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ORCID# 0000-0002-6507-9034

Italian Floridians[1] in South Florida: An Oral History Collection in the *New New Land*

Vincenza Iadevaia

Abstract

This article discusses a new concept, *new new land*, and the role of material culture as an identity marker. The research is based on ethnographic data (Italian American Oral History Collection). The *new new land* is a space in which Italians who relocated to South Florida experienced a different migration from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Methodologically, excerpts from interviews are used to document the Italian Floridian experience in South Florida and pursue answers to such questions: Why did Italian Americans choose the Sunshine State as their new home? What meaning do Italian Americans give to this *new new land?* What happens to *Italianità* when one moves to a different area? In the *new new land*, Italian Floridians experience a symbolic idea of *Italianità* in their ongoing journey for which more research will reveal hitherto undocumented aspects of this vibrant group.

Keywords: *Italianità*, Italian American Oral History Collection, Italian Floridians, *New New Land*, place, space

Güney Florida'daki İtalyan Floridalılar: *Yeni Yeni Topraklarda* Bir Sözlü Tarih Koleksiyonu

Vincenza Iadevaia

Öz

Yeni bir kavram olan *yeni yeni toprakları* ve maddi kültürün kimlik belirleyici rolünü ele alan bu araştırma, etnografik verilere (İtalyan Amerikalı Sözlü Tarih Koleksiyonu) dayanmaktadır. Güney Florida'ya yerleşen İtalyanlar, *yeni yeni topraklar*da on dokuzuncu yüzyılın sonları ve yirminci yüzyılın başlarındakinden farklı bir göç deneyimini yaşamışlardır. Çeşitli mülakatlardan yararlanarak Güney Florida'daki İtalyan Florida deneyimini belgelemeyi amaçlayan bu çalışma, İtalyan Amerikalıların yeni evleri olarak neden Florida eyaletini seçtikleri, *yeni yeni toprakların* ne anlam ifade ettiği ve farklı bir yerde *Italianità* deneyiminin nasıl şekillendiği sorularına yanıt aramaktadır. İtalyan Floridalıların *yeni yeni topraklar*daki yolculuklarında sembolik bir *Italianità* düşüncesini deneyimledikleri görülür. Yeni çalışmalar, bu hareketli topluluğun şimdiye kadar belgelenmemiş yönlerini ortaya çıkaracaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Italianità*, İtalyan Amerikalı Sözlü Tarih Koleksiyonu, İtalyan Floridalılar, yer, *yeni yeni topraklar*

Every two Italians living in the South ...
called Florida home.
(Mormino, *Land of Sunshine* 17)

This article discusses the role of material culture as an identity marker and proposes a new concept, *new new land*, based on ethnographic data from research carried out in South Florida (Italian American Oral History Collection). I specifically focus on Italians in

South Florida, or as I will refer to them, Italian Floridians, who, to my knowledge, have not yet been studied in detail so far.

Over the past decades, a large number of Italian Americans have relocated to Florida, "The Italy of America" (Mormino, *Italians in Florida* 24), usually leaving the first place of arrival of their progenitors. In this paper, I will pursue the following questions to understand this group and discuss some possible answers based on ethnographic data:

> (1) Why did Italian Americans choose the Sunshine State as their new home?
>
> (2) If people ascribe meaning to places, what meaning do Italian Americans give to this *new new land*?
>
> (3) What happens to *Italianità* when one moves to a different area?

I propose that the *new new land* is a space in which Italians who relocated to South Florida experienced a different migration from the one that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century primarily in the northern sections of the United States. In addition, they "are adopting [a] new form of ethnic behavior" (Gans, "Symbolic ethnicity" 5). For this reason, the *Italianità* we encounter in the *new new land* may represent a new stage in the Italian American migrants' history. In the following section, to provide a broader socio-historical perspective, I will first introduce a brief history of Italians in Florida. Then, to better understand the concept of the *new new land*, I will define my use of the terms *space* and *place*. This background is necessary to address the second question.

Lastly, as a response to question three, I provide ethnographic data from the project Oral History Collection. Excerpts from some interviews help me draw a more accurate picture of the Italian Floridian experience in South Florida specifically in Palm Beach County and Broward County. Among the themes that emerged in the interviews, I concentrate on *Italianità*, Florida as a paradise, a new idea of community, material culture, and food as a remembrance.

In the end, it becomes clear that, in the *new new land*, Italian Floridians are experiencing a symbolic idea of a community, where new semiotics of *Italianità* can lead to broadening our perspective on Italian American studies.

Brief History of Italians in Florida

Turning to the first question – *Why did Italian Americans choose the Sunshine State as their new home?* – we witness that Florida represents a world apart compared to other states. Namely, while for the first-generation migrants to Florida, geographic mobility was linked to ethnic groups, for later generations one can see the fracture in the community bond for different reasons, i.e., mixed marriages, and the opportunity to find better jobs (Battistella 1989).

Preliminary research on Italian migration in the State of Florida was undertaken by the American historian and writer Gary R. Mormino in Tampa who examined the period between 1885 and 1985. Mormino's work delineates the historical presence of Italians in the Sunshine State, conferring an extensive understanding of the Italian experience in Florida.

The Sunshine State needed to repopulate its wide space, and the Italians embodied the migrants who could adapt perfectly to a tropical climate (Mormino, *Italians in Florida*). Tampa comprised distinct ethnic groups, African Americans, Spaniards, Italians, and white natives. Based on Mormino's research, the Latin enclave was the only place where the primary wave of Italian migrants could live. They sought work in the cigar factories, living predominantly in the Ybor City district. Italian migrants who had settled there "by the mid-1890s, [were] seeking refuge to escape the nativist persecution suffered in New Orleans" (Mormino, "Tampa" 348).

