

Samuele F. S. Pardini. In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen

Jessica L. Harris

Volume 41, numéro 1, 2020

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1087344ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v41i1.35905>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Iter Press

ISSN

0226-8043 (imprimé)

2293-7382 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Harris, J. (2020). Compte rendu de [Samuele F. S. Pardini. In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen]. *Quaderni d'Italianistica*, 41(1), 168–170.
<https://doi.org/10.33137/q.i.v41i1.35905>

Lo sguardo triangolato sotteso al titolo (*L'America dei Padri*, non quella dei figli che si sono allontanati dalle radici, come Livorni stesso, nato a Pescara, ma delle radici riscoperte in nuovi padri che offrono il *loro* sguardo sulla terra d'adozione dei figli) si rafforza nel sincretismo dei riferimenti culturali, a partire dagli *exerga* (italiani, americani, ma anche appartenenti più in generale alla grande tradizione occidentale — francese, polacca) fino alla fitta rete intertestuale, non solo attraverso le lingue ed i tempi, ma anche attraverso le arti: da Dante e Petrarca a Montale, Luzi, Caproni, Amelia Rosselli, fino appunto a Beethoven (e forse anche Paolo Conte).

In *L'America dei Padri* Livorni dunque guarda alla patria acquisita, rivendicata come tale, attraverso la lente delle generazioni, i cui sguardi integrano quello dell'io narrante offrendo uno spessore e una sponda doppia (o plurima, con un effetto di eco che risuona più volte fra le due sponde dell'Atlantico) su cui si riverberano esperienze di vita, di lingua, di tradizione letteraria, tutte intrecciate.

ELENA FUMI

Independent scholar

Samuele F. S. Pardini. *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen*. Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2017. Pp. 280. ISBN 9781512600193.

Upon picking up *In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen*, the reader is confronted by a black-and-white photo from the early twentieth century of a young boy, wearing a hat and tie and carrying what appear to be books or folders, staring intensely back. Given the book's title, the child could either be Italian American or African American. Turning the book over to its back cover, the reader discovers that the photo is of an Italian American pupil in New York City, circa 1910–1915. This cover image, and the initial ambiguity regarding the child's ethnicity, is a perfect visual representation of the main argument put forth by Samuele F. S. Pardini in his book: that Italian Americans and African Americans are and were intimately connected, sharing similar values that contrasted with those of the dominant white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant individualistic and capitalistic modernity of twentieth-century America. Both groups' privileging of sharing,

community, mutuality, and above all, humanity (the “popular humanism of the Mediterranean”), as well as their marginalization from mainstream American society, served to, as Pardini argues, offer a “hybrid, transnational model of modernity” that was “capable of producing...an enlarged, non-solely color-based notion of race” (3, 4). By examining the relationship between Italian Americans and African Americans in literary works, films, and popular performances, and employing a contextual criticism approach, Pardini explores the constructions of this new hybrid, transnational modernity, taking into account issues of class and gender, in addition to that of race. In so doing, he makes an important contribution to the scholarship by bridging the gap between these two communities, which have been studied separately despite their “proximity of ways of being and living” that brought them in close contact throughout the twentieth century (3).

Chapter One examines Booker T. Washington’s *The Man Farthest Down* (1912) and his discussion of southern Italians in light of his own experience as an African American having lived through slavery and Jim Crow America. Pardini shows how Washington finds that it is the southern Italian woman who is at the bottom, a position similar to that of the slaves of the United States due to their shared “working and mental conditions” (30). This recognition allows for Pardini to formulate and examine three key points in his work: 1) a “new geo-political, Afro-Mediterranean region” that links the two cultures and creates a modernity that challenges the WASP American twentieth century version; 2) the investment of African Americans in Italian Americans; 3) the importance of the mother figure deriving from this region that works to the same effect (17). Following this establishment, Pardini moves on to Emanuele Crialesi’s film *Nuovomondo* (2006), exploring the character of Fortunata Mancuso to show how her refusal to undergo Ellis Island’s biopolitical immigration procedure challenges U.S. modernity while simultaneously affirming her own “way of being modern” which is rooted in her Mediterranean humanism (30).

The next three chapters focus on the Italian American male, the African American male, or the relationship between both as represented in literature and film. Through an analysis of Jerre Mangione’s *Mount Allegro* (1943), works by six African American male writers including William Motley and James Baldwin, Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* (1972) and *The Godfather Part II* (1974), Don DeLillo’s *Underworld* (1997), and Frank Lentricchia’s *The Music of the Inferno* (1999), Pardini skillfully highlights the Italian Americans’ communal, inclusive, and democratic modernity and its inherent incompatibility with white Protestant America’s modernity. This incompatibility results in Italian Americans having an

“invisible blackness” which connects them to the African American community, and thus, allows the African American male writers to invest in Italian American men in their works which decenter blackness from the discourse and instead question whiteness and its “interconnected pillars, [of] heterosexuality and masculinity” (123). Notably, in discussing the Italian American male gangster trope, Pardini introduces the mother figure, the “thinking female subject,” whose commitment to the community serves as a contrast to the emotional Italian American men and their assimilationist tendencies (159).

Chapter Five is dedicated to the Maria figure with Pardini analyzing “her repeated manifestations” in works by John Fante, Mary Tomasi, Michael Decapite, and Carol Maso, as well as in several Bruce Springsteen songs, that show her “cross[ing] the color and ethnic line and embrac[ing] the other as a possible version of herself” (171). In this way, Pardini shows how the Maria trope is the ultimate subversive figure since, rather than seeking acceptance as do Italian American men, her firm belief in communalism and mutual responsibility challenges the patriarchal, individualistic, and capitalistic nature of American modernity and creates a different and more ideal form of modernity. The final chapter provides an interesting analysis of the performances of two popular musical duos: Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis, Jr. and Bruce Springsteen and Clarence Clemons. Pardini demonstrates how the shared values of both Italian American and African American cultures manifested themselves in their performances “that destabilized fixed orders and allowed them to stage their differences by way of maintaining their own individual identity [thereby making] them equal and belong together” (238).

In the Name of the Mother: Italian Americans, African Americans, and Modernity from Booker T. Washington to Bruce Springsteen is a stimulating, engaging exploration of the connection between Italian Americans and African Americans. Given the emphasis on the Italian American mother figure, one wonders how African American women play into this relationship and its deconstruction of normative twentieth century American modernity. Nonetheless, Samuele F.S. Pardini’s work is a thought-provoking one that should open the doors to more explorations of this topic.

JESSICA L. HARRIS
St. John’s University