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1. Introduction

- ¹ In a scene from Steven Spielberg's Hollywood blockbuster war movie, *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), a few soldiers in the platoon led by John Miller (played by Oscar winner Tom Hanks) search through a bag containing dozens of dog tags for the name James Francis Ryan, a G.I. missing in action in Normandy, France. While pronouncing the Italian surnames of many soldiers killed in action, one of Miller's servicemen calls them "guineas," a derogatory term traditionally applied to Italian Americans. This cynical and inopportune expression indirectly refers to Hollywood's long tradition of negatively depicting Italian immigrants living in the United States, going all the way back to the beginning of silent cinema in the 1910s. Indeed, early American movies showed Italians as tending towards violence, being highly impulsive and emotional, gesticulating excessively, and wearing traditional folk costumes. All of these onscreen features were further reminders of the supposed "inferiority" of the Italians relative to Anglo-Saxon values and standards.¹
- ² In Spielberg's movie, the sizeable number of dog tags with Italian surnames suggests just how many young Italian Americans served in the American forces during World War II.² Americans with Italian backgrounds were drafted and deployed to battlefields across the world. Some of them fought to fully liberate their ancestral homeland from Nazi and Fascist control during the Allied Italian Campaign of 1943 to 1945; many Italian surnames appear among the graves of the American cemeteries in Florence and Nettuno, the final resting places in Italy for those US service members whose remains were not repatriated.

- 3 The goal of this essay is to investigate the presence and the function of Italian American servicemen in Hollywood's World War II movies set in Italy, to understand the value ethnicity had in films depicting American soldiers of Italian descent against the backdrop of their ancestral country. The first section will look at the Italian battlefield as a cross-cultural site, given the composite character of the US forces, which included African American and Japanese American soldiers. Italian Americans played a major role as culture brokers in establishing contact and developing rapport with the Italian population. This role was widely depicted in war films set in Italy, with American servicemen of Italian descent facilitating reconciliation between the Allied occupiers and the Italian population. The second part of the article will investigate the way Hollywood promoted the value of patriotism, and how this was done through on-screen representations of Italian American servicemen.
- 4 The focus is specifically on six motion pictures set in North Africa and Italy, based on either novels, memoirs, or journalism, and produced from 1945 to 1980: *The Story of G.I. Joe* (William A. Wellman 1945), *A Bell for Adano* (Henry King 1945), *A Walk in the Sun* (Lewis Milestone 1945), *To Hell and Back* (Jesse Hibbs 1955), *The Pigeon Who Took Rome* (Melville Shavelson 1962), and *The Big Red One* (Samuel Fuller 1980).³ The four combat-themed movies (*The Story of G.I. Joe*, *A Walk in the Sun*, *To Hell and Back*, and *The Big Red One*) feature non-protagonist Italian American ordinary G.I.s, and are played by Italian American actors. These include Osvaldo Castellano (Wally Cassell) as Private Dondaro in *The Story of G.I. Joe*;⁴ Joseph Sciarba (Richard Benedict) as Private Tranella,⁵ and Richard Conte as Private Rivera in *A Walk in the Sun*;⁶ Paul Picerni as Private Valentino in *To Hell and Back*;⁷ and Robert ("Bobby") Leonard Di Cicco as Private Vinci in *The Big Red One*.⁸ In contrast, the non-combat film *A Bell for Adano* recounts the efforts of Italian American Major Victor Joppolo (the movie protagonist) to administrate the fictional Sicilian town of Adano (in reality the town of Licata) after the invasion of the island.⁹ Exceptionally, the character is played by John Hodiak, an actor without an Italian background, but whose physical features, including a mustache, resemble the typical Hollywood Italian¹⁰. In addition, *The Pigeon That Took Rome* tells the story of two American secret agents in occupied Rome, one of which is the Italian American Sergeant Angelico (performed by the Italian American actor Harry Guardino), who appears subordinate to his Anglo-Saxon comrade, Captain Paul MacDougall.¹¹ His experience in the film recalls that of the many Americans whose Italian backgrounds led them to be recruited into the Office of Strategic Services, the special corps for espionage and sabotage missions behind enemy lines that operated in Italy (Corvo; Squatrito; LaGumina, *The Office*).

