

and then having her disappear for the rest of the play, is like introducing an audience to *Tosca* and then forcing it to sit still for five acts of *Peter Grimes*. An onstage Juno, in other words (and I don't think this would make Dana Gioia happy), would have to be seriously toned down.

But perhaps I'm wrong about all this. Maybe all it would take to bring a satisfying *Hercules Furens* to any of our major stages would be Gerard Butler's agreement to a limited run, and a director gifted enough to bring both the spectacle and the words to life. I'd still worry about Juno's monologue, and I'd worry, too, about how even the most gifted of directors would handle the stage direction, "He [Hercules] leaves, dragging Cerberus with him" (101). How exactly are you going to watch an actor trotting off with a three-legged dog without succumbing to the giggles?

Still, larger challenges have been met.

Review Essay: *Steering Us Off Course: When Leadership Becomes the Point of Contention*

A Politics of [Self-]Omission: The Italian/American Challenge in a Post-George Floyd Age by Anthony Julian Tamburri. Rome: Aracne Press, 2022. 119 pp.

Review essay by Donna Chirico
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In the introduction to *A Politics of [Self-]Omission*, Anthony Tamburri maintains that there is a need to understand the history of Italian immigration to the United States beyond the mass migration of the early twentieth century. To do this, there is a further need to look at the immigration experience through the lens of Italian diaspora studies in a more inclusive way as has been the process for other diasporic communities. Tamburri writes, "All of this is dependent on an Italian/American commitment (*impegno*) to the application of our culture" (18).

At an annual conference at the John D. Calandra Italian American Institute exploring the relationship between Italy, Italian Americans, and the Pacific Rim, one participant argued that to pass along culture to their children, it is necessary to keep up the "traditions" of Italian American culture. They used canning tomatoes and homemade wine as examples. Here I ask, must we pass down the supposed traditions of a culture chosen by an arbitrary intermediary to appreciate that culture? For me, this idea is analogous to saying that a person must participate in a religion or believe in God to be moral and behave ethically. Extensive research tells us the latter is indeed not true.

Jim Davies, a professor at the Institute for Cognitive Science at Carleton University, summarizes the vast research done on this topic: “Basically, people take or leave religious morality according to some internal moral compass they already have. They might even choose which church to go to, according to how well the teachings of that church match up with what they feel is right or wrong” (Davies 2018). Additionally, the research of Nicholas Epley with his colleagues at the University of Chicago suggests what people believe about what God deems right or wrong reflects the individual’s beliefs about right or wrong. Action is driven by self-referential thinking, not God or religious tenets, and then those beliefs are ascribed back to a higher moral authority to justify the beliefs (Epley 2009).

When atheists are presented with moral dilemmas such as those initially posed by Lawrence Kohlberg, Robert Selman, and numerous social psychological researchers into the present (Killen and Smetana 2022), the scores of atheists do not differ from subjects who profess a belief in God. It is clear from more than sixty years of research in this area that everyone has a moral compass of some kind, a way of being religious, regardless of faith or a God to guide them.

This is also true for culture. Both as individuals and as communities we pick and choose which aspects of ethnic heritage are valued and practiced. In the Italian American community, foodways are often among the values held dearest, particularly given that we associate specific foods and how they are and were made with people in our lives— past and present. No one made sauce like my mother. . . my grandmother . . . fill in the blank. Here, stereotypes must come to mind as these are part a community’s ethnic identity and then become woven into our personal identity expressed in our actions.

Another element is that these stereotypes may become our proclaimed traditions. When the characterizations are negative, we categorize them as stereotypes; but when the acts are positive and enhance our sense of self and highlight what is special about our ethnic community, we tend to call them traditions, but they are, nonetheless, stereotypes. Although most Americans of Italian heritage distance themselves from Mafia associations and will denigrate such cultural apparitions as *The Sopranos*, saying that this is not who we are, they readily promulgate the stereotypes of leisurely Sunday dinners and the wisdom of *nonna* as central to their Italian American identity.

The stories of identity communities, the stereotypes, are integrated into our personal narratives. When others see the expressions of these stereotypes in lived experience (the drunken Irishman or the dumb blonde), psychologists refer to this as “earned reputation,” but we could easily say “earned identity.” Regardless, we incorporate these repeated acts, and they become part of our communities of affiliation and of who we are.

In a critical chapter, “Why Promoters of Italian/American Culture Need to Know More: The Italian/American Experience in Religion,” Tamburri dissects and then eviscerates a statement made by the current president of the Conference of Presidents of Major Italian American Organizations, Basil Russo, about the requirement for Italian American leaders to be Catholic and that Catholicism is central to an Italian American identity. Russo has repeatedly said and written: “We are descendants of poor but proud people whose values are rooted in three essential elements, namely a deep and abiding sense of family, a strong work ethic and a centuries-long devotion to our Catholic Faith” (76). Even though it is the case that more than two-thirds of Italian Americans identify as Catholic, lapsed or not, implying that all Italian Americans are Catholic or should be Catholic promotes the type of insidious stereotyping that, in the past, has led to horrific consequences. Never mind too that these attributes, including their devotion to Catholicism, can be said about any number of immigrant groups. All new immigrants are trying to make their way down the proverbial streets paved with gold. For this, hard work is needed, and without fluency of language, family becomes the center of social interaction.