Tampa not only attracted Italians from other states but also directly from Italy. These Italian migrants did not solely work in the cigar factories, but they were also skilled as artisans, sculptors, craftsmen, fishermen, and gardeners (Mormino, *Italians in Florida*). Despite all difficulties, they were able to carve out a space for themselves, and even a sense of community (Mormino, "Tampa").

Mormino's seminal work is essential for comprehending Italians' earlier migration to Florida. However, I must emphasize that my investigation explores a much later and significantly different migration story and thus it merits a new conceptualization. In this latter case, the focus is later migration to South Florida (vs. initial migration to Tampa), which, in my opinion, has become a dreamscape, an island of symbolic spaces that I call the *new new land*. To that end, I will argue that the concept of space and place is distinct from not only initial migration to Tampa but also from other Italian American spaces and places. I argue that in the *new new land*, the outside space is more symbolic. On the contrary, the inside space, seen as an emotive environment, appears to be the more essential. In this regard, the house becomes a private sphere and *Italianità* is a memento. Thus, this new legacy of re-invented *Italianità* deserves to be analyzed with a novel perspective.

Having briefly introduced the preliminary works on the history of the Italians in Florida, I will now proceed to discuss the terms space and place and their relation to my second research question.

Space and Place

Broadly speaking, one can say that "each living body is space and has its space: it produces itself in space and it also produces that space" (Lefebvre 170). In other words, space and place are neither innate nor permanent (Gieseking et al., 2021) but they are constructed and adapted according to the actions and meanings that people associate with them. In this regard, Henri Lefebvre's fundamental work on the social production of space underlines that space carries social meanings and people create social space while producing social relations (Lefebvre).

There is also a nuanced formulization of the relationship between space and place. Namely, space is often seen as "the more encompassing construct, [where] place retains its relevance and meaning but only as a subset of space" (Low, *Spatializing Culture* 12). However, as I will detail soon, I aim to show how this relationship undergoes a reversal in the case of Italian Floridians. Namely, I will try to convey that for the Italian Floridian space *Italianità* is encapsulated in a more symbolic way in one's private place.

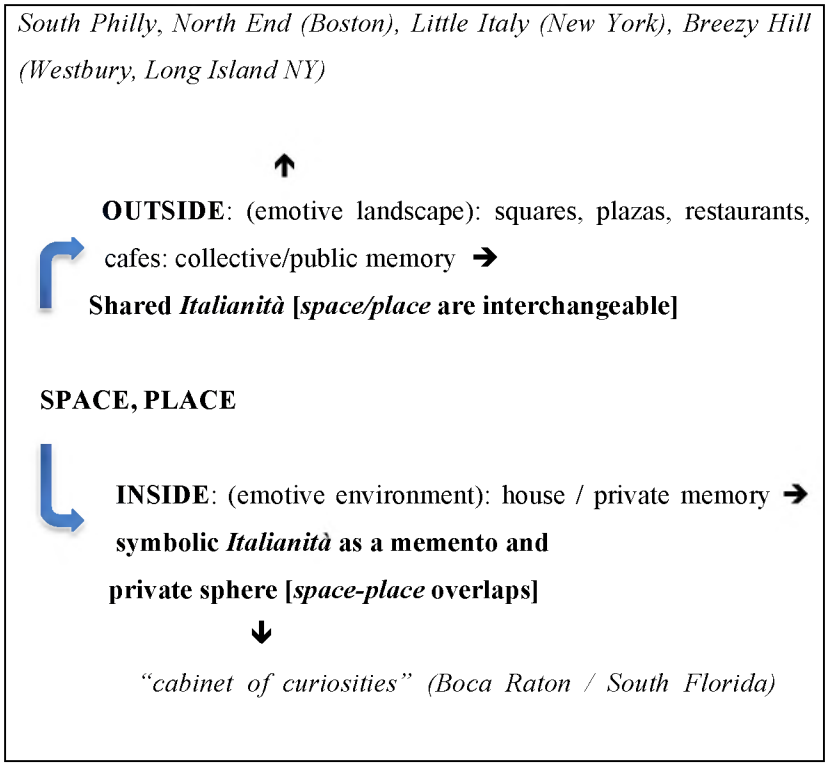
The anthropologist Setha M. Low coined the concept of *spatializing culture* by approaching space and place as social constructions and analyzing both the social and environmental elements that generate physical space and place, as well as the experience of individuals and the way they construct meanings. In this article, I revisit the usage of the two terms space and place drawing mainly upon her insights.

More specifically, Low's approach facilitates my theory on the similarities and differences between the terms space and place inspired by analyzing the Italians in South Florida, in comparison to the Italian Americans' *space/place* elsewhere. This change of perspective is useful to show how Italian Floridians interact, live, and create meanings in their *space-place*, which I labeled the *new new land*. Here, the adjective *new* is repeated intentionally: the adjective *new* closer to the noun *land* means contemporary. The repeated adjective, which now modifies *the new land,* informs us that something beyond the ordinary and mundane is taking place, thus *the new new land*.

In this imagined land, *Italianità* takes on symbolic connotations rather than tangible experiences. That is, if not all, the great majority of memories and imaginations that exist in the *new new land* about Italy seem to have been passed down from their parents or grandparents, but they were often not experienced first-hand by Italian Floridians themselves. In this regard, one can say that space and place acquire distinct meanings among different generations of Italian Americans.

