To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate: The Italian/American Writer: An Other American by Anthony Julian Tamburri

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no longer a major issue in their psyche or socioeconomic reality. It is these contemporary Americans of Italian descent that new commercial and elitist investors from Italy have to deal with. Money makes the world go round, we have been told, and that may obtain even at the global level. But the history and the memory of a social and cultural group from Italy begins here, not in Italy. Even against ever thinning Italian Islands throughout Queens and the Northeastern Seaboard, there is now a sizable number of Americans of Italian origin or background who have experienced, attained, and affected all walks of life, including government, the law, and national security. The dialogue between Italian Americans and Italian Italians is not going over very easily to this day. The differences between the two is fundamentally one of historical record, of the different (hi)stories each has told or has yet to tell. This story must be told by the Italian Americans, and in English, of course. It is interesting that in the great abundance of information on the social, political, family lives of Italian immigrants and their descendants, psychology or better psychoanalysis does not enter, neither as a profession nor as a practice or possibility. Some truths do seem to come from the other side, from the ones with the shorter and shattered memory, the founders, the immigrants. (Because we are looking at this from the viewpoint of America, of English: they are emigrants only to Italian(s).) After reading the chapter on the bocce game, I came away feeling that the stories of these Italians must be told and known. The founders are also humble, patient, inventive: they and their descendants have sailed the seas, they have persisted in furrowing the earth, or forge architectures, and costumes. The language they now possess will link up the islands also, we hope, and reveal to us an intricate, endlessly fascinating sociocultural archipelago.

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To Hyphenate or Not to Hyphenate: The Italian/American Writer: An Other American
Anthony Julian Tamburri
Montréal: Guernica Editions, 1991

In this essay, Professor Tamburri argues that hyphen is not the innocent piece of punctuation that it might seem to be; to Tamburri it is a sign loaded with ideological baggage. In the process of unpacking that sign Tamburri questions the arbitrary construction of rules. Rules and standards, he tells us, when examined closely, reveal prejudices and the very socio-cultural mechanisms that produce them. Through his questioning he reveals how the standardized use of the hyphen has contributed to the social distance our society has created among its cultures. This discussion is substantive in its own right, as few scholars today even think of the ramifications of considering Italian/American culture as an ethnic American culture. More importantly, Tamburri’s exploration of Italian/American culture is symbolic of the great need our society has to reconcile the effects of its marginalization of all minority cultures.

Tamburri sees literature as a “mirror of society in which it was conceived, created and perceived” (12), and thus tells us that one of the goals of ethnic literature is to “dislodge and debunk the negative stereotypes” (13). To see this, he says, we need to em-
ploy a comparative process in our analyses of literary and cultural products. This is a position that has been suggested recently by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Loose Canons) and Paul Lauter (Canons and Contexts), both of whom have made no reference to Italian/American culture. If one of the critic/theorist’s job is to validate literature, then Tamburri’s “little essay” accomplishes this task as well as any today working on ethnic American literary theory. He advances the validation, not only of Italian/American literature, but the literature of all minority cultures.

Tamburri has both the expertise and the experience for this task. After a very careful introduction to the goals of the book, one of which is to make an attempt to increase the sophistication with which Italian/American literature is analyzed, he discusses the role of the critic/theorist in presenting a case for acknowledging its existence and in the process validates its legitimacy as a body of work worthy of academic attention. Much of this first section is taken from the “Introduction” to From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana (Purdue UP, 1991), of which Tamburri was a contributing co-editor. However, in this context, the material takes on a new and different life. Tamburri has mined that “Introduction” in his development of a more focused consideration of the political implications of multiculturalism and how cultural products are affected by this latest “ism” to enter the academic and popular discourses.

