

Black hands and white hearts: Italian immigrants as ‘urban racial types’ in early American film culture

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ABSTRACT: Through the concept of ‘character’ or ‘urban racial type’, traversing literature, science and metropolitan life, Bertellini reconsiders early American cinema’s colour-based biracialism epitomized by D.W. Griffith’s *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). In the New York-based film industry race also emerged from the city’s dense intermingling of ‘white ethnics’ and broader shifts in epistemological emphasis – from inheritance to the environment. If Italian immigrants were racialized as innately violent in early gangster films, after 1915 heartbreaking melodramas of destitution and misfortunes adopted instead a combination of still othering and universal characterizations.

Half the people in ‘the Bend’ are christened Pasquale . . . When the police do not know the name of an escaped murderer, they guess at Pasquale and send the name out on alarm; in nine cases out of ten it fits.
Jacob Riis, 1890¹

I like to play the Italian because his costume, his mannerisms, his gestures, and his unlikeness to the everyday people of the street make him stand out as a romantic and picturesque person.
Actor and director George Beban, 1921²

Up to 1915, New York City was the centre of the American film industry.³ Films were shot in the city’s streets and alleys, or in its urban studios (at times in nearby New Jersey), and first exhibited and commercialized in

Abbreviations are to be read as follows: *MPW* (*Moving Picture World*), *MPN* (*Motion Picture News*) and *NYDM* (*New York Dramatic Picture*). For their most helpful suggestions and precious comments on earlier drafts, I would like to thank Richard Abel, E. Summerson Carr, Saverio Giovacchini, Kristen Whissel, James Boyd White, my fellow Fellows at the Michigan Society of Fellows, *Urban History*’s two anonymous readers and, in particular, Philip J. Ethington. This is for Summerson.

¹ Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York* (New York, 1971 [1890]), 52.

² George Beban, *Photoplay Characterization; One of a Series of Lectures especially Prepared for Student-Members of the Palmer Plan* (Los Angeles, 1921), 19.

³ I here adopt the film studies convention between ‘early’ (pre-1915) New York-based productions and ‘silent’ Hollywood films (1915–27). Given the paucity of extant films of this period, many of my discussions stem from a small sample of surviving film texts, but mostly from plot summaries, photographs and existing reviews.

the mushrooming movie theatres of Union Square, the Bowery and Third Avenue. As cinema was initially denied the status of respectable business and entertainment, a remarkable portion of producers, distributors and exhibitors, not to mention a large part of early film audiences, comprised of European immigrants or immediate descendants of immigrants. Many actors and actresses, as well as a few directors and film scenarists, were familiar with the city's vaudeville scene, its numerous national theatre traditions and the established codes of racial impersonations typical of both venues. New York, in other words, was the place where early American cinema began to visualize immigrant narratives, whether dramatic or comedic, exposing and recreating the dramas of racial characters to local audiences largely composed of foreigners and their descendants.

Caught between the necessity to address its immigrant constituents and the aspiration to gain wider cultural respectability and stronger commercial viability within the dominant, Anglo-Saxon US society, early American cinema was compelled to tell stories about old and new Americans. Not immune to contemporary scientific and popular rhetoric of racial antagonism, American films often resorted to racially inflected plots about city life, crime, white slavery and battles between frontiersmen and native Americans. With the predominance of fiction films over protodocumentaries (known as 'actualities') occurring after 1905/06, the production of urban dramas, western films, romantic narratives and comedies consistently asserted the moral and cultural superiority of Anglo-Saxon culture and lifestyle through more or less overt displays of a racialized nationalism. This process instated the *racialness*, or intrinsic racial quality, of the American film image.⁴

Over the decades, D.W. Griffith's negrophobic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) has achieved a unique prominence in the historiography of early cinema. No other American film stirred more racial antagonism than *The Birth of a Nation* and no other American film used more powerfully race-as-colour as a definitive discriminatory tool. In the end, the film epitomized the racial fabric of American cinema that had and would regularly depict African Americans, as well as Asians, Latinos and native Americans, as subjects racially *extraneous* to the realm of American polity and thus constitutionally 'unfit' to assimilate within 'white' American mainstream society. Thus the narrative, moral and representational regime of Griffith's film operated on a stark polarization whiteness vs. blackness,⁵ which, for the mid-1910s,

⁴ Jane Gaines, 'The Scar of Shame: skin color and caste in black silent melodrama', *Cinema Journal*, 26, 4 (1987), 3–21.

⁵ Whiteness defined, in legal, social and representational terms, civil entitlements and rights (citizenship, contracting loans, purchasing real estate and freely choosing marital partners) that certain individuals enjoyed, while others did not. For Europeans, for instance, assimilation was open to question but *not* denied *a priori*.

we may refer to as 'critical bi-racialism'.⁶ Yet, to reduce the notion of whiteness to a single, one-dimensional realm of advantage fails to account for the spectrum of its own internal, highly racialized taxonomies which were so often narrativized and displayed in pre- and post-1915 American cinema. Colour aside, a whole range of racial signifiers were used to mark the distinctiveness of European immigrants and Italians, in particular, within the complex and varying connotations of turn-of-the-twentieth-century urban views of race.⁷ This, of course, was particularly true in New York.

Historically contemporaneous and geographically overlapping, moving picture productions and migrations to New York affected each other. The presence of immigrants in New York and the nationalistically and racially charged public debates around their culture, religion and lifestyles inflected American cinema's ideological, aesthetic and social fabric, by prefiguring films' subject matter, settings, characterizations, genres and, ultimately, educational mission.⁸ As the most problematic, controversial, yet successful synthesis, the non-urban *The Birth of a Nation* was the tip of the iceberg of a national cinema and an urban film culture both obsessed with and fascinated by race – and not just colour.

As discussed in the first part of this article, throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, most discussions of race, inside and out American cities, revolved around the resilient concept of inherited racial *character*, encompassing both outer physical features and non-visible ones, formulated at the intersection of science, politics and literature. In the early 1900s and 1910s, the emphasis on racial *inheritance* and thus immutability began to shift in favour of discussions on the role of the social, economic and cultural *environment* in which people of different racial character happened to live. By then, the notions of 'character' and 'characterization' had long gained discursive predominance as conceptual framework and descriptive tool to address, beyond the autocratic cogency of physical observations, the vexed question of the mixed races (particularly common in the South) and to respond to the growing need for orientation within the racially complex urban environments of the North-East and Midwest. Anthropology and social sciences had learned from the literary habitus of characterization to draw coherent 'racial types'. Similarly, 'scientific' notions about characters' racial inheritability had become features of literary and theatrical characterizations. As the centre of the American

⁶ 'Bi-racialism' emerged within the new 'race-consciousness' of the mid-1910s in the works of such different authors as Madison Grant, Lothrop Stoddard (who coined the term), W.E.B. Du Bois and Marcus Garvey. Cf. Matthew Pratt Guterl, *The Color of Race in America, 1900–1940* (Cambridge, MA, 2001), 6 and 12ff.

⁷ P. Kolchin, 'Whiteness studies: the new history of race in America', *Journal of American History*, 89, 1 (2002), 1–41.

⁸ See my entry ('Migrations') in R. Abel (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Early Cinema* (New York, 2004).

cultural industry and the ideal location for urban ethnography, New York City (more than Chicago and Boston) was positioned at the critical intersection of these social and cultural practices.