2. Hollywood and Wartime Italy as a Site of Cross-Cultural Encounter

- 5 On 9 July 1943, Operation "Husky" launched an invasion of Sicily by hundreds of thousands of Allied soldiers, who had departed from the Tunisian coast.¹² It was the largest World War II military operation before the Normandy landing nearly one year later, on 6 June 1944. Soldiers of several nationalities contributed to the liberation of the island before moving north to free the rest of the peninsula from Nazi and Fascist control, a mission effectively completed on 25 April 1945 (Williams). Thus, the Italian population encountered mixed Allied forces, because these included troops drawn from across the British Commonwealth, North African soldiers serving with French

liberation forces, and Filipino. Overall, minorities were well-represented in the US military (Takaki). For instance, African American soldiers were employed in Italy in the 92nd Infantry Division, the so-called “Buffalo Soldiers,” an experience recounted by Carolyn Ross Johnston, through visiting the places in Italy where her father had fought (Gibran; Hargrove; Wynn; Ross Johnston). In World War II, African Americans fought in segregated units and in Italy their relationship to the local population was multifaceted. According to Maria Porzio (65-68), many Italians saw them as “evil” because of their skin color and treated them with fear and suspicion. Alternatively, Andrew Buchanan argued that contact with Italians “offered a welcome break from vicious racism prevalent in the army, and black GIs found themselves welcomed for their apparent exoticism as well as for the fact that their military assignments often gave them access to cigarettes and food” (Buchanan 598). Because of widespread prejudice, African American servicemen hardly appeared in Hollywood’s war movies, until African American director Spike Lee depicted a segregated US battalion fighting in Tuscany in his 2008 *Miracle at St. Anna*.¹³ Paradoxically enough, it was Italian neorealist cinema—such as the internationally acclaimed *Paisan* (Rossellini 1946)—that, to a greater extent, took into account the African Americans who served in Italy, albeit sometimes by reproducing images of blackness tied to violence and savagery. According to Shelleen Greene, these portraits would contribute to reiterating the Italian claim to “whiteness,” and the disappearance of the recent colonial past in Africa from the Italian collective memory (Greene 93-107).¹⁴

- 6 Prejudice also played a role for Japanese Americans during wartime. After the Japanese aerial attack against the American fleet stationed at Pearl Harbor in the Hawaiian Islands, on 7 December 1941, suspicion of treason and allegations of collaboration with Tokyo’s government, which were mostly unfounded, led to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans in US detention centers. Widespread anti-Asian racial bias was behind these measures, as Caucasian Americans with German and Italian backgrounds were subjected to less restrictive limitations, despite the fact their ancestral homelands were also at war with the United States. In order to demonstrate their patriotism, a certain number of second generation Japanese Americans agreed to serve in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was employed in Europe (McCaffrey). After the invasion of Sicily, they fought across the Italian peninsula, and their story was positively depicted in Robert Pirosh’s 1951 movie *Go for Broke*, released, coincidentally enough, the year that the Allies and Japan signed their Treaty of Peace. The movie shows these “unusual” American soldiers fraternizing with Neapolitan citizens, who offer them wine on their way to Rome. The astonishment of many Italians upon meeting American uniformed men with Asian traits marks this out as a distinctive form of intercultural encounter. While Black Americans recalled the colonial subjects of the Italian territories in East Africa, who were constant subjects of the Mussolini regime's racist propaganda, Japanese American servicemen gave rise to a novel curiosity, given the theretofore unlikelihood of most Italians having encountered Asian people.¹⁵
- 7 For African Americans and Japanese Americans, joining the US military forces in World War II was an opportunity to attempt to counteract discrimination, demonstrate full-fledged patriotism, and seek acceptance by US society. Given these particular aims, and their lack of local connection, these minorities were likely to see Italy as no more relevant a place to serve as any other. For Italian Americans, however, fighting in the ancestral homeland was personal, since there was a risk of facing friends or relatives on

the battlefield. Within this context, some preferred to voluntarily enlist in the Marines to fight the Japanese in the Pacific, and thus avoid any confrontation with Italians (Pretelli and Fusi 304). Nevertheless, the US authorities considered American servicemen with Italian backgrounds as key to the occupation of Italy. While on the domestic front Italian Americans supported the US war effort through the widespread purchase of war bonds (Luconi, "Bonds"), in Italy, ethnic servicemen were commonly utilized as cultural brokers. Their knowledge of the Italian language, local dialects, and cultural customs, even if only partial, genuinely helped to facilitate the military administration of the liberated territories, as in the cases of Italian American officers such as Charles Poletti and Michael Musmanno, U.S. Army Civil Affairs Officer in Italy, and Allied Military Governor of the Sorrentine Peninsula, respectively. Overall, ordinary soldiers' command of Italian served as a medium to aid reconciliation between the local population and US uniformed soldiers who entered Italian towns and were acclaimed as liberators. In their memoirs, Italian Americans fighting in Italy recounted mixed feelings towards Italy and Italians.¹⁶ Many felt love and compassion for the harsh conditions caused by war privations endured by the Italians, and wished to contribute to their rapid economic and social recovery. While some might have been embarrassed by the local population's attempts to endear themselves to the ethnic Italian soldiers, the majority of Italian American servicemen responded positively to the Italians' warmth (LaGumina, *The Humble* 204-264; Luconi, "Italian Americans"; Patti 19-61; Rioss 165-194; Baris 62-65; Rossi; Pretelli and Fusi 299-324; Belmonte, *Italian Americans* 100-102).

