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Place, Race, and the Picturesque in Bronx Italian American Oral Histories: Remembering and Representing the Urban Immigrant Experience in the Twentieth Century

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Introduction

The Bronx Italian American History Initiative, an oral history project founded in 2016 and based at Fordham University in New York City, collects, analyzes and interrogates Italians and Italian Americans' personal memories through oral history interviews. Our online, searchable database contains 37 filmed and coded interviews which demonstrate how meaning-making unfolds in the context of Italian American culture. In keeping with the best practices outlined by the Oral History Association (www.oralhistory.org), the BIAHI aims to recover the personal narratives of Italian and Italian American residents of the Bronx and to document and map the cultural centers in which they settled, lived and worked. Our work analyzes the interviews in the BIAHI archive and in that of our sister project, the Bronx African American History Project (BAAHP), which has run interviews consistently since 2002. We study the network of cultural institutions that shaped and sustained neighborhood growth and change and we examine stories of racialized identity and racial conflicts as they emerge from narratives of urban existence and ethnicity in the twentieth century.

In this essay we focus on two aspects of our community-based oral history project: how narrators reconstruct the notion of place in filmed interviews, and how their memories reflect an internalization of processes and paradigms of racialization that can be traced back to the early twentieth century. Our methodological and theoretical approach draws on the work of Mary Louise Pratt, in comparative literature, and Della Pollock, in oral history, to read filmed interviews as texts that occasion encounters between people, spaces and chronologies. We situate

our interpretation of filmed and recorded interviews, within studies of early American cinema, literary and journalistic representations as we explore how visual and written representations of "Italian" spaces in New York City's urban environment functioned to racialize and "other" Italians. As our analysis demonstrates, the oral histories in which narrators reconstruct their memories of middle-class, urban life in the Bronx are couched in images and themes that evoke these early representations. Bronx neighborhoods become spaces of "safe danger" in narrators' memories, nostalgia for and continued connection with areas that were marked as Italian in the early 1900's. We argue that, in deploying the iconography and imagery of the picturesque in reconstructions of urban spaces, narrators who self-identify as Italian American adopt the same politics of exclusion to which they - or their ancestors - were also subjected upon arrival to the U.S.

Methodology

Oral history is a dynamic, interdisciplinary, and relational encounter that puts theory into practice (Pollock 2005). The practical – the interview – leads to analysis and interpretation – the theoretical. We view oral history is both a process and a product, which is what distinguishes it from other qualitative-based interview research methods. The process (the oral history narrative) cannot be separated from the outcome (the interpretation of that narrative). Moreover, this process is a communicative event, in which we have to understand «not just *what* is said, but also *how* it is said, *why* it is said, and *what* it means» (Abrams 2010, 1-3).

From 2017 to 2019, we filmed 45 oral history video interviews with Italians or Italian Americans who had resided in the Bronx in the twentieth century. Beginning in January 2017 we initiated the pilot phase for interviews, drawing on already established networks and outreach methods of the Bronx African American History Project. We relied on interpersonal connections (word of mouth) and social media feeds (primarily Facebook) to identify narrators and to schedule ten interviews during the spring semester of 2017. The pilot phase also helped us to gauge public interest in the project and to further determine methods for outreach and communication as we continued interviews through Fall 2019. Outreach continued through word of mouth and social media networking, although we received some additional coverage from local news sources. The volume of interest was significant; we received approximately 50 requests for interviews.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and a necessary pause in interviewing, our research has focused on the analysis and interpretation of interviews in the BIAHI and BAAHP collections. Many interviews housed in the latter were conducted well before our 2017 start, and so integrating them into our current work creates a discrepancy in the chronology of interview materials. The methodological choice to read interviews from the BIAHI alongside those from the BAAHP, however, allows us to examine the stories of urban experience in the Bronx from the differing raced and racialized vantage points that each collection offers. The technique of close textual analysis that we deploy in reading interviews from both collections adds an important layer of complexity that outweighs the discrepancies which, in other methods of analysis, may otherwise be problematic.

