen for her and eloping, instead, with a barber. The betrothed, Tintori would later find out, was the son a powerful mafia family in 1920s Detroit. The price of free will and disobedience was too high for this teenage Sicilian American girl, especially since the all-too-powerful Detroit mafia was involved. She was “taken care of,” most likely raped and tortured before being drowned by her own two older brothers. Because of both its mediatic and real dimensions, the mafia plays an important role in the social, cultural, and literary discursive practices of Sicilian Americans.