- 8 In regard to the Italian Campaign, Hollywood's films from the selected sample are geographically set in Southern Italian locations, in places such as Sicily, Naples, and Salerno, that were heavily affected by war operations and in which memories of conflict are still very vivid today (Gribaudo). Additionally, these regions saw massive emigration to the United States in the early 20th century. In Central Italy, the city of Rome enjoys special attention, along with the famous Benedictine Abbey of Montecassino, located south of the capital. The Abbey has been an object of intense debate since it was almost completely destroyed on 18 February 1944 by American bombers, based on the erroneous belief that the Catholic site had been occupied by Germans for its strategic position and ample view over the surrounding valley (Caddick-Adams).
- 9 In Hollywood war movies, Americans are usually portrayed as liberating Italy from the oppression of fascism, both in older and more recent reels. In *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945) local Italians come out of their homes after the Americans defeat the Germans in battle, and receive food from them. More recently, in *The Big Red One* (1980), Italian American Private Vinci's platoon celebrates a dinner together with a group of old Italian women, after the former had killed a group of German artillerymen who were forcing the ladies to work the land. Emblematically, the women use their spades on the dead bodies of the German soldiers as a form of revenge. Food, flowers, and the display of American and Italian flags together proclaim the reborn friendship, to the point that during the festivities the narrating voice states "it is the first time in ages we all felt very good." In the American platoon Vinci acts as a "cultural bridge" to facilitate contact between Italians and Americans, as Italian American servicemen usually do in war movies set in Italy. In the cases of Private Dondaro (in *The Story of G.I. Joe*) and Vinci, Italian American G.I.s' ability to speak Italian, or dialects, allows them to familiarize themselves with the local population. In movies such as *A Bell for Adano* and *The Pigeon that Took Rome*,

dialogues are all played in English, but Italian American characters are identifiable by their capacity to speak the local idiom. Language is a medium particularly emotional for Private Tranella who, in *A Walk in the Sun*, is called to translate the interrogation of two suspicious Italian defectors. Shifting from a rigid American-style military discipline, Tranella transforms himself to employ the typical Italian gestures and body movements in his dialogue with the Italians. He also experiences excitement and empathy upon learning that the soldiers come from his own father's hometown. Tranella even becomes upset with his American ranking officer, when the latter seems dubious of the Italian soldiers' honesty.

- 10 Cinematic fiction mirrored the military practice of relying on ethnic soldiers, including Italian Americans, to make and maintain contact with local populations in the countries where American troops were operating. However, in the movies, servicemen's use of the native language is always accompanied by a full command of English, devoid of any accent whatsoever.¹⁷ This capacity reveals that these people were usually born and raised in the United States, where their experience attending American schools accelerated their acquisition of local values and behaviors as children. Those who volunteered or were drafted into the US armed forces during the war were in fact members of the generation born in America to Italian parents. According to the 1920 US census, these American-born children had by then already outnumbered those who, like their parents, had been born in Italy and later emigrated to the United States. American born ethnic Italians were exposed to mostly their parents' native culture and language at home, but outside they made the American lifestyle their own and used English with non-Italian peers. Thus, while the first Italian generation to arrive idealized the country from which they had departed, their children mainly perceived themselves as American. Given the fact the majority of them had never visited, Italy was felt to be very far away (Orsi 133-147; Carnevale; Vecoli 75-78).¹⁸
- 11 Italian Americans also function to bridge Italians and the American troops, as they comprehend local culture. Major Joppolo "conquers" Adano's population by taking part in the Sunday mass, thus showing everybody his Catholic faith. Afterwards, he also undertakes very popular initiatives to improve the local economy and the average living conditions of the population (such as establishing fishing rights and free passage for mule carts), as well as fulfilling his promise to bring a historic bell back to the town that had been stolen by the fascists. Set in Rome, *The Pigeon that Took Rome* is another case, in which Italian American Sergeant Joseph Angelico plays a significant role as a bridge between Italians and Americans. Angelico and MacDougall find a "natural" liaison with partisan Ciccio Massimo, a member of the Roman Resistance, and his family, who end up definitively facilitating their mission.
- 12 In terms of reconnecting with the land of their ancestry, encountering Italian women was of major relevance to Italian American G.I.s. Around one third of the American soldiers who married Italian women during wartime were of Italian descent (Varricchio 146; Cassamagnaghi). In light of this, these relationships as depicted in war movies may be seen as functioning to fill a sense of emptiness caused by the tragedies of conflict. Thus, the encounter between Italian American servicemen and Italian women becomes a way to escape loneliness, fear, and alienation. In *The Story of G.I. Joe*, Private Dondaro is the traditional Italian Latin-lover who, in the course of a battle against the Axis forces, finds an Italian lady stuck at home. Despite the inappropriate situation, he oddly