Oral History, Urban Encounters, Contact Zones

In the present work we deploy the notion of "contact zones" as a useful framework both for understanding the encounters and ensuing texts that the oral history interview generates, and for analyzing the spaces and places that interviews reconstruct. In filmed interviews, the representation of urban spaces, which are charged with multiple and changing meanings, constitute one form of the "contact zones" that Mary Louise Pratt has defined as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in context of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today" (Pratt 1991, 34). While Pratt applies the notion of contact zones in a significantly different setting, that of the seventeenth-century Spanish occupation of Peru and its representation in an indigenously authored text, we rely on her ideas to show how texts engender knowledge production and exchange in the contemporary context of twenty-first century: that is, the multiple ways in which oral histories occasion their own contact zones.

In collecting and studying oral history interviews and the contact zones that they bring about, our approach considers the intrapersonal and interpersonal underpinnings of the relational setting as manifested in both the interview transcript and the video interview. Calling the oral history interview a "heightened encounter," Della Pollock has shown that the interview and the personal narrative that it captures comprise multiple layers of interaction. Pollock outlines four core relationships that the narrator negotiates in the course of one interview: with the interviewer, with their remembered past, with community memory, and with knowledge about the past that circulates in global, public knowledge (Pollock 2005, 3). In other words, even before arriving at either an analysis of the representation of physical spaces or at an examination of the vantage points from which differently raced individuals reconstruct them, we find four contact zones in just one interview. Keeping in mind the dynamic layering of knowledge that inheres in oral histories, in this work we understand contact zones as a multi-layered framework through which we analyze the stories and interviews in the archives of both the Bronx Italian American History Initiative and the Bronx African American History Project. Contact zones, moreover, also describe the physical settings of the urban spaces that our narrators reconstruct – ethnic neighborhoods and their ever-changing and fluid boundaries over the course of the last century.

Historical Background: Italian immigrants in the Bronx

The historian Robert Orsi notes that "Italian American history began in racially inflected circumstances everywhere in the United States" (Orsi 1991, 258), and we situate our work within this racialized context. Italian arrivals, settlement and integration into the dominant culture of the United States has taken place against the backdrop of global historical events that include the end to slavery in North and South America, the era of reconstruction in the U.S. after the Civil War, the national unification of Italy (1870), as well as industrialization and urban expansion. The development, evolution and application of race theories, which began in Italy in the 1860's, were subsequently adopted and adapted into legislation by the United States government in the early part of the 1900's and were applied to Italian immigrants. While their status as a fully white people was debated heavily at the turn of the last century, immigrants from Italy who arrived in

European settler colonies in search of economic opportunity ultimately benefited from the privileges of being categorized as white.[1]

There is no definitive history of Italians in the Bronx, however several sources indicate that Italian laborers began arriving in the late 1800's as part of the first wave of urban expansion of New York City (Ultan 1991, 5; Sciorra 2001, 26-30). As experienced and skilled stone masons, Italian artisans built some of the most historic landmarks that grace the topography of the borough still today, such as the Botanical Gardens (1891), the Bronx Zoo (1899), the Jerome Park Reservoir (1906) and countless Catholic churches. The formation of Italian neighborhoods – such as Belmont, Melrose, and Morris Park to name just a few – took place concomitantly with the presence of Italian laborers, many of whom moved up to the Bronx to escape the tenement living of Manhattan. They were largely dependent on the area's connectivity with the borough of Manhattan via the elevated train on 3rd avenue. At the turn of the last century and increasingly with the incorporation of the Bronx into the greater New York City metropolitan area beginning in 1898, the emerging ethnic neighborhoods served as centers of cultural consumption that were shaped by spaces of worship, markets, restaurants and entertainment. As quickly as the boundaries of ethnic areas in the city were drawn, however, they began to change. As Ervin Kosta has noted, despite demographic changes to the faces of these neighborhoods that have been brought on by waves of immigrants hailing from countries other than Italy, there have only recently been significant alterations to the cosmetic make-up of the public facing businesses. In Belmont, the area adjacent to Fordham's Bronx campus, the arrival of the Albanian and Montenegrin communities has led to storefronts of businesses in streets, such as Arthur Avenue, that have been commercially marked as primarily and "authentically" Italian (Kosta 2014; Stapinski 2020).