Again, this makes apparent why an understanding of history in its broadest definition is needed to understand culture and limit the fallacies that drive divisiveness and, there is getting around it, hatred of those who diverge from the stereotypes. The thin veneer of civilization has not protected communities in the past, and as highlighted in the book, there are no shortage of examples in the present. The question then becomes how to avoid being locked into the stereotypes that further divide the Italian American community as well as cause hostility and mistrust between that community and other ethnic communities?

In New York City, there are far too many occasions when Italian Americans have clashed with other racial and ethnic groups because of these so-called traditions. The most prominent example of these was the murder of Yusef Hawkins in 1989. The riot and attack were motivated by Keith Mondello, under the guise of protecting his ex-girlfriend (Gina Feliciano) from getting involved with people outside the Bensonhurst community. Mondello did not pull the trigger, that was Joey Fama, but that event initiated a storm of hate and a sense of acrimony that persists.

Unlike so many other ethnic leaders and fortunately for the Italian American community, Tamburri is not just pontificating from some ivy-covered, or if you prefer, basil-covered tower. He posits solutions to achieve the understanding of culture that is desperately needed in the Italian American community, and, as you might imagine, the university lies at the heart of this endeavor.

In the postscript to the present book, Tamburri reminds us of the historical inaccuracies and self-created narratives of success imagined by certain self-proclaimed leaders in the Italian American community. We are also reminded of the lack of educational opportunities to combat such ignorance. As Tamburri states:

We should be concerned primarily with the lack of Italian/American and Italian diaspora studies in our college and university curricula. All colleges and universities that have graduate programs in Italian studies should also have at the very least, a certificate program in Italian/American studies that can be part of a master and/or doctoral program. (109)

In his book *Italian Diaspora Studies and the University*, Tamburri explores the microaggressions and direct discrimination that persist against those of Italian heritage. As he remarks:

It is both an internal and external challenge; and in both cases I am convinced that education is the best way we can (1) better inform ourselves of our own history in the United States, and (2) enlighten the non-Italian American about our history and the many challenges immigrants faced. That said, Italian Americans must step up to the plate and support grand projects such as a worthy Italian/American museum at the national level, endowed professorships, and centers, as well as other entities and/or institutions dedicated to imparting knowledge of our history and culture, and, in the end, a veritable Italian/American “think tank.” This ultimately brings us to the dire need for private, cultural philanthropy. (Tamburri 2022, 5)

The specifics of such an enterprise are clearly delineated, including not only a model curriculum but also the costs. Cost is a key factor given that the Italian American community is not known for its philanthropy toward education beyond having their names plastered atop a gymnasium or academic building. People such as Russo have used their money to attract and influence those in less advantageous positions rather than supporting the educational opportunities for future leaders in the Italian American community about their heritage—warts and all.

In the same spirit that an informed faith community leads to a more deep-rooted commitment, an informed ethnic community can be in the position of better explaining and defending their cultural outlook. The issue is more complicated than discussed here. We know that during late adolescence and early young adulthood as young people try on different roles, they are shopping around toward an authentic identity and sense of self, including ethnic identity. Part of the developmental process is being able to explain and defend your beliefs and choices when they are challenged. When the developing person cannot do this, the results from a psychological perspective may be as sad as adopting the views of others and following them without question. History tells us that such an approach can lead to deadly consequences in the hands of malevolent leader.

When a person is trying to justify Columbus Day or a particular historical monument, or even something as trivial as your *nonna*’s spaghetti and meatballs, without

a foundation of knowledge about whatever the issue is at hand, the person making the attempt has no way to substantiate their claims. Instead, the argument devolves into a childish rendition of a parent saying “because I said so” in response to the developing young person trying to understand the world at large.

Thankfully, *A Politics of [Self-]Omission* and other essays by Tamburri provide the explanations, background, and rhetoric needed to address the larger issues that befall the Italian American ethnic community. Through education, succeeding generations, who will after all become the leaders of the future, could have the sound foundation that such leadership requires to truly gain a place in the larger geopolitical context. Frankly, despite the nostalgia we derive from traditions, on such matters I would rather rely on Anthony Tamburri’s wisdom than my *nonna*’s!

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Review Essay: *Expanding a City: Medieval Pisa and Its Mediterranean Worlds*

A Companion to Medieval Pisa, edited by Karen Rose Mathews, Silvia Orvietani Busch, and Stefano Bruni. Leiden: Brill, 2022. xxix + 623 pp., 5 maps, 36 figures.

Review by Charles Bartlett
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The writer and diplomat François-René de Chateaubriand preserves an intriguing story about Napoleon Bonaparte’s birth. He knew the emperor and proved useful and then enraging to him—among his most threatening claims was that Napoleon had been born in Ajaccio on February 5, 1768, and not on August 15, 1769, which was the birthday of his brother Joseph. The significance of this lay in that Corsica