seduces the woman in a mix of English and Sicilian dialect. When she asks that he stay because she feels lonely, he responds that he has to leave to keep fighting, but he promises to return. In *A Bell for Adano*, Major Joppolo—a married man in the United States—has a quasi-affair with a local Sicilian lady whose Italian fiancé is detained somewhere as a prisoner of war. Their being together is for each of them a way to temporarily escape loneliness and the tragedies of war, in view of a future return to ordinary life. Love is also a core theme in *The Pigeon that Took Rome*: Sergeant Angelico falls in love with Rosalba, Ciccio's daughter, and asks her to marry him, despite learning that she is pregnant by another American G.I. He is ready to accept her anyway because, he says, these things “happen” during warfare. Eventually they get married after the liberation of Rome. Sergeant Angelico shows his Italian character by being particularly appreciative of the Italian ladies' charm; conversely, MacDougall persists in his contained, “Anglo” attitude towards women, but inevitably falls in love anyway, with Rosalba's sister Antonella.

- 13 The above-mentioned examples reiterate the traditional stereotypes of Italians as passionate, driven by emotion, and, in the case of Dondaro, who searched for love in the midst of a battle, an irrationality alien to mainstream Anglo-Saxon Americans. At the same time, the importance Italian Americans attribute culturally to the value of family becomes, in war movies, a plea for the return to ordinary civil life. In Hollywood productions, family gatherings associated with big lunches and dinners are among the most common tropes regarding Italian Americans, to the point that the household becomes a “primary cultural value” for them (Bondanella 89). According to Ilaria Serra, the “predominance of the family as a narrative unit is part of a larger tendency in American cinema. In the majority of Italian American films, however, the family is not only a cue for comedy or simple wallpaper, it is indeed a constitutive part of the narration” (Serra 197).
- 14 In *The Pigeon that Took Rome*, Ciccio's household becomes a sort of substitute family for Sergeant Angelico, who left his own behind in America. In *The Big Red One*, when Vinci finds a bag full of Italian liras in a destroyed Sicilian house, he thinks immediately of helping his father. In the film *A Walk in the Sun*, Private Rivera is a sociable Italian American G.I. who seems detached from his Italian ethnicity, but at the beginning of the movie he is introduced as an Opera-lover willing to find a wife and have a lot of children. Family is also a pivotal component of identity for Private Valentino in *To Hell and Back*. During the transit from North Africa to Sicily, Valentino talks about Italy as his “ancestral land”. As soon as he arrives in Naples, he leaves his comrades hanging out in the city streets so that he can pay a visit to his relatives and bring them gifts, in order to fulfill the promise he made to his mother to take care of the family. Valentino reproduces on screen the widespread practice of many Italian American servicemen to visit the ancestral villages and towns from where their parents and grandparents had departed. This popular activity was encouraged by the American authorities, which believed that it was a way to facilitate reconciliation between uniformed American soldiers and locals (Fusi 1-23).

3. Hollywood and Italian American Patriotism

- 15 One of the main wartime goals of the US government on the home front was to cultivate a positive view of the American military effort overseas, in order to foster

patriotism. In particular, the movie industry was a vehicle to heroically describe the Allied “good war,” namely a conflict worth fighting in order to defeat the evil of totalitarianism, whether in Europe or in Asia.¹⁹ Debra Ramsay points out how every week during the war, over ninety million Americans went to the movie theatres, an activity that became a communal viewing experience (Ramsay 38-39). The American authorities sought collaboration with Hollywood to spread propaganda and accelerate their final victory. As part of a deal, the federal government softened its anti-trust attitude towards cinema moguls and worked to reduce import tariffs on American films in foreign countries, especially in Europe. In return, Hollywood fully embraced patriotism and displayed, through its reels, a willingness to depict American society positively; consequently, it received abundant war materials from the US armed forces for filmmaking purposes (Bennett 18-19). The US government agency charged with managing information and dealing with propaganda both at home and abroad, the Office of War Information printed a handbook intended to be a guide to movie production during wartime for Hollywood, the *Government Information Manual for the Motion Picture Industry* (Winkler). Hence, Hollywood and the U.S. government aimed jointly to shape national unity and mobilize citizens against Axis enemies, especially the Japanese, often portrayed on screen as an indistinct, dehumanized, and threatening mass. According to Todd Bennett, “Widely associated today with the United States, Hollywood became fully American by virtue of its extensive patriotic service during World War II, when the industry’s commercial objectives complemented Washington’s geopolitical agenda and established the foundation of a cozy corporatist partnership” (16).