Immigrants, Ethnicity and the Urban Environment in New York City

Foremost in oral histories of urban ethnic contact zones, therefore, are the physical settings of neighborhood spaces, their inhabitants, and their boundaries that have evolved and shifted over time, and how interviewees remember them. Early on, scholars of the Chicago School, such as W.I. Thomas and F. Znaniecki, documented immigrant experiences in urban social settings in the 1920's (Thompson 2000, 61-62). Alistair Thomson's observation that in the latter part of the twentieth century "migration emerges as one of the most important themes of oral history research" (Thomson 1999, 24) underscores the ways in which practices of oral history continue to shape the study of urban immigrant life and ethnic experience in the United States. Thomson focuses on empirical knowledge that comes from the study of individuals' direct experiences of migration; he also acknowledges the rich and varied textures that arise from the intergenerational transmission of stories of migration which continue to inform individual ideas and stories about both perceived places of origin and of settlement. Scholars that examine the structuring of Italian and Italian American ethnic identities in the United States have often taken on analyses of the relationship between immigrants and their new, urban spaces (Baily 1999; Gabaccia 1984; Sciorra 2015). Throughout the twentieth century, these urban ethnic spaces – once called "colonies," sometimes "communities" and eventually "Little Italies" – constituted dynamic locales that, though always mixed and continually mixing with other urban populations,

[1] For studies that explore the history of partial whiteness of Italian immigrants to the United States at the turn of the century see Guglielmo (2004), Guglielmo and Salerno (2003), Jacobson (2002), and Roediger (2006).

nonetheless preserved and renewed current and former residents' connection with their (real or imagined) homelands.

In the early twentieth-century, Italian immigrant arrivals to New York City and the urban areas where they settled were the objects of the outside, dominant gazes of evangelicals, reformers, police, and with them journalists, writers, directors and urban tourists. Giorgio Bertellini's work shows how the representations of Italians in early American film made use of the aesthetic dyad of the picturesque/primitive in depictions of Italian culture as both "exotic" – as in belonging to a faraway time or place, and "backwards" – meaning that which is incapable of becoming "modern" and therefore resides in the past (Bertellini 2010). Both Bertellini, who studies photography and film, and Nelson Moe, who studies illustrations and literature, have traced the origins of this dual mode to non-autochthonous nineteenth-century Romantic writings about southern Italy. Together, their work uncovers an encyclopedia of imagery that, during the course of the nineteenth century and the quest for Italian unification, was subsumed from foreign writings into northern Italian representations of the south, in the Alinari Brothers' photography archive and in publications such as the magazine *Ilustrazione italiana*. At the height of post-unification emigration, representations of Italians as both "exotic" and "backwards" subsequently circulated in the transnational exportation of southern Italian culture. This encyclopedia of imagery that portrayed Italy, and specifically the south, as a space of the primitive and picturesque not only accompanied migrant global mobilities but also influenced, as Bertellini demonstrates, the works and thought of the Danish reformer turned photographer, Jacob Riis (Bertellini 2010, 50-52; Moe 2002, 16-19).

In a study that investigates the historical naming of Little Italies in upper and lower Manhattan, Donna Gabaccia similarly shows how the areas mostly inhabited by Italian immigrants came to be known as spaces of "safe danger," where members of the city's wealthier and whiter social elite could venture to experience Italian culture and to observe the mostly impoverished and almost always foreign born "other" first hand (Gabaccia 2006, 16-19). Riis and other writers adopted a visual and moralizing rhetoric to advocate for social reform. The idea that these spaces contained "safe danger," however, simultaneously created a spectacle of Italians and the conditions of urban poverty or moral depravity in which they resided. This picturesque view of the Bronx and its ethnic Italian spaces figures into the utopian-like memories our narrators share of the borough as a rural, pre-urban setting that provided a vast, limitless, and therefore exciting but also safe venue for exploration and play.[2]

[2]A utopian view of the Bronx is shared by some of the narratives in the Bronx African American History Project and is also the main focus of the 2016 publication of select oral histories from that project, entitled *Before the Fires: An Oral History of African American Life in the Bronx from the 1930's to the 1960's*.