Participating in the public cultural life of the city, early American cinema learned a great deal from the non-colour-coded, racial characterizations sketched by racial scientists, moral reformers, political commentators, novelists and vaudeville performers. This article is primarily interested in how the dynamics of Italians' cinematic representations in early American cinema echoed the language, categories and developments of American racial thought informing scholarly publications and debates, highbrow and lowbrow literature and popular entertainments, long before cinema had emerged as the first American mass medium. By looking at a number of early American films depicting Italians, and specifically southern Italians (which were the nation's and New York's largest immigrant community), it is thus intended to place early American cinema's penchant for *urban* racialized narratives and characters within the categories and idioms of US popular and scientific racial discourse.

Profiling the city and its residents: the individual racial character

Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century, America's largest cities, and New York in particular, came to personify both the most dynamic manifestations and the most detrimental excesses of capitalist modernity. As converging social and economic forces propelled the elevation of daring skyscrapers upwards, mass circulation and mobility demanded the extension of complex transportation systems. Meanwhile, plebeian multitudes of poor American workers and foreigners of different races, religion and culture crammed the lower, darker, 'pathological' organs of the city – the dreary quarters of shady alleys, filthy boarding houses, opium dens and all-night dives of the Five Points, Hell's Kitchen, East Harlem and, of course, the 'Lower' East Side.

The sensationalist coverage of newspapers, magazines and even novels, packed with crude figures and statistics, in fact, unproblematically identified in the 'invading' multitudes of immigrants from Europe and Asia the cause for American cities' experience of social disorder. Politicians' speeches and newspaper editorials and cartoons expressed fierce opposition to the unrestricted arrival of strangers coming through once foreboding Oceans.

This stance was not surprising. Between 1870 and 1900, over 11 million immigrants arrived in the USA and the vast majority of them ended up joining urban crowds of unprecedented density. By 1900, at least 60 per cent of the residents of the nation's twelve largest urban centres were either foreign-born or of foreign parentage. For New York City the totality

of these 'urban hordes' approached 80 per cent.⁹ The disturbing novelty of these immigration waves, however, was not just in the numbers.

Differently from earlier arrivals, post-1890 European newcomers, particularly Italian Catholics and Eastern European Jews, were visibly more diverse and 'alien' in dress, customs and religion. Without resorting to colour-coded forms of racial discrimination, the racial affiliation of Southern and Eastern European immigrants was regularly viewed as a *cluster* of inherited and thus unchanging linguistic, cultural, devotional characteristics. Such features were often hailed as unAmerican and explained according to the racial taxonomies and hierarchies developed by the increasingly popular thesis of social Darwinism. At the same time, immigrants' deplorable living conditions and visible squalor stemming from less noticeable labour exploitation and prohibitive rents became a common subject of interest for a range of urban, 'ethnographic' discourses interspersing America's highbrow and popular racial culture. Apart from anthropology, sociology and eugenics, urban crowds and racial characters were a favourite subject for mainstream (and sensationalist) journalism, reformers' writings, pioneering social photography (i.e. Jacob Riis and Lewis Hine), the new 'realist' literature of William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser and Henry James, the so-called tenement melodramas of Abraham Cahan, Fanny Hurst and Israel Zangwill, as well as countless vaudeville scenarios.¹⁰

Tales of urban decadence, however, were not at all a novelty in the USA. Since the early nineteenth century, American culture had developed a literary genre centred on the admonition of the moral and civic dangers of mass urbanism. At its core was the often sensationalist, increasingly realistic and always dystopian description of the city as a menacing *terra incognita*, a Babel and Babylon. Combining moral uplifting with travel writing, in the 1840s and 1850s this popular genre informed newspapers' exposés, reports from popular magazines (i.e. *New York Tribune* and *Niles Weekly Register*) and both pulp and serious novels, from Ned Buntline to Herman Melville.¹¹

In the name of the country's morally and racially unified identity, the diversity of the city's foreign and threatening masses, particularly Catholic and Jewish populations, had to be known and sanitized – medically, religiously and morally. That the newcomers needed to be assisted went hand in hand with the condescending belief that they had to be converted as well. Immigrants' dire and miserable living conditions in fact were explained as the result of such religiously coded vices as 'self-indulgence', 'idleness' and 'filth'. Whether of confessional nature or

⁹ J. Strong, *The Challenge of the City* (New York: 1911 [1907]), 100.

¹⁰ Cf. Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2000).

¹¹ See Shelley Streeby's fundamental *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 2002).

not, several urban organizations aiming at social betterment operated under the assumption that, for a large part, the roots of poverty laid in 'the *characters* of the poor themselves'.¹² In order to instil a civic life conducive of higher moral standards, one approach was to diagnose and document individuals' temperament or character, and specifically their deficiencies, in a positive, scientific manner.¹³ Another approach, endorsed by less patronizing settlement workers, focused more on the moral and industrial *environment* surrounding immigrants rather than on their 'inner' moral fibre.¹⁴ Part of a larger moral reformism emerged throughout the 1890s in New York, Chicago and in other American cities, this reformism worked toward the creation of an alternative, healthier urban environment, inclusive of parks, playgrounds, gyms, swimming pools and public baths – which, in the words of a member of the 1895 New York State Tenement House Committee, would have a 'favorable effect... upon character; tending to self-respect and decency of life'.¹⁵ *Contra* racial-biological determinism, the emphasis on the critical role of the environment in both enhancing and delaying adaptation and assimilation soon acquired scientific recognition through the work of sociologists, criminologists and cultural anthropologists (i.e. Robert E. Park and Franz Boas). Without utterly relinquishing the power of racial difference and typecasting, these new positions allowed for more sympathetic literary, photographic and cinematic narratives addressing immigrants' alleged *effort* to adapt to their difficult environment.

Still, as a recurring trope in the profoundly religious American culture of the time, the notion of personal moral character was widely used to identify the racial and national features of US 'othered' populations beyond the black/white dyad. White European newcomers presented a number of distinct features, from physical signs to cultural and ethical customs, which were commonly described as racial. Yet, such features could not always be obviously distinguishable in individual subjects belonging to a specific race – a task made particularly difficult within the city's complex racial scenario. Hence, as Cathy Boeckmann writes, the recognition of racial identity had to be formulated in ways that bypassed the ambiguities and mistakes of mere visual inspection:

The need to locate the essence of racial difference fell upon the concept of inherited racial character – a racial essence that is connected to the features of race but which can also be extricated from them. Nineteenth-century scientific racism elaborates on

¹² Cf. Anna L. Meecker, *Lend-a-Hand* (1886), quoted in Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Protestants against Poverty: Boston's Charities, 1870–1900* (Westport, CT, 1971), 73 (my emphasis).

¹³ Roy Lubove, *The Professional Altruist: The Emergence of Social Work as a Career* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 17.

¹⁴ An eloquent and harsh criticism of the moral righteousness of the approach of charity organization and a move toward an examination of the environment in which immigrants found themselves was Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York, 1902).