As it is well known, the Italian American migrant communities, like many other ethnic communities, have historically constituted ethnic enclaves in created ethnic landscapes with a strong sense of ethnic identity, whereas I argue that, being Italian Floridian presents a different picture, more of a symbolic association. Based on this distinction, the spaces in which Italian Americans live can be categorized into two types: i) *space/place* outside, and ii) *space-place* inside as illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1:



Note that the use of different punctuation marks is not random. Namely, the slash in *space/place* shows the possibility to interchange the two elements since the ethnic identity is experienced in both venues. In other words, *Italianità* is felt both outside the house (the ethnic enclave) and inside the house. On the other hand, the dash in *space-place* indicates the combination or the overlapping of the two elements. Thus, as a *space-place,* the house of a Floridian Italian is "a third area that has the potential of bringing together aspects of both constructs into a new synthesis" (Low, *Spatializing Culture* 13). The first-generation migrants recreated the communities after their birthplaces in their image and likeness. However, for the Italian Floridians, this ethnic community takes on a symbolic connotation, over time becoming only a state of mind. This distinction makes me argue that Italian Floridians harbor a new paradigm of *Italianità*.

We can now discuss in more detail how these constructs (*space/place* vs. *space-place*) are instrumental in understanding the changes in Italian migrants' spaces through initial generations of migrants settled in ethnic enclaves such as North End (Boston), Little Italy (New York), Breezy Hill (Westbury, Long Island), to the most recent generations now re-settled in counties of south Florida such Palm Beach and Broward.

First, consider the initial generations of Italian migrants and enclaves they created. For them, the outside space is a remarkable venue to share *Italianità* with other *paesani* 'paesans.' In this context, one can say that "the built environment of an ethnic enclave contributes to the definition and redefinition of the ethnic identity of its inhabitants" (Bogdana Simina i). Here, to understand the contribution of outside space to the feeling of shared identity among the first generations of Italian migrants I would like to cite an excerpt from our interview with Edmondo Catania. Born in South Philadelphia in 1944, Edmondo moved to Florida in 2012. While talking about his childhood, he reports:

> We lived in South Philadelphia, and we lived in an all-Italian community. . . . we lived with people like Bobby Ryddel[2] and Frankie Avalon[3] were all in the neighborhood at the time, unknown people so it was a real . . . fun place to be. Pat's Steakhouse, . . . where they served steaks right around the corner, always smelling it. And the smell of Italian food was always going on.

Likewise, Dina Santomaggio, born in Yonkers (NY) in 1942 to Italian migrants says:

> The neighborhood in which I grew up was strictly Italian. It was all Italian because all our neighbors were Italian, we all knew each other. In the wintertime, the kids would all play outside and you know, have snowball fights. And then my mom would have everybody come into the back of the store. And she'd make hot chocolate for everybody in [and] all the mothers are there with the kids, we'd have a big social event. It was a lot of fun. And it was safe then to be outside. But like I said, we all knew each other. We're all neighbors, and we all helped each other.

Shared places create feelings of identity. As observed by Low, the migrant community can be described as an ethnic enclave with an extensive array of common feelings and desires:

> the urban spaces have always included performative components that guide public and private emotional responses, … The relationship of the urban environment, however, is not just that the built environment produces affect and feeling but also that affect in part produces the built environment. ("Spatializing Culture: Social P. and C." 153-4)

In addition to the excerpts I cited above, a look at some Italian American literary examples can provide further evidence of an emotive landscape of first-generation migrants. 10th Avenue, part of the area called Hell's Kitchen, in the heart of New York's Neapolitan ghetto, accurately stated by Mario Puzo ("Choosing a Dream") represents a great model of an ethnic landscape in New York, which South Florida in contrast did not experience yet. The first-generation migrants tried to recreate places and spaces according to their native villages: "the *Panettiere* … the grocery filled with yellow logs of provolone … the barber shop closed for business but open for card playing" (*The Fortunate Pilgrims* 5), but more than that, "the children covered the pavements, busy as ants, women almost invisible in black, made little dark mounds before each tenement door" (5). The community of initial generations of Italian migrants is not an imagined one, it is filled with the typical *botteghe* ("shops"). The surrounding space reflects customs and practices that accurately define their ethnicity. For instance, religious feasts are an important element in Italian American communities and external space is also instrumental in practicing awareness of belonging in this domain. According to Joseph Sciorra, "In New York, Italian Americans … create socially accepted sacred space within their neighborhoods. These structures, created by individuals and families, are an expression of the larger community's ethnic, religious, and aesthetic values" (185). The trope of an emotive-ethnic landscape is also found in the verses written by the Italian American poet Giovanna Capone,[4] who underlines the necessity for the migrant, to live *porta a porta* 'next door' with *la famiglia* 'the family' and other *paesani* 'paesans.'

They moved in next door
and next door
and next door
till one by one, all down the block, the dagos flocked
and our neighborhoods became
a Little Italy, of sorts. (16)

All of these anecdotes reveal that the ethnic enclave of first-generation Italian Americans is a good specimen of a constructed and shared emotive landscape. In contrast, in South Florida, the community as an ethnic space has a more elusive definition. For most of the Italian Floridians, there is an impulse to recapture the mood of an imagined land. However, the persistence of ethnicity, whether symbolic or not, seems to apply only to older generations of Italian Floridians[5]. We currently have no evidence that the younger generation of Italian Floridians is concerned with preserving the concept of ethnic community.

More than their belonging as a community, the Italians of Florida focus on private spaces to recompose fragments of a diluted identity. Thus, the space acquires a different connotation, from the outside to the inside, from an emotive landscape to an emotive environment, and from collective to private, hence my use of *space-place* for these Italian descent individuals in Southern Florida rather than *space/place* which I spare for Italian Americans in other states.