[Figure 1]

Analysis and Interpretation: Memories of the Idyllic Bronx

In telling the stories of how their families first arrived in search of space and property as they grew more prosperous, narrators recall that the Bronx was a "gorgeous" and green suburb in comparison with the squalid and over-crowded living conditions in Manhattan. Denise Linzalone-Nicoletti recalls that she moved with her family to the Morris Park neighborhood in 1960, [Figure 1] when she was five years old, from East Harlem. Camille Acampora's family moved to Belmont before her birth in 1950, after having first established themselves in lower Manhattan, then East Harlem. Acampora recounts an inherited version of the family story,

> "So my mother actually grew up in Harlem, East Harlem which was very Italian then. And my father's family were from Little Italy and then moved here when this was a suburb. The Bronx was actually a gorgeous suburb. My grandfather was wealthy, and they bought several properties and they had businesses. They had a robe factory, a candy store. I mean this was before I was born. And they had their apartments on top, they were all two-family houses." (Acampora, 1:33)

For urban dwellers, the Bronx offered an escape. In many cases, a move up to the Bronx also indicated the family's upward socio-economic mobility. With this move, many families also became first time homeowners. Linzalone-Nicoletti further recalls how her family, while still

residing in East Harlem, would vacation at the beach along the river in Soundview in the summer months. Middle to low income families, such as Carl Calò's [Figure 2], moved to the Bronx to get away from the tenement living of East Harlem and to take advantage of affordable housing and a "better" life offered by the new construction of public housing projects. Calò recalls, "It was a move up and out of Harlem, for them, it was a step up, out of the tenements of Harlem. My father was a sanitation man." Calò's extended family moved to Edenwald together in 1952 before eventually migrating out to Long Island in the early 1960's.


[Figure 2]

In the majority of personal narratives that cover the arc of time from just after the end of World War II to the early 1980's, narrators idyllically recall exploring beyond the limits of their neighborhoods as they relive childhood memories, such as the discovery and collection of salamanders in Seton Falls Park, visiting and working in the "oasis" of their grandfather's unauthorized and therefore hidden garden plot. A green, pre-industrial and picturesque image of the borough provides the backdrop for the "safe" neighborhoods where narrators remember playing in the street or at the playgrounds as children under the watchful eye of a community of caring but authoritative elders:

> "We all got to know one another. We all got to know what floor they were on; what apartments they were on. Therefore, when we went out to play, in those days it was safe just to go out and play in the street, or go out and play in the courtyard, go out and play in one of the empty lots. That's where we did most of our growing up. In fact, right here in Fordham University, this was one of our backyards." (J. Tinari, 01:31-02:32)

> *"*I was born in 1950. Well, it was post war. In some sense it was idyllic. I remember most of us not having a lot of money but not noticing it, it wasn't significant. Most of my friends were Italian, Italian American. Big families, lots of cousins. We played out in the street. It was very safe. Everybody's mother knew everybody. Anybody's mother could reprimand you, call you in and tell your mother something, whatever.*"* (Acampora 02:26)

> *"*My uncle ran the butcher shop. Another cousin of a cousin ran the grocery store, and my mother would occasionally venture around on East 204th Street over Marshall Parkway to the supermarket, to buy food every once in a while. Pretty much she would shop at the grocery store. We were kids. We would play out in the street. It was kids all over, and it [00:05:00] was all family. Everybody was related in some way, cousin of this one, cousin of that one, so it was very much a very shielded thing.*"* (anonymous, 04:38)