¹⁵ Roy Lubove, *The Progressives and the Slums: Tenement House Reform in New York City, 1890–1917* (Pittsburgh, 1962), 88–9, 91.

the links between physical signs, racial identity, and racial character with surprising flexibility. The concept of character defined a racial essence that was not visible and established a framework for how the individual inherits the traits of culture.¹⁶

Increasingly used within scientific, literary and popular discourses, the notion of character implied, in a true neo-Lamarckian sense, that an individual's life summarized and expressed the features of one's race. Furthermore, it implied that such features included not just biological make-up and physical traits, but also the equally inherited dimensions of what today we refer to as 'culture' and 'ethnicity', that is social customs and traditions, generally attributed to a specific population. The fact that the very synthetic formulation of 'character' equated 'biology' and 'culture' forces us to reflect on both past and current linguistic habits. The same applies to the identification of the concepts of 'nationality' and 'race'.

First and foremost, throughout the nineteenth century the notion of culture was understood within a traditional humanist and evolutionary framework, thus viewed as a *singular* phenomenon, present in all peoples but existent to a higher or lower degree: there were 'cultural stages' but not different cultures. Consequently, the argument went, just as bodily traits spoke of long-term evolutionary dynamics, so did peoples' ideas and customs. A mere discussion of social mores and intellectual traditions, divorced from bio-racial make-up – as the modern, pluralistic and relativistic formulations of 'culture' and 'ethnicity' suggest – was not current.¹⁷

Secondly, the catch-all category of *nationality* with which European immigrants were generally grouped before and after their passage through Ellis Island was correlated by the increasingly popular science of eugenics with a number of allegedly defining features. They ranged from social customs, physical appearance, cultural traditions and inclinations (from literacy to civic stance toward Americanism), moral fibre *and* biological heredity – the latter being closer to our definition of race.¹⁸ 'In 1890', George W. Stocking has brilliantly shown, 'the idea of race was in many ways and for many people not very different from what we would call today national character.' Referring to the shared viewpoints of politicians,

¹⁶ Cathy Boeckmann, *A Question of Character: Scientific Racism and the Genres of American Fiction, 1892–1912* (Tuscaloosa and London, 2000), 4.

¹⁷ At the end of the nineteenth century, George W. Stocking writes, "'Blood" – and by extension "race" – included numerous elements that we would today call cultural; there was not a clear line between cultural and physical elements or between social and biological heredity. The characteristic qualities of civilization were carried from one generation to another both *in* and *with* the blood of their citizens.' G.W. Stocking, 'The turn-of-the-century concept of race', *Modernism/Modernity*, 1, 1 (1994), 6.

¹⁸ Emerging in England at the end of the nineteenth century, cosmopolitan in scope, but jingoistic in purpose, this form of social Darwinism quickly developed in the United States where its 'scientific' tenets were popularized in the press and lay culture and ended up informing the biological engineering of the body politic of early twentieth-century immigration restrictions. Cf. Daniel J. Kevles, *In the Name of Eugenics: Genetics and the Uses of Human Heredity* (Cambridge, MA, 1985).

scientists, journalists, writers and common citizens, Stocking alerted that if race 'was a *determinant* of national cultural experience, it was at the same time an outgrowth of previous national and cultural tradition'.¹⁹ Yet, how to detect race *as* nationality or nationality *as* race on the disorienting stage of New York?

In the largest and most diverse municipality of a 'nation of newcomers', recognizing who or what the foreigners were, knowing the borders of their neighbourhood and understanding how to (or not to) interact with them was a crucial and growing necessity. Street orientation required signposts, particularly with regards to strangers who may display significant outer marks of difference, but who, not being visibly black, Asians, Latinos or native Americans, did not necessarily convey their specific national and racial origin and who could even pass for native whites. What one witnesses among scholarly, political and popular discourses is a terminological and narrative convergence toward the exposition and clarification of the *individual racial character* or *type* (i.e. 'the Jew', 'the Italian', 'the Greek'). Simultaneously articulated as the analytical protocol of social sciences from criminology and anthropology to sociology and eugenics, and elected as the preferred rhetorical *exemplum* of literary and journalistic productions, from true-crime writers to police reporters, the notion of racial character functioned throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and beyond as a solvent of general, even contradictory, yet highly significant traits.

Photo-literary characterizations and the Italian type

At the crossroads of social work, literature and visual media stands the key figure of Jacob Riis (1849–1914), a Danish Protestant immigrant working as a police reporter turned social worker, writer and photographer. Catapulted to fame thanks to *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), his illustrated report from the New York's ghettos, Riis embodies the convergence of ethnographic journalism, reformers' moralism and urban racial discourse.²⁰ Although today Riis is mainly known as one of the earliest *social photographers*, at the turn of the twentieth century his fame (and self-worth) rested on his merits as a 'slum writer' and lantern-slide lecturer.²¹ As the most enlightened and successful housing reformer of his era, Riis was an energetic and moralistic mix of jingoist and evangelist. Yet, the

¹⁹ Stocking, 'The turn-of-the-century', 6.

²⁰ On Riis as a writer and photographer, see Keith Gandal, *The Virtues of the Vicious: Jacob Riis, Stephen Crane and the Spectacle of the Slum* (New York, 1997), and Bonnie Yochelson, *Jacob Riis* (New York, 2001).

²¹ Riis collected his lectures to middle-class audiences of church and charitable groups in several anthologies, including *The Children of the Poor* (1892), *Out of Mulberry Street: Stories of Tenement Life in New York* (1898) and *The Battle with the Slum* (1902).

ethnographic aesthetic of his prose and photographs articulated a vision of New York's slums based on vivid yet rigidly coded depictions of racial characters.

Sympathetic to the coercive policies of moralistic activists à la Roosevelt, yet aiming at the elevation of individuals' ethical character and behaviour, he was also a major exponent of environmental reformism. He recognized that such vulnerable subjects as children did not have much of a chance for self-improvement if growing in morally deprived urban conditions: their behaviour was not a matter of personal moral defect.

This pervasive double track informed Riis' wavering attitude toward Italians. The Danish author could look with sentimental sympathy at the several thousands of Italy's immigrants who were living in horrible conditions out of poverty and crime. Still, while he showed a consistent appreciation for Italians' renowned family dedication, he described them, like an American tourist back from Europe, as *colorful* and *picturesque*. His exoticizing distance informed a number of negative and racializing portrayals. Riis saw Italians as clannish, fatalistic, often emotionally unrestrained and unwilling to change their depressed socioeconomic status – against the sacred American ethos of upward social drive. His distrust for Italian immigrants' aptitude to assimilate was particularly augmented by his sharing of the increasingly widespread, unmistakably nativist distinction between Italy's northerners and southerners.²² Rehashing the anti-south prejudices developed since the 1860s and 1870s by Italian anthropologists, economists and cultural commentators, Riis distinguished between 'Northern Italians as of "fairer complexion than those from the southern regions" and "full of energy"' and swarthy Southern peasants, 'avowedly the worst of the Italian immigration', who 'wash less, and also plot less against the peace of mankind, than they do in the north'.²³ Adopting racist allegations of atavistic criminality common to Italian scientific and popular culture,²⁴ Riis also referred to Neapolitans and Sicilians as ruthless brigands or members of Camorra or Mafia organizations engaged in daily violence and blackmail against other, more vulnerable Italians and children, in particular, the Americans of the future and the innocent bearers of abject poverty, prejudice and abuse. Riis' visual and literary attention to minors (and child-like adults) maintained racially coded characterizations while adopting a tone of sentimental portraits, filled with pathos and condescending pity.

The actual media of Riis' ideological interventions inherently shaped his message. Not only did the photographs accompanying his writings

²² This distinction was widely popularized by a series of articles which appeared in *Harper's Weekly*, titled 'The foreign element in New York City'. Cf. *Harper's Weekly*, 18 Oct. 1890, 817–19.