- 16 Generally, movies set during World War II highlight a natural “harmony” in the U.S. combat unit, typically depicted as a platoon able to accomplish the final mission, under the guidance of a leader who was typically a white officer surrounded by servicemen who were usually identifiable by ethnicity or geographical provenance (Muscio 1051, 1059; May 142; Basinger 259; Bennett 107). Overall, in war movies, American soldiers with Italian heritage are often marked by Italian-sounding surnames and Mediterranean physical traits, such as dark skin, and appearances, like greased hair. Ethnicity is a relevant factor for indicating servicemen, especially in movies produced during and immediately following the war. These films often perpetuates some of the most typical stereotypes associated with Italians in early cinema, as Italian American servicemen are sometimes portrayed as getting drunk, fighting, dancing, and strongly sexualizing women. Perhaps the most remarkable case in point is *Sands of Iwo Jima*, a 1950 movie recounting the American invasion of the eponymous Japanese island, in which the Italian American Private Regazzi (another role played by the Italian American actor Osvaldo Castellano as “Wally Cassell”) is a US platoon member renowned for his clownish behavior and sociability. In war movies set in Italy, highly marked ethnicity appears in the combat themed films *The Story of G.I. Joe* and *A Walk in the Sun*, both produced in 1945. In the former, Private Dondaro from Brooklyn constantly sexualizes women and displays extravagant, caricatured behavior; in the latter, during his interrogation of the two Italian defectors, Private Tranella displays the tendency to gesticulate in an animated fashion that accords with the traditional American view of Italian people’s behavior.²⁰
- 17 In war movies set outside of Italy, but that included Italian American servicemen, spoken Italian lacks a cinematic function narratively; yet, this pattern of cultural

hybridity is mirrored in the capacity of Italian American servicemen to speak perfect English while simultaneously utilizing words extracted from Italian and its dialects, typically *capisce?* (understand?), or idiomatic expressions such as *Mamma mia!* (Oh my God!).²¹ In films produced since the 1960s, remarked “Italian” ethnic traits become much less pronounced and Italian American servicemen become quite undistinguishable from their peers. Indeed, against the backdrop of the formerly straight-forward process of assimilating minorities, the post-1960s’ “ethnic revival” gave an entirely new value to the distinctiveness of ethnicity in the United States. This may have actually pushed Hollywood to progressively treat excessive accentuation of ethnicity, including those of servicemen in World War II movies, with more nuance.²² In this phase, necklaces carrying Catholic crucifixes, or direct declaration of their Italian background by protagonists, rather serve to indicate their ethnicity. Nevertheless, in these decades Italian characters can still be distinguished from others by virtue of their being very talkative, particularly braggadocious, and by their obsession with women.

- 18 Yet, despite “typical” Italian ethnic traits, the Italian American servicemen in war movies (including those set in Italy) are always virtuous, patriotic American citizens, who fight hard and sacrifice themselves for the country and for their comrades. In this way, the Italians contribute to the trend described by scholar Richard Slotkin (480-481, 486): the soldiers of a platoon metaphorically depict a “microcosm” of the American liberal, multiethnic society committed collectively to the ultimate goal of winning the war. Consequently, harmonious relations among all of the different ethnic servicemen mirror the American democracy's supposed capacity to resolve differences and create shared objectives.²³ This attitude is functional to the spread of patriotism, but it is also part of the legacy from the New Deal years, a time when Franklin D. Roosevelt’s administration worked intensively towards making the American mainstream more inclusive of ethnic and racial minorities. While trade unionism close to the Democratic Party played a pivotal role in this practice, even the army facilitated this mediation by fostering patriotic feelings in the 1930s among people of foreign background.²⁴ In addition, World War II became a peak period of naturalization in American history, with over 1.5 million civilians becoming citizens, and more than 112,000 naturalizations based on wartime service in the armed forces. Italians were among the largest numbers of naturalized newcomers (Gerstle 187-237; Brusino 56-58; Ueda 168). Despite this context, however, the World War II filmic platoon recurrently still perpetuated Hollywood’s old stereotypes attached to ethnic groups, such as the drunk Irish, the Latin-lover Italian, and the complaining Jew (Muscio 1061).
- 19 With respect to patriotism, Italian Americans had to work hard to have their loyalty to the United States fully acknowledged. Before the outbreak of World War II, Americans of Italian descent still had strong transnational ties with their native country. During the years of Mussolini’s dictatorial regime (1922-1943), they expressed feelings of appreciation towards *Il Duce*, as they perceived him as a great statesman who had placed Italy among the most respected countries in the world.²⁵ In the second half of the 1930s, international tensions escalated, to the point that Italian Americans felt the suspicions of being seen as potential overseas agents of Mussolini. After Pearl Harbour, together with Japanese Americans and German Americans, many ethnic Italians saw their private liberties restrained, while those few that were considered national security threats were interned for the duration of the war (Fox; DiStasi; Basile Chupas).