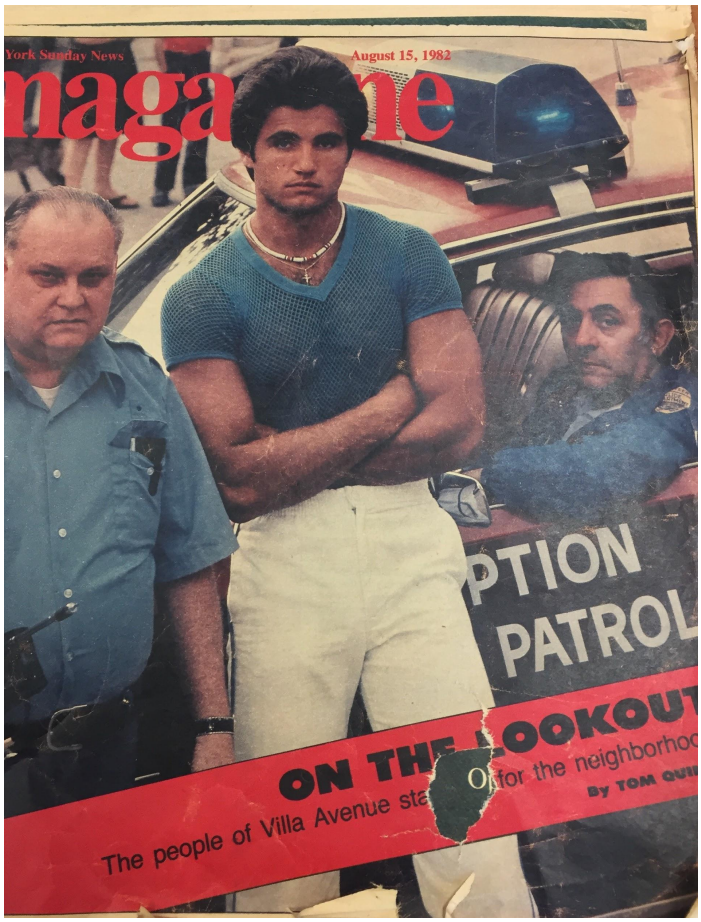
The memories depict an era of safe streets, practically free of traffic, danger or menace, and a total absence of strangers in which "family" and "community" are almost the same, as "anybody's mother" can scold and as single-family houses blur together as if they were all one's own. As the excerpts also show, early memories are often coupled with self-reflexive comments that express an unawareness of their family's socio-economic status, stating something like, "I didn't know I was poor," (De Carlo, 30:57). These reflections place the time and space of the narrator's childhood far away from the present moment of narration and set up both a temporal and a social distance in the "contact zone" of the interview. The different, more well-off vantage point from which the narrator tells their story aligns their gaze with that of an outsider looking into the past and in on the spaces of the past. Furthermore, the comment also communicates a blissful innocence that echoes a (mostly false) idea of simplicity in poverty - "it was idyllic*"*- and thus recreates, within the narrator's own memory, an image of urban poverty that evokes Riis' photography.

Select memories go so far as to recall an antiquarian history of Renaissance architecture that is akin to Bertellini's visions of the illustrious Roman or Renaissance past which accompanied the tropes of primitivism and the picturesque. Narrators emplace ideas of Roman or Renaissance grandeur in spaces of the Bronx where there has never been any evidence - architectural or otherwise - of them. Although the colonial, exurban history of the borough accounts for ample farmland and some vast estates that still exist today in names such as West Farms and in places such as Wave Hill, when asked about how their family came to Villa Avenue – a street that is two and a half blocks long beginning from Bedford Park Boulevard (to the south) and ending at Van Cortlandt Avenue East – an anonymous narrator elaborates:

> N1: I always thought it was called Villa Ave maybe because Italian people lived on it, but I really don't know. I think there's some story about the name of the block, that there was a villa there or something, some kind of villa.
>
> KL: Yeah, maybe. I don't know the story either.
>
> N1: So it was literally Villa, the back of the church. The church of St Philip Neri was actually built by Italian immigrants that lived on Villa. Apparently, the legend has it ... and my father told me this story, that they dragged rocks from when they were building

> the reservoir, the Jerome Park reservoir, and they used those stones to build the church. (anonymous, 07:38-07:59)

In creating contiguity between an antiquarian Italian heritage, the naming of their street, and the urban, middle- to lower-class city-block where they grew up, the narrator crafts a connection between their own lineage and an illustrious national ethnic history which, in some way even if for just a brief moment, forgets the personal history to which much of the rest of the interview bears witness: that of a working class Italian American family – the narrator was the only child to go to college, an Ivy league – whose grandparents came from southern Italy in search of economic opportunity. Furthermore, the imagining of Villa as "always" Italian ("I always thought it was called Villa Ave maybe because Italian people lived on it") only allows for an Italian-inflected history of the space and thus erases histories and peoples, especially indigenous ones, that have also lived there. At the time of the narrator's childhood, Villa constituted a hegemonic "Italian" ethnic space, albeit smaller than Belmont and Morris Park, that even had its own, resident-run border surveillance group called the Assumption Security Patrol [Figure 3] in the 1970's & 1980's, but the fact that Villa Avenue was also where W.E.B. Du Bois and his young family lived in 1912 offers a history variable to the illustrious, almost exclusively Italian one that the narrator imagines (Frazier 2019).