²³ Riis, *The Battle*, 176 and 177.

²⁴ John Dickie, *Darkest Italy. The Nation and Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860–1900* (New York, 1999).



Figure 1: Bandit's Roost, 59 1/2 Mulberry Street

Photo: Jacob A. Riis, Richard Hoe Lawrence, Henry G. Piffard, 1887. Courtesy of the Museum of the City of New York, The Jacob A. Riis Collection. The three men often went on shoots together and were members of the Society of Amateur Photographers of New York.

play a key role in the popularization of the immigrant ghettos as a repository of violence and suffering, but also the literary strategies of his writing drew the figure of the immigrant closer to the reader. Apart from repeatedly employing racial/national categories (Italians,

Chinese, Jews, Bohemians, 'Negroes'), Riis often chose *individual* characters charged with both racializing and naturalizing traits and customs which turned them into sympathetic representatives of their entire group. He characterized Italians as young drifters, street food vendors and rag-pickers, and in general as unfortunate individuals gifted with redeeming traits (honesty, love for the family and beauty). Their individualization mostly as male subjects effectively translated racial theories into literary plots and characters. As a reviewer for the *Indianapolis News* put it at the time '[he] knew how to put scientific and sociological truths in such a way as to make one think he was reading romance'.²⁵

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the powerful value of racial characterizations and anecdotes about urban poor became a common trope used to inform moralistic and reformist admonitions. But it also became a dramatic currency for profitable (photo)journalism, popular theatre and even ambitious literature.²⁶ Following the lead of William Dean Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), several of the leading American novelists of the time, from Frank Norris, Stephen Crane and Edward Steiner to Theodore Dreiser, Henry James and Mark Twain, participated in the soon widespread 'touristic' discovery and realistic rendering of urban social squalor. Venturing, at least vicariously, where 'the other half' lived, and rendering the slums with detailing minutiae, provided writers and readers alike with the opportunity both to contain and preserve the disquieting otherness of nearby immigrants. This ethnographic mood inspired literary and filmic melodramas that as models of intercultural and interracial encounter turned immigrants into familiar, but always 'different' figures. As American master of letters, popular novelist, influential literary and theatre critic, Howells deserves special attention.²⁷ His oscillation between stark racial othering and sentimental and realistic depiction of immigrants and African-Americans is paradigmatic of his era. In cosmopolitan New York, Isabel and Basil March, the protagonists of Howells' *A Hazard of New Fortunes*, are both attracted and repulsed by the strange panorama of foreign physiognomic and linguistic registers. They detect with curiosity, 'Italian faces, French faces, and Spanish faces... and foreign tongues', but after hearing Neapolitans' 'unintelligible dialect' they quickly and negatively wonder 'what notions these poor animals formed of a free republic from their experience of life under its conditions'.²⁸

²⁵ The review was a propos Riis' *The Making of an American* (1901), quoted in Gandal, *Virtues*, 12.

²⁶ Between 1892 and 1893, *Scribner's Magazine* ran a series of articles (including one by Riis) about urban destitution grouped under the titles of 'The poor in great cities'.

²⁷ Editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* between 1871 and 1881, after moving to New York to direct *Harper's Weekly*, Howells fully realized the dramatic linguistic and cultural differences among old and new Americans. Cf. Elsa Nettels, *Language, Race, and Social Class in Howells's America* (Lexington, KY, 1988).

²⁸ Howells, *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (New York, 2002 [1890]), 182.

Contemporaneous with Howells' and New York's tenement literature, the language of American theatre, particularly through minstrel shows and racial vaudeville, was growing radically independent from the comedies and serious melodramas of European origin and taste. Minstrelsy and vaudeville had been popularizing stereotypes and characterizations that derived from the racial antagonism of American ghetto life. Immigrant and working-class patrons largely supplied vaudeville with talent and audiences. Representations and mode of address, however, were not at all limited to specific and isolated racial groups: Yiddish routines for Jewish audiences, Sicilian and Neapolitan *sceneggiate* for southern Italians spectators. For obvious commercial, cultural and linguistic reasons, vaudevillians preferred mass and interclass audiences over segmented ones and favoured American shows that included a whole range of racial impersonations exceeding Yiddish and southern Italian ones. As a result, a 'national currency' of heavily stereotyped characters was circulating in a number of vaudeville venues in New York and throughout the nation's vaudeville circuits. These characterizations included beer-guzzling Germans, dim-witted, yet amusing African Americans, gesticulating, pimply and sallow-cheeked Jews, pig-tailed Chinamen, inebriated Irish Pat and Bridget, emotional Italian would-be opera singers and blackhanders. A whole corpus of manuals of jokes and songs were published in the late 1800s, which included the I. & M. Ottenheimer and the Wehman Bros. thirty-cent series. In these irreverent manuals, the character of the 'Eyetalian wid big whiskers' speaks an almost incomprehensible vernacular, is both naïve and cunning, and always quick with insults and his stiletto.²⁹

Moving pictures' characterizations, whether comedic or dramatic, performed by former vaudeville actors and actresses, reproduced the same stereotyping irreverence, including frequent allegation of Italians' 'natural' criminal inclination. The early 1910s adoption of a racially sympathetic melodramatic stance will signal a move away from the association of racial characters with cheap and small-time vaudeville thrills.

Italians and film genres: from Latin epics to the Latin quarters

Hypothetically, Italians' position amid the other races could have relied on a uniquely revered cultural endowment: Italy's artistic, literary and intellectual past glory. The American and European fascination for classic Italian humanism and its timeless civilization informed the taste for antiquity in political culture, academic education, painting, literature and stage. Yet, this fascination also circulated in the lower realms of popular

²⁹ *Italian Dialect Joke Book* (Baltimore, MD, 1909), 74.

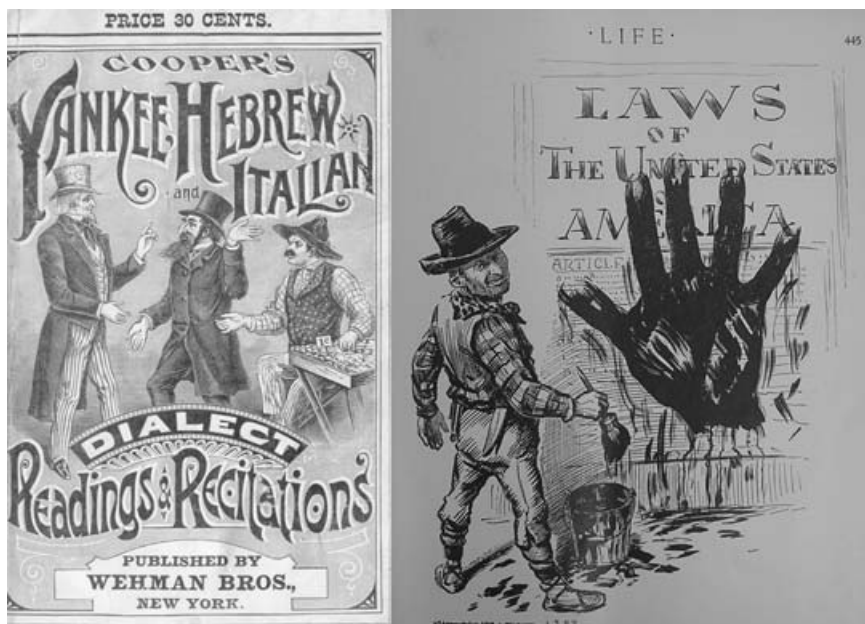


Figure 2: The intertext of Italians' representations, from vaudeville manuals to newspaper cartoons: *Cooper's Yankee, Hebrew, and Italian Dialect Readings and Recitations* (New York, 1891) and 'A school of Italian art (not appreciated in the US)', *Life*, 1 Apr. 1909, 445.

entertainment.³⁰ Since the 1880s, the success of toga plays, the spectacular melodramas opposing early Christians against Roman oppressors and pantomimic spectacles such as Imre Kiralfy's *Nero; Or the Burning of Rome*, included in Barnum & Bailey's Circus shows, attest to the widespread and interclass popularity of antiquity dramas.