Some cities on Florida's southeastern coast such as Boca Raton, Delray Beach, and Fort Lauderdale are prominent examples of newly imagined Italian communities, where cafes, restaurants, and *pizzerie* already gained their success: reinvented Little Italies,[6] "ethnic theme parks' … which are virtually Italian in name only" (Krase). The image of Florida as "The Mediterranean of America" is just a folkloristic one. Although even the architectural style resembles Italy, it's simply an American invention (Mormino, *Italians in Florida*).

In this sense, a representative illustration can be Boca Raton, which has a consistent Italian Floridian community. Our project started and is stored in this city. There are several Italian cafes and restaurants located in different areas of the city. For instance, Cosa

Duci is a Sicilian restaurant that serves pastries and lunch, where people gather, especially late morning for an Italian breakfast with cornetto and cappuccino. Saquella Cafè is another Italian American bistro where every Saturday *affezionati* 'loyal' Italian Floridians gather to practice Italian and *sorseggiare un caffè* 'to sip a coffee.' Doris Bakery is a Sicilian Market where *parlando Siciliano* 'speaking Sicilian,' one can order *cannoli* and *cassata*. Principessa Ristorante is a high-class restaurant specializing in classic Italian dishes with a range of handmade pasta. It is a fascinating example of an imagined Italy. Their website reports its "waterfront location and grand 1930s interior transport guests to the iconic villas of Lake Como."

While these places serve the same function as elsewhere, namely public spaces where people share an ethnic identity, it should be emphasized that in the case of Italian Floridians, this ethnic identity is symbolic. In South Florida, there is nothing of the ethnic character of a so-called Italian neighborhood that

> involve a concentration of the members of a group, together with an ethnic institutional infrastructure .... Population concentration combined with infrastructure cause an area to be perceived both by group members and by outsiders as having a specific ethnic character. (Alba et al. 886)

Many of those we interviewed were born in the USA. Some of them visited Italy but not the places where their descendants were born. Some of them only did it after their descendants' passing. Some others have never learned the dialect spoken by their parents or grandparents, or standard Italian.

Adrienne Martin, who relocated to South Florida in 1955, visited Italy twice, but not Sicily, the island where her grandparents were born. She explains this common situation very well:

> [Sicily] it's on my list for the next time ... I've been to Italy twice, but not to Sicily ...
>
> so, if I had learned Italian, I probably would [have] learned Sicilian dialect, anyway ...
>
> I never had the chance even to learn that [emphasized]. I did

> spend quite a bit of time with my grandmother when I was, like, preschool age, while my mom was at work. But she had always been very much, even with her children growing up, she'd been very much interested in the idea that we are Americans now and we do everything the American way, and so. . . She spoke in dialect with her sisters, but to her children at home, not that much.

Interestingly enough, Adrienne decided to learn standard Italian in Boca Raton only a few years ago. The *new new land* somehow allowed her to rediscover her grandparents' *Italianità*. For Adrienne, learning the language of her ancestors is a way of sharing Italian identity even if it is mostly symbolic for her by now. Perhaps, in general, the feelings perceived in a specific place can provide the impetus to piece together or recreate the social, linguistic, and cognitive dimensions of an ethnic group. However, this is not the case for the *new new land*. To clarify, if "Language use also affects the public identity of a neighborhood" (Alba et al. 889), this is not present in the *new new land*. Basically, in the *new new land*, "emotion is the sociocultural fixing of affect in individual lives through personal experience and meaning-making" (Low, *Spatializing Culture* 145). In fact, through personal experience – learning Italian at her age – Adrienne is making her own symbolic Italian identity like many others.

In this section, to substantiate the nuance between *space/place* vs. *space-place*, I compared initial Italian migrants with Italian Floridians. For the former, the Italian enclave is real where *space/place* is reproduced after their birthplaces, and they experience first-hand *Italianità* not only in their houses but also through a closely-knit community with customs and shops in their image and likeness. On the other hand, for the latter, the Italian Floridians, the use of *space-place* captures a rather symbolic association with *Italianità*.

In the next section, I will describe the oral history collection. Then, I will present excerpts from interviews that focus on *Flor-Italianness*, Florida as a paradise space, new ideas of community, material culture, and food as a legacy. All of these themes support my argument for the Italian Floridians' symbolic association with the *Italianità*.

Italian American Oral History Collection:

The Case for South Florida[7]

The digital archive project on Italian Floridians in South Florida[8] was carried out at Florida Atlantic University (FAU, Boca Raton) in 2017. It was created and developed by Vincenza Iadevaia, Viviana Pezzullo, and Federico Tiberini under the supervision of Professor Ilaria Serra. This project aimed to start an oral ethnographic archive of Italian Americans who resettled in South Florida. The archive includes a series of interviews with Italian Floridians. Our goal is to continue collecting stories, focusing on material culture, and memories, and above all we would like to continue investigating how the concept of *Italianità* evolves in the *new new land.*

We employed a qualitative method and collected video-audio recordings with semi-structured interviews. A form with interviewees' information was filled out before an interview. The form included questions regarding the name, place, and date of birth of the interviewee. We also asked whether an interviewee was a first, second, or third-generation Italian American and the origin of their parents as well as the languages that they spoke. Finally, we asked when they relocated to Florida. Permission was granted by all interviewees for us to archive the interviews with their names and to use the collected data for research purposes. Additionally, I will also mention personal communications as a follow-up.

All the interviewees are first or second-generation Italian Americans who live permanently in South Florida where they settled at different stages of their life. In this first stage of the project, people over 50 years of age were given priority.