[Figure 3]

Analysis and Interpretation: “Tutto il mondo è paese” / “All the world’s a village”

The above example reveals that the recreation of the spaces in which narrators have lived and played are less about the architecture of city blocks – Villa Avenue was comprised of some multi-unit dwellings and a few double and single family homes and was just down the hill from what was (after about 1909) the more affluent section of the Grand Concourse – and are more about the feelings or attachments displayed in the act of remembering. Thus, Daniel Lanzilotta, a Bronx-born and raised artist, recalls living in the northeastern-most section of the Bronx, which he describes as “nowhere” and a “non-neighborhood,” but which is in fact somewhere on the margins of the Bronx, at East 238th street (North Wakefield):

> I had an incredible relationship with both my parents, my mother and my father, and I felt like I lived in a little village. Even though there was nothing there, we created our reality. Because I was always building and making, and stuff. And I had a garage, and my father would bring me weird things from the city. There was cooking, my grandmother lived down stairs and she canned stuff. (Lanzilotta, 05:19)

The narrator conjures an Italian American space where there was none, historically speaking, and his memory completely contradicts descriptions of the Bronx in the late 1960s-early 1970s, decades characterized by white-flight, a newly onset urban poverty and increase in crime rates (Gumbs and Naison 2016, ix-x, xiii). The memorialistic imagination of a “village” evokes an intimate setting that is apart from, and in antithesis to, the reality of the urban area where the narrator was born and where the family actually lived.

The narrator further subsumes the feeling of living in a village into the embodied skill of creating something out of nothing, which he deploys often as an artist and which he ties directly to the specificity of being Italian and from the Bronx. When asked where he comes up with ideas for his sculptures he replies, “I can make literally… I grew up in the Bronx, with zero. See, this is where the magic is” (Lanzilotta, 20:50). At one point in his interview, Lanzilotta engages in a string of associations about his grandmother’s birthplace -- Casa Lambretta in the Apulia region -- in which the idea of an Italian village substitutes the urban setting of his upbringing and becomes his place of origin. Repeating the word -- “village” -- he uses it to describe an encounter with the designer Domenico Vacca:

> DL: And I was going to do an event there, which didn't happen yet, or probably won't happen, but it might, other things might happen, and I met him [Vacca], and I spent like forty-five minutes with him, and I said, he was up from Puglia, and I said, "Do you know Casa Lambretta?" And he said it's fifty miles from my village.
>
> KL: Oh.
>
> DL: I said that's my grandmother's village, and that was it. Because what he represents to me is like, “Oh my God,” he is the dude that brings us to the mindfulness of what Italian detail means, and what Italian culture is, the fineness of how they treat stuff, and the high-end luxury biz. Because he's across the board, he does everything.
>
> KL: Right.

> DL: Shoes, clothes, tableware. And then, you know you have the other side of it, the "Soprano" side of it. (Lanzilotta, 03:08-03:27)

The narrator's anecdote, which draws him closer (both as an artist and as an Italian) to Vacca vis-a-vis the proximity of their native Apulian villages, also recalls the proverb, "Tutto il mondo e' paese" ("All the world is a village"), which Gabaccia also cites in her study of Italian diasporas. According to Gabaccia, the phrase serves to "link a cosmopolitan familiarity with the world, il mondo, with the intimate localism of the village, il paese" (Gabaccia 2003, 174). It expresses the idea that "people can feel at home no matter where they are, anywhere in the world" and an understanding of the world as one big community, in which "all people everywhere are the same." In Lanzilotta's telling, the idea of the village, which according to Gabaccia is central to Italian folk and diasporic life, not only communicates his sense of belonging to a global, diasporic community of Italians, but also reveals the ubiquity, and therefore dominance on the world-sphere that he lends to Italian culture and design. In the same breath that Lanzilotta draws us into the idyllic and picturesque setting of the village, he abruptly dissociates himself from the "other side of it, the Soprano side of it" as he lends credibility to a common stereotype of Italians abroad: the mafia.