Aware of this pervasive American inclination, between 1906 and 1916 early Italian film companies produced dozens of historical dramas for the USA, the world's largest film market. Designed to satisfy the genteel and antiquarian taste of the American middle class, such lavish historical epics as *The Last Days of Pompeii* (Ambrosio, 1908 and 1913), *Nero; or the Burning of Rome* (Ambrosio, 1909) and *Quo Vadis?* (Cines, 1913) ended up becoming both strong commercial competitors of American cinema and influential aesthetic exemplars.³¹

³⁰ For a problematization of highbrow and lowbrow cultural realms within the American context of the time, see Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA, 1988), and the debates included in the special Forum of the *American Historical Review*, 97, 5 (1992).

³¹ G. Bertellini, 'Epica spettacolare e splendore del vero. L'influenza del cinema storico italiano in America (1908-1915)', in Gian Piero Brunetta (ed.), *Storia del cinema mondiale: Gli Stati Uniti*, vol. I (Turin, 1999), 227-65.

In many respects, Italian immigrants' national origin, by signifying closeness to the artistic heritage of the Western civilization, contributed to their potential ascription to America's white republic. Yet, their widely illustrated racial typecasting, predicated upon alleged terms of incongruous physicality, and violent and hyperemotional regimes, also signified the tenuous state of a *spurious* citizenship. A frequently recurring measure of racial underscoring was the *law*, with its sets of rules and regulations defining a social contract that Italians were depicted as *naturally* breaching. At times benevolently rendered in folkloric and picturesque terms, this 'racial dissonance' signified Italians' racial unsuitability and 'unfitness' for citizenship.

Particularly newsworthy was Italians' allegedly 'normal' affiliation with criminal organizations, usually identified as Black Hand societies, regularly presented in vaudeville sketches, newspaper articles and cartoons. Beginning with the mass production of fiction films in 1905/06, the Mafia movie became a most popular production of American cinema. Duplicating the yellow press sensationalist reports about saloon gambling, prostitution and terrible brutalities taking place in Little Italy and satisfying a growing ethnographic interest in Italians' life in New York, early American cinema made visible but also magnified (and fictionalized) what many Americans imagined about the inner circuits of the American metropolis but were too afraid to venture into. The conventional association of the gangster film genre with the late 1920s Prohibition needs to be revisited. As early as the mid-1900s, in fact, cinema had already chosen Italian characters (more than Chinese and Jewish ones) to represent the criminal outgrowth of seedy urban ghettos located just a few blocks away from ordinary city life.

Since the beginnings, gangster films did not cast all Italians as Mafia criminals. Often times the story line divided immigrant characters into two clear-cut groups, or created a space of moral indecision within a single character. The distinction between 'good' and 'bad' Italians was a profitable narrative compromise. Embodying the Italian community's racial difference in the figure of the Latin criminal, these films reaffirmed mainstream middle-class cultural prejudices and granted cinema the high moral ground of documenting and denouncing real delinquency. Simultaneously, by exhibiting Italians' honesty and frequent victimization and integrity, they pleased the self-contention of Italian and, generally, immigrant spectators, who constituted a remarkable portion of New York's film audiences.³² Throughout all these possibilities, the racialized topographies of New York City – early American cinema's master setting – could visualize scenarios of innocence and guilt, successful adaptation and malign (self-)exclusion. Films could do so by exhibiting the abandonment

³² For a useful summary of the debate around the class and racial composition of early film patronage in urban America, see *Cinema Journal*, 35, 3 (1996).



Figure 3: *The Black Hand* (Biograph, 1906): inebriated Italian blackhanders and their ungrammatical yet unambiguous blackmailing note. Frame enlargements courtesy of the Library of Congress/Motion Picture, Broadcasting, and Recorded Sound Division.

of past traditions and customs and the acquisition of new habits or by focusing on the city's narrow and dark alleys, where enclaves of defiant Italians could exhibit their linguistic and cultural isolation. Italians' urban (self-)segregating settlements, in fact, from Manhattan's Little Italies to the tightly knit 'suburban' communities of the Bronx or Brooklyn, well supported and enforced the perception of an abiding racial disjuncting *within* mainstream 'white' society.

At the forefront of the 'Mafia genre' was the Biograph 1906 one-reeler *The Black Hand*, with its significant expositions of the stark divide between Italian honest citizens and merciless criminals. In its combination of realistic rendering and moral/racial legibility, the film's story line became paradigmatic of the crime film genre featuring Italians. In this 'true story of a recent occurrence in the Italian quarter of New York' – as the opening title reads – an honest Italian butcher, Mr Angelo, receives a letter written in broken English by two Italian *Mafiosi* who threaten to kidnap his daughter, Maria, in exchange for 1,000 dollars. In contrast with most newspaper reporting about Italians' distrust for law enforcement, Mr Angelo calls the police.³³ Meanwhile, the gang kidnaps little Maria in what appears to be an authentic outside shot of Seventh Avenue in New York. Eventually, a clever scheme by the city's detectives enables the arrest of the gangsters, the rescue of Maria and the reunification of the family.

Despite its short length, *The Black Hand* offers numerous interesting insights. The Italianness of the gangsters is made visible through negative and stereotypical codings, from Old World costumes to drunkenness and fierce brutality. The visual and narrative device of having a letter

³³ Richard Gambino, *Blood of my Blood: The Dilemma of the Italian-Americans* (Toronto, 2000 [1974]), 278ff.

being written and read by different characters distinguishes the illiterate and racially coded blackhanders from Mr Angelo and his family, whose racialness is consequently made rather invisible. They appear to be the assimilated and Americanized immigrants: they are laborious, literate, honest and, perhaps most importantly, confident in the American police force.

Following *The Black Hand*, similar narratives of mob delinquency *within* the Italian community emerged in other films, both American and European, partly inspired by events selectively reported by the press. At the end of 1906, to combat growing Italian delinquency, the city of New York established a special police force. By 1908, its chief was Lieutenant Joseph Petrosino, who had immigrated to the States when he was 13. The story of 'Italians chasing Italians' had an obvious attraction for American public opinion. Its sensationalism reinforced the racial profile of Italians as a single cultural and moral entity, almost genetically in tune with the methods and habits of the Mafia, even when not individually part of it.³⁴

In January 1909, Kalem released *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau*, a racial thriller working on the premise that only 'courageous and honest men of Italian birth' had the capacity and the practical skills to catch Italian criminals.³⁵ On 12 March 1909, Petrosino was killed in Palermo under mysterious circumstances by what turned out years later to be the arrangement of a local Mafia chief. He had gone to Sicily to further his investigations on Mafia connections across the Atlantic. Petrosino's assassination increased the American public's hostility toward Italians, but it also augmented the dualism contrasting the moral uprightness of assimilation with the wickedness associated with its refusal. In 1912, *The Adventure of Lieutenant Petrosino* (Feature Photoplay Co.) presented 'blood-curdling scenes . . . showing the workings of that mysterious band of the underworld'.³⁶ Three years later, *The Last of the Mafia* (Neutral Film, 1915) fictionalized the vengeance of Petrosino's murder by showing that, differently from Italy, in America criminal threats against justice, property and family unity do not go unchallenged.