20 Serving en masse in the military was a way for Italian Americans to demonstrate full loyalty to the United States and the American democracy, a patriotic feeling easily recognizable in their war memoirs.²⁶ According to the Italian American literary professor Fred Gardaphe, who grew up in postwar America with the myth of war veterans, in the “Little Italies” “one way of providing unquestionable masculinity, as well as loyalty to the new country, would be performing service during World War II” (Gardaphe 18). Even servicemen in Italy always valued their American identities first, so much so that for the majority of them fighting in Italy was mainly matter of patriotism, with their priority being the final victory against the Axis forces. A case in point is Italian American aviator Edward J. Denari, who was stationed in Italy and wrote in his memoir:

I was filled with the consuming idea that my crew mates and I were on a grand mission that personified the core values of our beautiful country and that coming thousands of miles to this foreign land to bring an end to enormous forces of evil was in the mind of this twenty-two-year-old just regular American, simply an act of patriotism. (128)

21 The content of the New York printed *Il Progresso Italo-Americano*—the most widely circulated Italian ethnic newspaper in the United States—fully shows how popular the war effort was in the “Little Italies” in American cities. In his war memoir, the historian Salvatore LaGumina talked about those who came from the Italian American neighborhoods to fight in the war:

If not the greatest of the Italian American generation, they were a major element in the ranks of unsung heroes of the war. This was the mindset of Italian Americans on the home front as we lived, worked and sacrificed during the war years. For me and many others of my background, it was critically important that we were doing our share. For my fellow ethnics in Brooklyn, it meant a great deal to see those of our nationality performing the essential services that earned the respect of the nation. (*The Humble* 266-267)

22 As already mentioned, despite all of the stereotypes and caricatured depictions in war movies, Italian American servicemen, including those in Italy, are constantly shown as patriotic. This image probably mirrors the public perception of an ethnic minority that had demonstrated loyalty over time, initially through the massive purchase of war bonds and subsequently through their sacrifice on the battlefield. In the movie *A Bell for Adano*, Major Joppolo was the epitome of this ethnic patriotic Americanism: “More than simply a ‘good man’... he was a quintessential American hero, thoroughly assimilated and aspiring to a better life, and better world, than the one inhabited by his Italian-born parents” (Carruthers 1090).

23 A fluent speaker of accent free English, he is the obligatory embodiment of American values, made up of discipline and composure. Without any of the caricatured Italian-style features, Joppolo is called to administrate the Sicilian town of Adano. He works to “export” the values of American democracy through the promotion of equity and justice to the local population, who was unfamiliar with those principles after twenty years of dictatorship. Hence, Joppolo is the “good” and “benevolent” American administrator who works hard to help the Sicilians survive by fulfilling their daily economic needs. In this regards, Joppolo fully embodies the role of patronizing, Americanized, ethnic officer, called to “liberate” Italy from the relics of fascism. An Italian American from the Bronx, his parents had arrived from the surroundings of Florence, a detail that perhaps functions to explain his calm and efficient behavior.

From the end of the 19th century, Americans tended to perceive people from Northern Italy as more acceptable and easy to integrate than Southerners, so much so that, from 1899 onward, Italians arriving in Ellis Island were registered as either Northern or Southern (cf. D'Agostino 330). A long term persistent prejudice, during the occupation Allied military authorities in Italy reported that the local population in Tuscany had already begun reconstruction, while the Southerners were waiting to receive Allied assistance.²⁷

- 24 American patriotism, however, might encounter some military hurdles. A case in point is the aforementioned bombing of the Montecassino Abbey, an architectural masterpiece of primary importance not only for its role in the history of Christianity in Italy, but also for its overall cultural heritage value. Despite the importance of the site, in the movie *The Story of G.I Joe*, its destruction provokes no crisis of identity in the Italian American Private Dondaro. A member of an American platoon fighting on the Italian front, Dondaro cheers the bombing of the Abbey together with his fellow soldiers, after what is presented in the film as a very difficult decision made by the American high command, and only after long reflection on the matter. In this sense, Dondaro seems to renounce his Italian roots and utterly devote himself to the final victory against the Axis powers. Dondaro's behavior mirrors Italian American war memoirs, in which one hardly ever finds any criticism of the US government or military authorities. This was one of the ways in which Italian American soldiers demonstrated the extent of their own patriotism (Pretelli and Fusi 308-312).
- 25 Consequently, the full-fledged Americanism and patriotism of Italian Americans is never challenged in Hollywood motion pictures. A marked case in point is the 1980 film *The Big Red One*, set in Sicily and Tunisia. In the movie, Private Vinci is clearly identifiable as Italian American by his physical appearance, his capacity to speak the Sicilian dialect, and reference to his father's birth on the island. During the transit from Tunisia to Sicily, a red-haired soldier taunts Vinci for his ethnicity, belittles his masculinity, and insultingly suggests that he drink his "dago red" (red wine usually drunk by Italian immigrants in the US), and sing the famous Neapolitan song *O sole mio*. Aided by a companion moving in his defense, Vinci reacts by placing his rifle in the taunting soldier's mouth, while the entire group flanks him and joins the Italian American G.I. in singing the Neapolitan song. While Vinci's reaction might recall stereotypes of Italian hot-blooded temperament and tendencies to violence, the group's behavior clearly stands against the attempt to undermine Vinci's patriotism, loyalty, and even masculinity, because of his Italian roots.