The interviews were recorded in English. Only a few of the interviewees were fluently bilingual. Some were able to code-switch between English and Standard Italian or regional languages of Italy, i.e., Neapolitan and Sicilian. An initial set of queries were presented while we video-recorded the interviews. The questions focused on stories revolving around family heirlooms, memories, and their idea of *Italianità*. In addition to these set questions, which facilitated getting to know the interviewees, they were also allowed to add any other details.

The first interviews we conducted were transcribed by Angela Rivieccio from FAU Digital Library. Thus, the ethnographic archive contains both an audio database and accompanying transcriptions. The ethnographic material is stored at FAU. These resources are not only available for researchers, but we also aim to produce self-standing project outcomes.[9] The archive is still in progress, and it is constantly enriched with new material.

After this methodological background, in the following subsections, I will present excerpts from the interviews. The material is very rich with many interesting themes among which I selected excerpts that I considered crucial to describe the Italian Floridians. The themes that the excerpts cover are the *Italianità* in South Florida, Florida as a Paradise, what remains of the ethnic community, material culture, and food as a remembrance.

The *Italianità* in South Florida

What is the new phase of *Italianità* as experienced in Florida? Can we describe *Flor-Italianità* in terms that are distinct enough from *Italianità* experienced by the first Italian migrants to the United States? Can one talk about a mingling of feelings? Is there a new kind of Italian ethnic identity? From the information I gathered, it appears that the notion of *Italianità* in South Florida is based on fragments, narratives, and memories. Sometimes it takes a while before one can rediscover *their* own Italianness. I will now include some excerpts that attest to these. I would like to start with an excerpt from Vincent Zarrilli, who first migrated to the United States in 1960 from a small village in the Campania Region and moved to Florida in 1998.

> Interestingly enough, um, when I first came here [to South Florida] there were very few Italians. And, uh, I was so busy traveling. I rediscovered my Italian, interestingly enough, through my business when I was in Argentina, in Brazil, or even Peru. Um, I'd, I learned how to speak Spanish. And I met many of the Italians who had migrated there, so we'd speak. And, and, eh, they, we'd start talking about their [emphasized] Italian heritage, and my Italian heritage. So I, I rediscovered this, uh, this feeling of [being] Italian.

As we discover thanks to the project, Italian Floridians are starting to metaphorically re-establish a connection with an imagined Italy and rebuild their *Italianness* in a distinct way than other communities in the United States. While the first Italian migrants experienced "nostalgia [as] a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym, *The Future* xiii), Italian Floridians consider nostalgia as "a romance with one's own fantasy" (xiii). Another interesting example comes from the interview with Nicoletta Sorice. Born in Southern Italy in 1936, Nicoletta migrated to the United States in 1950. In her interview, while talking about memories and remembrance, she points out that the feeling she perceives in the *new new land,* where she relocated permanently in 1982, is different from the one she experienced in her first move to the United States. Switching from American, through Italian to Neapolitan, she underlines:

> A pride that I have as an individual today is to be an American. Because America has taught me many things and my children are part of this country. *Essere Italiana* 'Being Italian,' of course, I love it, *però mi sento più Americana Italiana, che Italiana Americana a questo punto, perché sono già settant'anni quasi* 'but I feel more American Italian than Italian American at this point because it has already been almost seventy years'… I mean, 69 years … I switched… You know… *Non che l'Italia non rappresenta… diciamo la bellezza dell'Italia* 'Not that Italy does not represent… let's say the beauty of Italy' is enormous for me, and I have my pride there too, *però mi sento più Americana* 'but I feel more American.'

Nicoletta is proud of being an American citizen. At the same time, her *Italianità* is "a romance with [her] own fantasy" (Boym, *The Future* xiii) and it is not filled with "a sentiment of loss and displacement" (*The Future* xiii). She is still proud of her Neapolitan dialect: "I switch…*inglese* 'English'… *napoletano e italiano con facilità*" 'Neapolitan and Italian easily.' The dialect is for Nicoletta the language of rage and love: "*Si mi faij sentì na canzun napulitan*" 'If you make me listen to a Neapolitan song'… I mean … I go crazy! Because my soul wakes up, you know."

Similarly, Dina Santomaggio, who relocated to South Florida in 1987, reports that her ethnic identity is based more on her admiration of Italian culture than a feeling of being Italian *per se*. Despite having grown up in a strictly Italian neighborhood in Yonkers, New York, only when she visited Italy, she started to develop an interest in her Italian heritage. "Once I visited Italy, I kind of became more Italian than I was growing up. Because it seems to me that as I was growing up … it wasn't the right thing to be Italian. You had to assimilate and become American." As she underlines "culturally, I think I described myself more American … Yes, I am Italo American, but the American seems to win out. I still enjoy Italian culture and the Italian food. I like to go back there and visit. I love to go to Venice. I love to go to museums."

Vincent, Nicoletta, and Dina consider *Italianità* a meaningful addition to their identity. However, it is not "a sentiment of loss and displacement" (Boym, *The Future* xiii). It seems that their ethnic identity is "remembered and perhaps even felt and expressed when the situation demands it" (Gans, "The Coming Darkness" 761-2). In these cases, as for other later-generation descendants of the European immigrants, ethnic identity is more symbolic than functional. This is why the Italian Americans who moved to Florida can represent an evolving type of ethnic identity, "turning into symbolic ethnicity, an ethnicity of last resort, which could, nevertheless, persist for generations" (Gans, "Symbolic ethnicity" 1). Consequently, the journey of Italian Floridians should be investigated more to understand how it will evolve. I included excerpts from interviewees who are older than 50; however, this exploration should also be conducted across several generations of Italian Floridians including the youngest ones.