Analysis and Interpretation: Spaces of "Safe Danger"

The impulsive juxtapositioning of safety alongside its opposite, danger, therefore recalls one of the key dualities that has characterized Italian spaces in New York City since the turn of the last century and echoes the voyeuristic pleasures of early twentieth-century danger tourism. Descriptors such as "so it was very much a very *shielded* thing" (anonymous, 04:38) and "I never thought of the Bronx as a *dangerous* place" (Bonaro, 02:23) imply that the spaces where narrators played innocently were also always threatening. The fact that Lanzilotta refers to the television series *The Sopranos* (David Chase, 1999-2007) to evoke that danger is one of the many references in which the subjects resort to popular and controversial representations of Italian Americans on film and television to illustrate their memories. Much like their recourse to the picturesque, they often condemn these representations and simultaneously use them as descriptive markers of their experiences. As John Gennari has recently argued in his work on Italian American and African American contact zones, mediated culture interrogates the inherent tensions and contradictions of Italian American ethnic identity (Gennari 2017, 8-12), and the archived interviews that speak to those tensions and contradictions will be the subject of further research. For the purposes of this paper, however, we see the invocation of films like *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) and *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972) and television series such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) as intertextual contact zones of individual memory, ethnic geographies, and popular culture that are rhetorical and iconographic devices designed to facilitate their interpretation. They also create a sense of community between the subject and interviewer in the shared knowledge of such references. Although there have been recent films and series that have challenged these iconic and at times problematic representations -- *Silver Linings Playbook* (David O. Russell, 2012), *Green Book* (Peter Farrelly, 2018), and *Cake Boss* (various, 2009-present) are prime examples that fall within our interview timeline (although each remains problematic for stereotypical and racialized tropes) -- our subjects remain attached nostalgically to these earlier, culturally dominant portrayals.

The implicit sense of danger that lurks alongside many of the overt assertions of safety referenced in our interviews requires additional unpacking. It is commonly known that many of the areas narrators reconstruct as “Italian” and “safe” were actually not safe for certain types of people or, perhaps, are still thought to be unsafe at certain times of the day. For Susan Legnini, one event she witnessed walking into the playground shapes the entire experience of playing “safely” in the neighborhood:

> MN [interviewer]: When did you, sort of, become... at what age conscious of your neighborhood as a unique, sort of, place? With its own way of governing itself and...
>
> SL: Okay. I was about ten because that's about the time that my mom let me venture off of the block, and go around the neighborhood. And I would like to go to the playground there, over on Arthur Avenue and 188th Street.
>
> I'm walking by with my friends and there were two black boys walking by. Chasing them with bats are two white boys and they hit them both in the head. One went down. One got grazed and kept running. One went down, got up, and ran. And I was just...
>
> KL [interviewer]: And this is your first time going off the block?
>
> SL: Maybe not the first time but it reminds me of being the first time. I don't know. It was one of the first times. I talked to a man that I saw. I said, "Help them." And he said, "This is how it is. This is how the neighborhood stays nice.″ (Legnini, 17:37-18:45)

While the narrator clarifies that she witnessed the event only once, she later states the opposite, that “it happened over and over again” (19:35). The way in which the racial violence has been integrated into her everyday memory of the playground as well as the explanation she remembers coming from an adult bystander (“this is how it is. This is how the neighborhood stays nice”) connote the everyday aspect of these hate events.