4. Conclusion

- 26 The historian Thomas Guglielmo points out how American World War II motion pictures and popular literature never depicted Italians as enemies, but rather as pitiful and craven soldiers, as in the case of the two defectors from *A Walk in the Sun*. At the same time, Italians are usually seen as jovial and good people, as well as full supporters of the United States. This image is very far from that of the "inhumane" German and Japanese fighters. Guglielmo labels Italians the "forgotten enemy," an image based on the brief, two year period of hostilities between the two countries and on the disastrous Italian outcomes on the battlefield (5-22).

- 27 A positive perception of Italy might also have been presented on screen for political purposes, given that Italians in the United States were a key electoral bloc of Roosevelt's constituency. Additionally, because of their sizeable number and excellent service record, Italian Americans experienced appreciation and respect for their military contributions back in the United States, which may be part of why so few war memoirs recount ethnic discrimination in the military. Therefore, they eventually achieved a positive—even though sometimes caricatured—depiction in the American war film. In the broader context of the Soviet challenge, American policymakers worked to quickly integrate Italy into the pro-American, democratic bloc. During this process of rapprochement, Hollywood's Italian American servicemen in Italy appearing onscreen helped to offer a better image of the Italian population, and to establish a new phase of friendship and reciprocity.

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NOTES

1. As early as 1906, Wallace McCutcheon's silent movie *The Black Hand* embraced these ethnic representations and had begun to popularize the myth of the Italian migrant as being culturally alien, associated with criminal organizations, and impervious to assimilation into American society. Subsequently, the gangster genre would reiterate the trope of Italian violence, and continues to do so currently. On anti-Italian sentiment in the United States, see LaGumina, *Wop!*; Connell and Gardaphé. For Hollywood's perspective on Italians, cf. Bondanella; Bertellini.

2. According to the military historian Thomas Bruscino, Italian Americans were the largest ethnic group in the US armed forces. A teenager during the war, the historian Salvatore LaGumina counts roughly 750,000 servicemen of Italian descent. Other sources indicate around 850,000 servicemen, a number close to LaGumina's figures. However, these data can be considered merely speculative, because the US military authorities did not register ethnicity for drafted men during World War II (LaGumina, *The Humble* 152; Bruscino 58; Pretelli and Fusi 302-303).

3. Jeanine Basinger's close examination of nearly 600 war movies set in World War II and produced from wartime to the present, clearly shows the importance of ethnicity in cinematic narrative through the notable presence of Caucasian non-Anglo-Saxon servicemen of European background. Of these, twenty-nine movies depict Italian American servicemen (including some presenting Italian American World War II veterans' experiences in a postwar setting), suggesting that the fictional presentation of these ethnic soldiers was important to the American public's perception of World War II veterans (Basinger; Eberwein; Ramsay). In the television miniseries *The Pacific* (Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Gary Goetzman 2010), the actual war hero John Basilone, who had an Italian background, was one of the main characters. A marine from Raritan, New Jersey, born to Italian parents, Basilone was repeatedly decorated for his wartime accomplishments, becoming so well-known that he was featured in a nationwide campaign encouraging Americans to purchase war bonds. He eventually was killed in action in Asia, fighting the Japanese (Frontani 21-52).

4. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0144082/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm. Accessed 18 December 2019.

5. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0070807/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm. Accessed 10 December 2019.

6. <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0002017/>. Accessed 12 December 2019. Conte is also the Italian American Lieutenant Angelo Canelli, member of group of aviators taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese in *The Purple Heart* (Lewis Milestone, 1944).

7. <http://www.nndb.com/people/750/000279910/>. Accessed 13 December 2019.

8. Di Cicco's Italian ancestry is not proven by sources, but his Italian-sounding surname surely indicates an Italian background.

9. The film was adapted from the Pulitzer Prize winning novel of the same name, published in 1944 by journalist and writer John Hersey, which was later made into a Broadway hit as well.

10. http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0388303/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm. Accessed 14 December 2019. For a literary analysis of the novel see Mariani 2013. Actors of Eastern European descent played Italian American criminals in the gangster movies *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) and *Scarface* (Howard Hawks and Richard Rosson, 1932).

11. On Guardino see Aste 390.

12. The Allied troop landing in Sicily was a pivotal moment in Italian history that quickly led to the collapse of Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime. The Italian King Victor Emanuel III had him arrested and removed from his position as the head of state, before signing an armistice with the Allies on 8 September 1943. The new premier Pietro Badoglio's flight from Rome to find shelter in Allied occupied Brindisi marked the beginning of a civil war between the Nazi and Fascist controlled northern part of the country and the southern part, in the hands of the Allies.