These films' narrative and ideological framework relied on the idea that for Italians assimilation was a challenging, but not impossible, process of moral domestication and adjustment. The racialized dimension of innate violence and delinquency prevented the entire community from redeeming itself from old attachments and habits. Yet, a crucial sign of Italians' proper standing was their respect for the sacredness of work ethic and family life. Work endurance ('Sicilian indefatigability') and devotion

³⁴ On Petrosino, see Arrigo Petacco, *Joe Petrosino*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York, 1974), and Humbert Nelli, *The Business of Crime: Italians and Syndicate Crime in the United States* (New York, 1976), 95–8.

³⁵ *MPW*, 30 Jan. 1909, 125.

³⁶ *MPW*, 16 Nov. 1912, 668.

Kalem Films

THE DETECTIVES OF THE



ITALIAN BUREAU

LENGTH 600 FEET

Release of February 5, 1909

Lovers of Children will Rave over this Film, for the heroine is a little girl of nine, who does one of the most remarkable stunts ever shown in motion pictures.

You ought to have our WEEKLY LECTURES

No charge. A postal will do it

KALEM CO., Inc.

121 West 24th St., New York City

THE MOVING PICTURE WORLD 821

The Adventures of Lieut. Petrosino

THE
Famous Italian-American Detective

In Four Parts and 80 Scenes, a Total of 3,500 Feet
BY SPECIAL PERMISSION OF MADAME PETROSINO

No public minded citizen of the United States or other countries need be told how this famous detective met his death in Palermo, Italy, while engaged in tracking the Black Hand criminals.

Undoubtedly the finest detective story ever produced without a dull moment from beginning to end.

A genuine startler with plenty of action, and a sure crowd magnet. Perfect in every detail, beautiful scenery. Splendid acting, magnificent quality, and staged with greatest possible care.

A genuine feature in every sense of the word.

States now selling at 15c. a foot, including territorial rights. Territory for other countries now open.

Magnetic one, three and six sheet posters, together with booklets, cuts, photos, slides and lobby frames now ready.

Product, Copyrighted and World's Rights Controlled By	Feature Photoplay Company 145 West 45th Street New York City	Patents Will Be Prosecuted to the Full Extent of the Law
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For Review See Page 668. All Prints On Eastman Stock

Figure 4: Regular advertisements in the trade press: *The Detectives of the Italian Bureau* (Kalem, 1909), and *The Adventure of Lieutenant Petrosino* (Feature Photoplay Co., 1912), *Moving Picture World*, 30 Jan. 1909, 124, and 23 Nov. 1912, 821.

to the family were some of the rare values the Anglo-American culture most admired in Italian customs.

Although allegations of natural criminal inclinations remained a constant narrative subplot, other films of the period found different ways to accentuate Italians' racial and cultural diversity, by insisting, for instance, on Italians' artistic and professional talents. This was the case in two Griffith films, respectively *The Violin Maker of Cremona* (Biograph, 1909) and *The Italian Barber* (Biograph, 1910). Also, when stories of Italians related to domestic life *within the community*, as in *In Little Italy* (1909), the characterological traits of pathological jealousy, impetuous anger and 'Sicilian tenacity' often came to the forefront in a combination of ethnographic realism and curiosity. In Griffith's *The Italian Blood* (Biograph, 1911), for instance, an Italian wife tries to revive her husband's love through the dangerous artifices of jealousy. The plan backfires. The husband is driven into a frenzy, and comes to his senses only moments before killing his own children. The very title of the film literally racializes the storyline:

the ways in which characters act and interact are 'explained' on the basis of their peculiar biological make-up.³⁷

In other instances, Italians' temper, passions and inclinations for *vendetta* were ambiguously justified in the face of dreadful adversities and coupled with their allegedly intense attachment to family bonds. In *The Wop* (Independent Moving Picture Company, 1913), a widowed father named Luigi, after being unfairly jailed, seeks a violent revenge. Only the sight of his own daughter stops his fury. Overall, the emphasis on Italians' disproportionate reactions and emotional outbursts was commonly rendered by the acting style of American actors playing Italian characters. Within the melodramatic genre, a favourite in American cinema, the difference between operatic stock figures and psychologized individuals marked a crucial separation, charged with racialized connotations. It exhibited the divergence between clear-cut narratives whose racialized characters' 'realistic' behaviour was shown as reactive, instinctual or perfunctory, and psychological storylines emphasizing Anglo-American characters' inner turmoil and motivation.³⁸

Romantic racialism, cinema's universal appeal and George Beban's 'Italian types'

By the early 1910s, the cinematic characterization of the Italian racial type witnessed a progressive humanization, from stock characters naturally deviant and prone to crime to still destitute, but more individualized types, charmingly picturesque and highly sympathetic. The new poetic direction still racialized Italian characters while stirring poignant participation and passionate involvement from the audience because of blatant discrimination and dreadful adversities that had immediate and long-term precedents. On the one hand, the change echoed the language, categories and developments of American racial thought, which in those very years through academic and popular venues had begun placing a larger emphasis on environmental factors operating in immigrants' life in America. On the other hand, the shift in characterization toward sympathetic racial characters had also literary and theatrical predecessors, from mid-nineteenth-century slave narratives to later immigrant autobiographies.³⁹ Together with opposite, more antagonistic characterizations – from blackface minstrelsy, the Indian and Oriental Medicine shows to P.T. Barnum American museum – a growing,

³⁷ Plot summaries and visual advertisements for these films are to be found in Kemp R. Niver (and Behe Bergsten) (eds.), *Biograph Bulletins, 1908–1912*, 2 vols. (New York, 1971–73).

³⁸ The development of longer feature productions of 'tenement dramas', both on stage and later in film, allowed for more complex melodramatizations of Italian characters and, consequently, of audience's emotional responses.

³⁹ Shirley Samuels (ed.), *The Culture of Sentiment: Race, Gender, and Sentimentality in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1992).

complex universe of racial representations, which included southern Italian melodramatic theatre and the performative excesses of Italian opera, had familiarized Americans with 'othered characters' created for public consumption.

The combination of melodramatic pathos and ethnographic curiosity had an unquestionably broad marketability, and not just for theatre. Economic misery, life misfortunes and moral redemption, in fact, especially within the narrative contours of social integration, were both gripping and educational subjects capable of attracting the highest emotional response of native and racialized audiences alike. Together with the disavowal of strict racial heredity to the advantage of environmental influences, in the early 1910s US films developed more racially tolerant formulations of American civic identity, an aesthetic adjustment which matched cinema's ever-growing aspiration for the widest popular consent. Without alienating either its immigrant or its middle-class audiences, in this period American cinema engaged in the 'realistic' and *universalistic* representation of racial and cultural diversities. By addressing immigrants as both picturesque and ill-fated, US films struck a fine balance between the encouragement of emotional identification and the maintenance of bourgeois and native detachment.