In the only other memory from the interview where she mentions the playground, Legnini recalls having invited a Black friend living in the neighborhood over to play at the park:

> MN: Were there any black families which were accepted within the neighborhood?
>
> SL: Well, one of my friends who moved onto Prospect [Avenue] was black and I was over her house all the time. And I tried to bring her into the park, thinking she's with me, and someone came up to me and said, "You need to go. You can't bring her in here." (Legnini, 25:28-25:46)

Having shared that the safe space of her childhood was not a universally safe space, Legnini tells how the bats were kept in the park house adjacent to the playground. These objects, used by boys for playing in the streets, became iconic symbols of Italian anti-Black racism in the 70’s and 80’s. Legnini’s point lays bare the notion of “safe danger,” a sentiment that many narrators dance around but do not often name and that erupts in the collective act of repeatedly taking a child’s toy, turning it into an adult weapon for hate, and of storing those weapons in the “safe” area of the neighborhood intended for children’s play.

The reputations of Italian neighborhoods as places where residents acted out forms of anti-other sentiment emerge through the different perspectives of "outsiders" to a given area – in this case Belmont/Arthur Avenue. When asked about being allowed to ride his bike with his friends throughout the Bronx as a child, Joe Letta, who grew up on Grand Avenue remarks:

> JL: The only time that I might have hesitated about going anywhere was Arthur Avenue-
>
> KL: Okay.
>
> JL: ... because you better make sure you're Italian if you're into Arthur Avenue at night.
>
> KL: Yeah.
>
> JL: And I was with Jewish kids, so I wasn't going.
>
> KL: So they didn't go?
>
> JL: No.
>
> KL: Okay. And you didn't go because they didn't go.
>
> JL: That's right, and I couldn't speak Italian. Then that would have been alright. (Letta, 35:51-36:09)

Regina Hartfield offers a similar perspective in the Bronx African American History Project's collection. Despite growing up on the periphery of the Belmont area and having many Italian American neighbors and friends, she recalls being a black girl in the midst of an Italian majority area:

> RH: You did not go past Third Avenue. And we also didn't go past Webster Avenue, because we just couldn't. Not for any other reason except—if we found you on, somewhere else over there, it was a rap. But, you know, back in those days, everybody watched out for all the kids. So if you did or went anywhere you weren't supposed to be—before you got home your parents would know about it. Because other people were watching you, and other people would say, "your parents don't let you go over there, you can't, you're not supposed to be on that corner, or wherever." For us it was going into the Arthur Avenue area, which was past St. Barnabas, past Third Avenue. Unless you went with your parents or for something specific, like a class trip, or somebody sent you to the store—which there was no reason for you to go to the store over there—you didn't go past that.
>
> BP [interviewer]: Why?
>
> RH: It was predominantly Italian neighborhood, and all though it never was, "you don't go to the white neighborhood," you just don't go there. (Hartfield, 9)

Although the narrators in these interviews focus on the Belmont region of the Bronx, other interviews speak to neighborhoods such as Morris Park and Villa Avenue as replicating these

racial dynamics. The dangerous and threatening racialized spaces are now projected onto insiders rather than outsiders looking in.

Conclusion

In his recent book on urban legends and representations of the South Bronx, Peter L'Official explores how words used to describe them -- "ghetto", "wasteland" or "no-man's land" -- are euphemisms, "ways to describe a city so that people don't have to think any deeper about why it looks the way that it does, a shorthand for describing problems so complex, systems of oppression so entrenched, that the realization of their uncomfortable proximity produces a kind of willful distancing via language. They are coded spatial signifiers for race" (L'Official 2020 7). Similarly, the interviews we discussed above speak to the synergistic analysis of space, neighborhood, and memories of racial contact. In this way, the picturesque becomes its own euphemism and urban legend for the racial representations it both inscribes and overlooks. Although select areas of the borough are currently undergoing urban and demographic transformations (including the area adjacent to our home institution), contemporary representations of the Bronx rely on those dominant myths of urban decay and pervade the narrators' memories of past versus present. Italian urban spaces exist nostalgically in the interviews or are constructed artificially as ethnic theme parks (Kosta 2014). Space and place thus continue to coexist as contested sites and contact zones for racial tensions that consistently pervade contemporary American society and its personal and collective imaginary.

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Figure 3: Photo of the cover of the New York Sunday News Magazine (of the New York Daily News), located in the Bronx Italian American History Initiative Photo Archive. Citation for the primary source: "On the Lookout." Photograph, The New York Sunday News, August 15, 1982, New York, New York.

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