O' Paravis – 'A Paradise'

Whereas migrating to the Italian enclaves mentioned above was of necessity, relocating to Florida seems to be more of a choice. Italians who visited the Sunshine State were often attracted by the exotic environment. In most cases, the climate reminded them of a paradise, or *'ó paese ro 'sole* 'the land of the sun.' Not surprisingly, in a 1974 article, George Pozzetta points out that the prevailing perception is that Florida is seen as the "Italy of the South" (9). Likewise, Mormino underlines that it "has evoked contrasting and compelling

images of the sacred and profane: a Fountain of Youth and Garden of Earthly Delights" ("Sunbelt Dreams" 4). The sacred can also evoke the idea of belonging and family history. It can also be reflected in a space recognized as a unique sphere to which sacredness is assigned through culture and experience. An example of this is indeed illustrated by one of the interviewees. When her family relocated to South Florida, Adrienne Martin was 7 years old. She reports that when her grandparents, first-generation Italian migrants, visited her in Florida, "It was winter and my grandmother said right away that the plants and the weather, everything, just reminded her very much of Sicily."

The sacred space of her grandmother's childhood is mirrored in the *new new land*. The *madre patria* is viewed in a mystical-religious way, filled with a feeling of nostalgia experienced by Adrienne's grandmother. Yet Florida turns out to be a valid surrogate, acquiring the same mystical-religious value.

Another interviewee, Ann Blumberg Capone (Mount Vernon, NY, 1921), who relocated to South Florida as a young girl during the 50s, tells the story of her father, a migrant from Caivano (the Naples province), who decided to visit her during the winter. Once in Florida, he was amazed by the weather. However, when Ann solicited him to move in with her, he suddenly refused to live in that paradise: "I can't move here because they don't have cellars." Here, paraphrasing Mormino ("Sunbelt Dreams" 4), we have a compelling case of the sacred and profane, a land seen as a paradise (sacred) has no space to create the (profane) space of a cellar to store the wine[10]. For Ann's dad, a migrant from Southern Italy, a place is, therefore, an assemblage of practicality and meaning, storing the wine in Italian style matters. The cellar is not only a part of material culture but more importantly, it embodies a symbol of *Italianità* the initial migrants wanted to preserve, a tie that connects them to their past. Therefore, the cellar overweighs the paradise-like climate and thus relocating to Florida which is short of this functional space – ironically because of its climate – becomes difficult if not impossible for the first-generation migrants. The absence of a cellar in Florida vs. the first enclaves that I mentioned is of course only a token of a more fundamental difference between the two types of locations. The *space-place* in the Italian enclaves is both the functional and emotive landscape for establishing the sense of community that the initial Italian migrants had to adhere to. The cellar is one of many of these spaces. In contrast, when later generations of Italian migrants

had a stronger feeling of being part of the overall American society, the *space/place* where they preserved fragments of their *Italianità* does not need to include any of these functional spaces that were so indispensable for the initial Italian migrants.

Keeping Ties with the Ethnic Community

As we discussed above, the idea of a community was essential for the initial Italian migrants. Thus, the community bond cannot be broken. In other terms, when someone tries to alter this linkage, the ethnic group feels betrayed. An example is given by Jean Simonelli Giarrusso, who relocated to South Florida in 1986. In her interview, she reports: "We caused a great sensation in the family because we were moving away from this big Italian family … everybody was upset."

Leaving the ethnic neighborhood, which has established and prolonged a chain resettling process, is like fracturing a system of relationships considered unbreakable. In this sense, the community embodies an essential part of the adaptation of the initial migrants. Similarly, Ann Blumberg Capone, reports that even her family, at the beginning, did not agree with her choice. However, since she was always sick in the cold New York winter, they finally agreed that her move was mainly related to her health. Nonetheless, not entirely reassured of that change, they flew to Florida to visit her. As Ann reports: "My father, like all Italian fathers, had to know where I was, who I lived and socialized with. He came to Florida with my mother. In the end, he was satisfied and said, 'I don't blame you.'"

The space of Italian Floridians differs from that of their parents. Jean and Ann's example of relocation to South Florida represents a second stage in which the Italian Americans "combined a pragmatic politics of independence … with the symbolic assertion of community identity" (Amith 161). For example, in Giarrusso's case, winter became the symbolic tie to her ethnic enclave. In her words: "My husband and I both wanted to keep the Italian influence on our family, so my mother and father spent every winter with us. Sometimes they came before Christmas, sometimes after. My children grew up, in some way, with their Italian grandparents" (Iadevaia, personal communication, May 19, 2017). Thus, the broken piece is repaired. The ethnic enclave can resume its existence, albeit in different ways and at different times.

The Cabinet of Curiosities

Another way of keeping ties with the past is through material culture. Undoubtedly, for Italian Floridians too, heirlooms passed down from generation to generation still hold considerable significance. However, among the majority of Italian Floridians interviewed, the cabinet of curiosities is only symbolic.

In a study concerning material culture as memorabilia, it has been suggested that the majority of the identified objects were revered not simply for their value, but also for helping define identities, and because of their invitation to recall a faraway past (Sherman). Objects and heirlooms serve to symbolize memories and histories. They are connected to that kind of nostalgia defined by Svetlana Boym as "reflective" (*Common Places* 283-91), which emphasizes the memory of the past, and it is not "merely an individual sickness but a symptom of our age, a historical emotion" (*The Future* xvi).

As an illustration, Adrienne Martin describes the Sicilian donkey cart in her grandmother's dining room, "Very colorful … my grandmother had one of those …. Um, and she had kept it in her china cabinet in her dining room. And … When I was small we always had Sunday dinner at grandma's house, so I would see it a lot." The Sicilian cart lives in Adrienne's memories. She has never owned it, but its remembrance is bright, and it will always be associated with her *Italianità*. Adrienne only remembers specific objects from their childhood, but no trace of them is seen in her household anymore. At the same time, in one way or another, the cultural biography of an object is intertwined with people's lives.