13. The film was highly controversial in Italy for its depiction of traitorous Italian partisans who delivered their compatriots to the Nazis (McDonald Carolan 103). During World War II, US military authorities produced *The Negro Soldier* (1944)—followed by *The Negro Sailor* (1945) and *Teamwork* (1946)—to show the African American contribution to the American wars, in an attempt to mitigate the widespread racism within the US forces (Wynn 50).

14. On Italian neorealism see Ruberto and Wilson.

15. In the memoir of one of these servicemen, we can read the following account: "At any rate, I can say that the participants get a kick out of it... Pompeii, that's where we were headed for—that famous town buried in 600 bc by the ashes and dust from the volcanic antics of Mt. Vesuvius. I'd looked forward to the trip and here we were on our merry way with a mess of Italians in a crowded tiny train with a responsible guide. Naturally the passengers were quite curious about us wondering as to our race and we told them in our beautiful Italian (don't forget the hand movements). They couldn't quite figure out how come we were speaking English, when we were Japanese. We had some good conversation all the way (or should I spell that confusion)... the tour was excellent and very worthwhile and we were in the ruins for three hours. After the hot walk, naturally, we had to go to an arbor where wine was sold and a bottle of the sparkling stuff was in order" (Masuda 35).

16. For an overview of Italian American servicemen's memoirs see Belmonte, "The Sword". On US World War II soldier writings see Bodnar 34-59.

17. Command of the German language is an important factor for American servicemen fighting the Nazis in the movies *U-571* (Jonathan Mostow 2000) and *Inglorious Basterds* (Quentin Tarantino 2009).

18. This lack of knowledge regarding the ancestral country, combined with some command of the Italian language or its dialects, is traceable in the memoirs of Italian American soldiers who took part in the Italian Campaign (Petruzzi; Lovoi; Caponi; Denari; Feuer).

19. For the American view of totalitarianism see Gleason; Alpers.

20. In Hollywood motion pictures, excessive gesticulation has long been a marker of Italian ethnicity, recurring still in current films, like *Eat, Pray, Love* (Ryan Murphy 2010), a romantic drama in which Julia Roberts plays a divorced American woman searching for a new life in Italy.

21. Such is the case of Private Adrian Caparzo in the aforementioned *Saving Private Ryan*, or Private Joe Collucci in *Eight Iron Men* (Edward Dmytryk 1952).

22. On the “ethnic revival” see Jacobson.

23. For a critical perspective on the myth of American patriotism in World War II, see Rose.

24. Unlike during World War I, in this decade the armed forces had only a limited number of drafted aliens to integrate through the teaching of English and American civics. US anti-immigration laws passed in the 1920s had in fact drastically curbed the arrival of newcomers from Eastern and Southern Europe, which in turn restricted and restrained transatlantic mobilities, and pushed ethnic settlements in the United States to become more stable. Hence, by the early 1940s, the US military relied on Americanized draftees whose pro-American ideology had also been shaped by their widespread participation in Civilian Conservation Corps programs designed to have young Americans doing public works such as clearing forest lands or building roads. Over 2.5 million were recruited between 1933 and 1942, during which time the US Army managed the agency camps, as well as some of the educational programs.

25. Scholars define it as a “nostalgic nationalism,” given the fact many ethnic Italians matched their positive view of Mussolini with their ancestral memories of the homeland. Additionally, the admiration expressed by many American politicians and stakeholders for Mussolini’s anti-Communist attitude and emphasis on social order was appreciated in the “Little Italies,” insofar as it was a psychological reaction against the derogatory stereotypes to which Italian Americans had been traditionally subjected (Cannistraro; Diggins).

26. For instance, an Italian American G.I. from San Francisco named Ben Savelli wrote: “Our family was as patriotic as patriotism could be... my sister Roberta was selling war bonds; my mother and father were working hard in the store, keeping track of all the food rationing problems; my brother Richie was in the Service; and I was already notified, upon my graduation, that I was to be drafted. Now, how patriotic can we get? (Savelli 131).”

27. On the encounter between the Allies and Italians see Ellwood; Miller.

ABSTRACTS

This article analyzes the portrayal of Italian American servicemen in Hollywood films set in Italy during the Italian Campaign of World War II (1943-1945) and produced from the time of the war to the present. Addressing this widely overlooked theme, the study shows how the American film industry perceived and represented one of the largest ethnic groups in the US forces, who were deployed to liberate their ancestral country from Axis control. Special attention is paid to representations of the servicemen's relationship with the Italian population and to their expressions of American patriotism.

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Keywords: Italian Americans; Servicemen; Hollywood; War movies; Italy

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