Two such examples of realistic and 'pathetic' racial film melodramas were released in 1915 with an unprecedented nationwide success. Titled *The Italian* and *The Sign of the Rose* (or, alternatively, *The Alien*), the two films were feature-length productions presenting sentimental and sympathetic portrayals of Italian immigrants as victims of racial prejudice and terrible adversities. Starring the stage actor George Beban, who for years had specialized in impersonating French and Italian comedic characters, *The Italian* and *The Sign of the Rose* problematized the defensive, nativist and often racist positions of the established crime film genre.

Beban's career is a shorthand for the relationship between American cinema and race. Born Malcolm Arnold in San Francisco in 1873, George Beban started his theatre career as a comedian in the 1890s on the vaudeville circuit. By 1908, he was active in New York vaudeville. Initially uninterested in moving pictures, his aspiration was to embark in serious, dramatic performances on stage and to decline comedic roles. By 1911, he had played the leading role for more than a year in the four-act racial melodrama, *The Sign of the Rose*, with which he toured England and the States and established himself as the Italian impersonator *par excellence*. In 1915, Beban agreed to adapt the play into a nine-reeler film and to interpret the starring role for the big screen. Soon the film was celebrated as a masterpiece of American cinema. Before examining *The Sign of the Rose*, however, we must turn to the film that, produced a year earlier, initiated Beban's success into the cinematic representation of wronged Italian characters.

Originally titled *The Dago*, produced by Thomas H. Ince and released by Paramount, *The Italian* was an operatic tenement melodrama set in Italy and in New York's Lower East Side. The first part of the film is set in Italy, where the title character, gondolier Beppo Donnetti, is in love with Annette, but cannot yet afford to marry her. He then decides to emigrate to America. Landing in New York's Lower East Side, he finds work as a bootblack, saves his money and a year later he sends for Annette whom he marries upon arrival. One intolerably hot summer, their only child becomes sick and threatens to die without pasteurized milk. Beppo begs everybody for help, including Mr Corrigan, a heartless local boss who feels disrespected and has him beaten and incarcerated. Without appropriate nutrition, his child dies. Plotting revenge, Beppo decides to kill the boss's daughter. He repents after noticing that she sleeps with the same baby-like posture he had loved in his own child. The last image is that of Beppo at his son's grave while the intertitle reads: 'At the eternal bedside of his baby where hate, revenge and bitterness melt at the crucible of sorrow.'

The plot line of an immigrant man toiling in a foreign land and struggling to bring his prospective wife to his side had been told many times, and most often through one or two reels, which regularly duplicated the racial typecasting of the vaudeville scene. Expanding the story to six reel, Beban plugged into the traditions of realist and sentimental literature and legitimate theatre remindful of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, where racialized individual characters were invested with universal humanism.

Beppo's various misfortunes, particularly the loss of his child, are explicitly rendered as the result of the environment in which he lives, not as the result of his own personal failures. Yet, the injustice and ill-treatments he has to endure are not narratively transformed into punishment for his abusers. The film denies him not only the right to express his rebellion and avenge himself, but also his right to justice. After all, he remains an immigrant, not an American citizen. What the film exacts from its audience is not *com*-passion for a peer, but a purely sentimental pity, kept at a distance by a stoic and ultimately mortifying narrative conclusion. In its melodramatic combination of realism, pathos and commiseration, *The Italian* carefully preserved a racialized legal and ideological distinction between Italian and American individuals.⁴⁰

Beban's reputation as a virtuoso actor, established on stage with his long-running interpretation in *The Sign of the Rose*, significantly increased with the creative filming of his signature stage play. At nine reels, the film was a racial melodrama of shocking adversity and cruelty, displaying the perverse outcome of racial prejudices, sentimentalizing along the way the miserable Italian protagonist. A financial dispute between two American

⁴⁰ Particularly appreciated was the pathos of the narrative, the realism of the setting and the poignancy of the acting performances. Cf. *NYDM*, 30 Dec. 1914, 26, and *MPN*, 2 Jan. 1915, 81.



Figure 5: Beppo (right) celebrates the birth of his baby at a local bar. *The Italian* (1915). Courtesy of Kevin Brownlow.

brothers ends with one of them kidnapping the other's daughter and accidentally running over and killing Rosina, the only daughter of an Italian widower, Pietro. Distressed over her death, Pietro is indicted as the kidnapper simply because he happens to be in the flower shop, where the ransom was supposed to be paid to a man identified by 'the sign of the rose'. As in *The Italian*, tragedy is the result of environmental and circumstantial factors, not personal crimes or mistakes. *The Sign of the Rose's* ideological address openly sympathizes with the Italian character's emotional outbursts, following his family tragedy and his unjust accusation. Yet, once more, the film narratively and visually racializes the protagonist: through the realism of costumes and setting, the 'authenticity' of Beban's unrestrained acting performance and, quite prominently, the lack of a fair closure.

Once racialized, Pietro's legal standing falls to substandard levels: nobody is indicted for the death of his daughter. The audience's emotional response is reduced to inconsequential compassion. Pietro appears as an imperfect, deficient and 'pathetic figure':⁴¹ no full identification is

⁴¹ George Blaisdell, 'The sign of the rose', *MPW*, 1 May 1915, 740.

possible with him. Not only does the story deny him justice, but the film's social system also requests from him a sense of childish and fatalistic submissiveness to the authority that failed to protect him. As the alternate title indicates, Pietro is and remains an 'alien'.

By (allegedly) mimicking Italian stage performers and real life individuals, Beban emphasized the racial mannerisms through a skilful, widely appreciated and almost obsessive attention to props, settings, costumes and facial expressions. But the entire film achieved a carefully thought-out *realistic effect*, further enhanced by mass scenes featuring extras brought in from New York City and trained to look like 'an excited, surging, crowding crowd'.⁴²

Beban was keenly aware of the effectiveness of his mimetic talent for Italian impersonations to the point of conscious manipulation. As early as 1911, he published a self-celebratory autobiographical article where he described the strategies adopted to perform the authentic Italian character. He reported that his yearning for authenticity led him once to visit the new Pennsylvania terminal in New York in order to buy the wardrobe of an Italian worker, 'as it stood, dirt and all', and use it as his stage costume.⁴³ Ten years later, now a recitation instructor, he published a booklet-lecture titled *Photoplay Characterization*, which in a more systematic fashion illuminates his approach to play 'the Italian' from both a racial and performative standpoint. For Beban, his Italian characters' distinct outward traits were a matter of national and racial origins as well as ingrained cultural manners, all recorded through careful ethnographic observation and rendered with 'picturesqueness'. Yet, their inner humanity had to be kept akin to the familiar sensibility of mainstream audiences and as such appear true-as-universal: 'A character whom we do not understand makes no appeal to us... We are cold in our attitude towards him and consequently unsympathetic.'⁴⁴

In the American cinema of the mid-1910s, and specifically at the time of the intense psychological characterizations enhanced by D.W. Griffith's cinema, Beban fostered an unprecedented intimacy and solidarity with racialized, non-American, characters. Through a deliberate performative approach that relied heavily on manipulation, exploitation and stereotyping, Beban made himself the most outstanding 'interpreter of racial types', as the *New York Dramatic Mirror* reported in 1917.⁴⁵ Although distant from the 'criminalizing' characterizations of earlier gangster films, Beban's films – which he continued directing and impersonating for the next decade – did not fully question contemporary Anglo-American

⁴² *MPW*, 24 Apr. 1915, 561.