A further example comes from Dan Pichney (East Elmhurst, NY, 1950), who moved to West Palm Beach in 2005, "I remember the white marble ashtray stand and ashtrays from my grandparents' home …. I used to have one of the ashtrays in my library …. I believe that I gave it to one of my nieces along with other memorabilia of my parents." In this case, like for other Italian Americans, the ritual of passing down family heirlooms reflects the necessity of preserving the ethnic heritage, "I did a very good job of organizing, labeling and explaining so that my nieces would have as good a sense as possible of family history" (Iadevaia, personal communication, July 5, 2023). Heirlooms and memorabilia, along with the symbolic identity

associated with them, become also focal points in narrations that pass down stories of individuals and families.

While recording the interviews, we realized that in some cases, objects and heirlooms allowed the interviewees to tell the journey and the lives of their objects without having to describe them. This is the case, for example, of Vincent Zarrilli. As a matter of fact, among all the interviews collected, I decided to give special attention to his cabinet of curiosities.

Vincent has dedicated his entire adult life to collecting memorabilia. His ancestral home in Southern Italy is regarded by him as sacred. For this reason, he carried many of his family's heirlooms, belongings, and objects to his place in South Florida. Most of the things Vincent carried along the years were commodities before entering the indefinite world of remembrance. The objects, once in Florida, acquired a different meaning. They "perform the work of metaphor that ties the sensate present to a contingent realm of myth and cosmos" (Robert St. George 224):

> I have, um, many, many, um, artifacts that, over the years … going back, I was able to pick up . . . little things which are important to me. And they're all over the house. A ceramic tile on the wall, the number on the house—the number twenty-three, . . . the utensil to wash—, the washboard that my grandmother used. So I brought all these things here, and they are throughout the house. As a matter of fact, I even brought in a bottle full of the earth from my little . . . land—. A vineyard, I still own it . . . in Italy. I brought a part of the land to the United States.

Vincent's memorabilia are all placed on the same level. No object is less valuable than another. As Vincent claims, switching to Italian, "Non ci può essere un ordine con i ricordi, tutto è posto sullo stesso livello" ("there can be no order with memories, everything is placed on the same level"). As soon as one enters his house, one can see many *presepi* 'nativity,' in various sizes, covering a large part of the living room. Next to the *presepi* collected over many years, one can notice Florida's kitschy souvenirs, pink flamingos, and wooden palm trees: the sacred objects alongside the profane ones. Kay Turner observes that "This additive

process results in a tendency toward excess, a creative layering of objects that simultaneously evokes many relationships, many meanings—religious, familial, personal, political" (101).

While different objects are spread all over Vincent's house and are visible to the guests, there are others kept in a private space, like a suitcase jealously hidden in his master bedroom. He clarifies: "It wasn't really a suitcase, it was made of wood, which my uncle built for me, full of my notebooks, and my books from first grade to eighth grade … I still have my first grade, when I was writing my little penmanship, the little s— ah, story, and a little poem to my mother."

As Vincent's case illustrates, *la casa,* 'the house', nourished with objects of lasting emotional value and symbolic meanings serves the desire to recreate self-contained *space-places,* becoming a cabinet of curiosities. The house, in this regard, is not only a "tool of analysis of the human soul" (Bachelard xxxvii), but it represents what persists in a symbolic ethnicity. Gaston Bachelard (1994), in his fundamental work, illustrates how the spaces we inhabit shape our memories and thoughts. To this end, he defines the house as an essential and primal space, which acts as a first universe. However, one could say that the intimate *space-place* that the Italian Floridians keep sustains a deeper meaning: the house is the world itself since it represents the only connection with an ancestral past. The house becomes a *space-place* "filled with relationships that transcend the bounds of a human lifetime and memory" (Lillios 243).

In short, objects acquire symbolic value that bonds the Italian, Italian American, and lastly Italian Floridian cultures. Thus, in this latter case, they epitomize the "shuttling back and forth" (Giunta 769) between these spheres of belonging.

Food and (no More) *Pranzi della domenica*

Vincent points out that cooking is also his way to feel close to his past, and his heritage:

> My mum's cooking activity is now reflected in my cooking passion … So, cooking has become an important part of my retired life …. My Italian friends always say 'That's not

> really Italian food!' - It's MY Italian food. It's Vincenzo's interpretation of his mother's dishes .... My mother's recipes with a little twist of South Florida, a zest from this land.

Vincent's mother resembles a character artistically symbolized by the poet Capone, who grew up in an Italian American family for whom making the sauce was truly like a religious event:

> You picked bushels full of red tomatoes
> grown in a backyard garden
> You'd chop and simmer
> them fresh in a pan
> with basil, garlic, onions,
> always making your Sunday sauce from scratch. (21)

In contrast, Vincent's recipes echo his hybrid identity. While his mother would make the traditional pasta from her hometown, with the sauce made from scratch, Vincent, using "a little twist from South Florida" makes them with shrimp or *aragosta,* 'lobster.'

However, while food still has a strong ethnic connotation among all generations of Italian migrants (Gabaccia), what has been lost in the *new new land* is the ritual of Sunday lunches. The peculiar reality born from *i pranzi della domenica* 'Sunday lunches' at the grandparents' house, the sound of accents and dialects, and the many stories heard and repeated a thousand times, are only a distant and almost faded memory for the Italian Floridians. A case in point comes from Dan Pichney's anecdotes from his childhood:

> Nearly every Sunday we would go over to *nonna*'s ... for dinner. And I would be there with my, what came to be twenty-eight, cousins. ... we're all about the same age, and I was very close to them. And, uh, it was wonderful. We were totally immersed in this Italian culture on, ... a weekly basis. (Iadevaia, personal communication, July 5, 2023)

After Dan's grandparents had passed away back in the Seventies, the third generation tried to recreate the same atmosphere of the *pranzi della domenica* for a while, but then they all headed in different directions.

As I listened to the many stories of Italian Floridians, I realized how dishes, even the most ordinary ones, permeated their memories. Food is a ritual and reinvented or not, it is still a legacy "etched deeply … in the tastes and smells" Italians took with them (Mormino, *Italians in Florida* 88). Food, "including its implications in terms of opportunities for reunions of relatives at mealtime—generally turns out to be a more durable ethnic identifier than their [family] language" (Luconi 69). As an illustration, Dan points out "mostly I remember my Italian American heritage through food rather than language or objects" (Iadevaia, personal communication, July 5, 2023).

Conclusion

The interviews were a major tool for analyzing the Italian Floridian's internal worlds and exploring what I have labeled the *new new land*, a *space-place* where concepts such as ethnic community have undergone an interesting shift, adding new layers of meaning to it. I would like to highlight the interesting points from the interviews.

First, there is still high regard for an Italian identity. All the interviewees were deeply proud of having an Italian heritage. Second, while among the majority of interviewees, only a few of them were fluently bilingual, I witnessed that there was a high motivation to learn the Italian language to make a connection with their past. Third, among the initial Italian migrants, sharing an identity is connected to sharing a place but this is not the case for Italian Floridians. The idea of an ethnic community among them is more of a symbolic one, thus the distinction I make between *space/place* for the former group and the *space-place* for the latter. Lastly, material culture was an important part of the interviews. Some of the interviewees have a lively memory of certain family heirlooms, but they never owned them. Others have passed down their family objects to their nephews and nieces. Some others, like Vincent Zarrilli, still keep objects, heirlooms, and artifacts that are jealously guarded and projected into a mythological sphere, a highly illustrative example of *space-place*. Each object encountered

is a "culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings" (Kopytoff 68) for those who own it, and also for those who only remember it. Each object ends up being narrated and associated with a specific moment. However, once in Florida, the meaning people attribute to things changes (Appadurai) acquiring a more sacred value. As a matter of fact, "we have to follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (5).

In presenting this project, I intended to investigate how Italianness in South Florida has undergone changes and what makes it still lively. To paraphrase Gary R. Mormino "What then is this Italian Floridian?" (*Italians in Florida* 116). A possible answer may be an identity in progress, a mimetic being, with multiple selves.

Mormino, in the last paragraph of his book, asserts that according to the circumstances, it is "highly fitting" that Italians in Florida "have completed their historic trajectory" (*Italians in Florida* 120). However, as observed from my research, in the *new new land* Italian Floridians are experiencing a symbolic idea of a community, where new semiotics of *Italianità* can probably give a different horizon to Italian American studies. Therefore, "their historic trajectory" (120) is not complete yet and future studies on the current topic will provide more insights. Indeed, a broader aim would be to foster a debate from a diverse perspective that is not restricted to Florida but is also enriched by examining how the relocation of the new generations of Italian Americans to other American regions or rural areas affects their symbolic Italian identity.

Notes

[1] In this article, I use the term Italian Floridians only for people who have resettled in Florida permanently. Additionally, the terms Italian American and Italian Floridian have no hyphen. The recognition of Italian migrants (or other migrants) came along with convoluted forms of identity politics applied to them and controversial ways of describing them. One of these controversies that retains its currency revolves around the concept of hyphenation, which in this article I prefer to avoid.

[2] Teen music pop idol of the late 1950s and early 60s. He was born

Robert Ridarelli in a neighborhood of South Philadelphia. Both of his parents were of Italian descent.

[3] Francis Thomas Avallone was an American actor, singer, and former teen idol. Avalon started appearing in films in the 1960s and is also well known for his role in the 1970s musical film Grease as Teen Angel. He was born in South Philadelphia from Italian migrants.

[4] Poet and a fiction writer. She was raised in an Italian American neighborhood in Mount Vernon, New York whose strong Neapolitan influence still resonates in her life.

[5] At the time of writing this paper, there were no interviews with the younger generations of Italian Floridians in their 20s or 30s so this is just speculation.

[6] In South Florida, there are only a few streets with Italian names, while the recurring term Little Italy is also used to name a neighborhood in Fort Lauderdale. A Little Italy of sorts, named La Centrale, has been opened in Miami: 40,000 square foot emporium of Italian-inspired dining.

[7] https://fau.digital.flvc.org/islandora/object/fau:oralhistories. Accessed 26 July 2022.

[8] Berardi, Tucker. "FAU student archive seeks to preserve Italian culture: Three graduate students have conducted 18 interviews with Italian-American students." *UP, University Press*, 30 April 2017, https://www.upressonline. com/2017/04/fau-student-archive-seeks-to-preserve-italian-culture/. Accessed 26 July 2022.

[9] A docufilm titled *My FlorÌta* is currently in preparation. It focuses on Italian Americans' experience in South Florida. This project is thoroughly original as it represents the first media effort ever made that specifically centers on Italian Floridians.

[10] Houses in Florida lack basements and cellars because of the nature of the soil. Territories like the "Sunshine State," are characterized by the presence of swampland, wetland and coastline. For this reason, the amount of water in the soil does not allow one to build basements without running into flooding or mold. Data collected by the project *Orality and Microhistory*.

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