⁴³ George Beban, 'Taking a comedian seriously', *The Green Book Album* (Sept. 1911), 511–18.

⁴⁴ Beban, *Photoplay*, 19 and 15.

⁴⁵ *NYDM*, 3 Feb. 1917, 27.

prejudices about Italian racial traits.⁴⁶ Instead, they capitalized on familiar racial attributions such as childlike emotional excess, aggressive tendencies, limited intellectual faculty and intense family bonds. Beban's interest in displaying the melodramatic turmoil of Italian immigrants was often kept within the safe narrative and ideological distance of an American point of view and within the respectable exhibitory boundaries of America's legitimate theatres. Still, his dramas of tenement pathos and high sentimental enticement undermined, at least until the mid-1920s, the sensationalist melodramas of family security threatened and then restored traditionally depicting the rise and fall of Black Handers. Relying on Italians' white racial status, Beban's racial urban melodramas stifled both nativist antagonism and newcomers' grievances by pasting 'unanimous' ideals of universal brotherhood and solidarity on to stories of indigence, exploitation and injustice.

Conclusion

Based in the immigrants' port of New York City, and sensitive to the social Darwinism of contemporary Anglo-American nativism and urban racial thought, since its inception American cinema was caught between the urgency to entertain its metropolitan immigrant patronship and the ambition to uplift film narratives and gentrify film consumption. Before the mid-1910s, the racialness of films depicting non-Anglo-Saxon populations exceeded mere black and white juxtapositions. Race was a complex repository of differences, encompassing national, cultural as well as outer physical and biological traits. While African Americans (as well as Asian Americans and Latinos) were positioned as unmistakably falling out of American society, racialized European immigrants like Italians could attract emotional sympathy and be cast in struggling narratives of *adaptation* – without ever being granted the full parity of *assimilation*. At first, abiding by the law was the greatest divider. Proto-gangster films depicted Old World Italians as brutal and drunken individuals, entertaining regular relationships with the Mafia, and busy threatening the American way of life that other, 'converted' Italians had begun embracing. Soon, however, the scenario became less polarized. A number of tenement dramas revealed the picturesque otherness of Italians' urban quarters crowded with skilled musicians, jealous wives and ill-fated families in need of help or at least compassion. The cinema of Beban emerged from the same alleys, while participating in larger dynamics affecting American cinema as a whole.

In the ten years between *The Black Hand* (1906) and *The Sign of the Rose* (1915), despite a repeated depiction of Italians' dissonance as instinctive

⁴⁶ His other films include *Pasquale* (1916), *Lost in Transit* (1917), *One More American* (1918), *One Man in a Million* (1921), *The Sign of the Rose* (1922), *The Loves of Ricardo* (1926).

unlawfulness and childlike emotionalism, American cinema underwent crucial aesthetic transformations, particularly in terms of narrative ambition and ideological address. From an initial self-positioning as visual newspapers, motion pictures developed a higher and more unanimous vocation: their universal appeal to the most diverse masses of spectators seemingly called for a sense of social inclusion and interracial kinship. Realizing America's progressive mission of 'civilization', American cinema aspired to the status of patriotic and humanistic pageantry. This was not, however, an impulse to democratize representations from a racial standpoint: films, including racial melodramas, remained tied to an Anglo-American cultural and racial supremacy. In the 1910s, the emergence of the western film genre and the restaging of the myth of the West fuelled an ambition of nationalistic consensus, but also instilled a self-righteous sense of racial entitlement against the unruly diversity of eastern urban centres. The privileging of the white Anglo-Saxon cowboy *over* other races and customs assumed the form of hagiographic patriotism. Another option, embraced by Beban, was the narrativization of immigrants' life in an utmost sentimental, yet still patronizing fashion.

Aside from the cultural dynamics initiated since the nineteenth century by literary representations of race and, later, by sociology, criminology and anthropology that I described above, the convergence of these poetic transformations around 1915 was not casual. Italy's siding with Western armies in the First World War restrained US films' inclination to depict Italians as 'natural' criminals. Meanwhile, as the Great War increased American patriotism, the Great Migration of African Americans into urban cities and the arrival of other peoples of African descent from the Caribbean supported the emergence of the New Negro Movement in a period also shaped by race riots, labour strife and visible protests that engendered, in Guterl's words, 'a national mass culture obsessed with the "Negro" as the foremost social threat'.⁴⁷ The former nativist emphasis on racial heterogeneity was complemented and then eclipsed by a dawning bi-racial polarization of black vs. white, best epitomized by the 1915 unprecedented success of *The Birth of a Nation*. The equation of racial difference more directly with colour made space for racial narratives that cast European immigrants in less antagonistic and more sympathetic and even sentimental tones. By then, American cinema was displaying a growing interest in characters' psychological rendering and, in general, the new racialized consumer society was commercializing familiar racial differences for spectacular, emotional and entertaining purposes.

This new emotional intimacy with racialized subjects would lead to the production of filmed racial melodramas featuring new and foreign gender models, both male and female. From the second half of the 1910s, in fact, racial melodramas constituted the most serious challenge to westerns

⁴⁷ Guterl, *The Color*, 6.

and Griffith's racist pageanties – both champions of the nationalization of male white dominance. Highly emotional male subjects and a new, unprecedented spectrum of female protagonists – often played by such established all-American icons as Lillian Gish and Mary Pickford and dramatized by an increasing number of female screenwriters⁴⁸ – were cast as Italian women in passionate, highly sensualized and quite controversial love stories, often set (and shot) between the Old and the New Worlds.⁴⁹ New York City's Italian ghettos were often adopted as a recurrent backdrop in these stories to explore, without pedantry, issues of social freedom, sexual expression, gender and interracial relations as well as cultural resistance and assimilation.⁵⁰

And then, of course, there was Rudolph Valentino, the gallant Latin lover. Through him, Italianness returned to transcend the condition of immigrants. Racially positioned between alterity and familiarity, Valentino was biographically coded as an Italian nobleman, the protagonist of a Horatio-Alger success story in 1920s Hollywood, yet never fully equated with an average immigrant. That he could become an exotic object of sexual desire beyond undue fears of miscegenation is quite symptomatic. It tells of a resilient yet malleable racial difference, for decades articulated as dysfunctional, unlawful and, at best, sentimental and picturesque, now turned sensually appealing and once more offered for public consumption.⁵¹

⁴⁸ In the mid-1910s, such talented screenwriters as Sonya Levien, Anita Loos, Frances Marion and June Mathis had a chance to emerge and have a creative impact since the scenario department was the least sex-typed of all studio divisions.

⁴⁹ Some examples include Pickford's *Poor Little Peppina* (1916) and *The Love Light* (1921), and Gish's religious *The White Sister* (1923).

⁵⁰ Consider *A Woman's Honor* (1917), *The Ordeal of Rosetta* (1918) and *Who Will Marry Me?* (1919).

⁵¹ G. Bertellini, 'Divo/duce: masculinity, racial identity, and politics among Italian-Americans in 1920s New York City', *Journal of Urban History* (forthcoming).