Tamburri’s contribution to the multi-cultural discourse serves as a vital challenge to sociologist Richard Alba’s notion of the “twilight of ethnicity” and makes a strong case for the renewal of ethnicity and the re-reading of past publications, many of which unfortunately are out-of-print. Italian/American ethnicity, he tells us, is not dying, but being revised and reinvented by contemporary artists. His critical concern is the invisibility of the Italian/American culture that lies beneath the suffocating stereotypes that have absorbed most of the critical energies over the past decades. His attempt to situate and redefine Italianità in relationship to its literary heirs is an important first step in approaching discussion of this difficult concept.

He then moves into a discussion of the hyphen by using a model set up by Daniel Aaron in his essay, “The Hyphenate Writer and American Letters.” Tamburri revises Aaron and presents the evolutionary stages that occur both among generations and within an author’s work. Using the rhetoric of postmodern literary and cultural theory, Tamburri presents an interesting paradigm that enables readers to dissemble the mechanism of viewing texts that had previously been ignored, slighted and misread. For this alone, Tamburri should be recognized as one of the first postmodern thinkers to approach the idea of Italian/American literature.

Tamburri uses this opportunity to argue that the hyphen is but one tool that mainstream culture has used to maintain the distance between “American Literature” and “Ethnic/American” Literature.” The hyphen, Tamburri suggests, has a “disjunctive” and not a “conjunctive” effect. It is a colonizing sign, a tattoo of otherness etched into the face of texts created by members of minority cultures. It separates with the effect of maintaining that separation.

So why don’t we just get rid of it (as some have suggested and done)? Tamburri is too slick for that anarchic stunt. He suggests rotating it up forty-five degrees, turning it into a slash; the effect is that it shortens the gap between the words without eliminating the rule.
The evidence Tamburri provides for his case suggests only possibilities of what could happen when his theory is applied.

His paradigmatic suggestions are in need of application, and without providing readings of representative works, this essay is likely to remain more a manifesto than a documentation of radical theory in practice. However, what he has presented here is the first major suggestion of a way of reading Italian/American writers since Rose Basile Green's sociological categories. With this work, Tamburri has offered a model that needs to be applied to writing and other cultural products created by Americans of Italian descent. He has also upped the ante for those who wish to contribute to the on-going project of criticizing Italian/American culture.

While this is a "little book," it has certainly earned its place on the shelf of books by indigenous critics of Italian/American culture, alongside Olga Peragallo's *Italian-American Authors and Their Contribution to American Literature* (1949) and Rose Basile Green's *The Italian American Novel* (1974). *To Hyphenate* will certainly be looked upon as a milestone on the path to developing serious consideration and criticism of Italian/American literature and culture.

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**Border Writing: The Multidimensional Text**
*D. Emily Hicks*
*Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991*

This is an important book owing both to its theoretical subtlety and its actual critical praxis. It certainly stands as a major contribution to Latin American studies and, by analogy, to ethnic and intercultural studies, including Italian American studies. The questions raised by the author are of the following type: How can we think about culture without nations? How can we assess the political import of works of art written in a language which is no longer the main means of everyday expression for their authors? How can we escape the iron law of critical dualisms, of dialectics between colonizer and colonized, First and Third World, dominant and dependent national groupings? Center and periphery models?

In his Foreword Neil Larsen sketches the two main currents of interpretation which have effectively served as "paradigms of postcolonial oppositional culture: the 'transcultural' and the 'anthropophagus'." The first is based on Fernando Ortiz' anthropology, developed by Angel Rama and positing that Latin American narrative texts avoid the "double bind in which one either settles for a direct imitation of metropolitan imports or seeks to expunge all 'foreign' cultural influences," and attempt instead to treat the regional or local culture itself as a species of language or code within which to "rearticulate or, in this sense, 'transculturate' the exotic cultural dominant." As compared to what was recorded and woven into art in past centuries—figuratively a highly educated upper-class writer stooping from the tree of knowledge and power with condescending gaze upon the ridiculous and uncouth world of marginal or minor cultural productions—here the poles are reversed and it is the minoritarian or tactful writer who pulls down the imports from alleged high and cosmopolitan culture, ironizing its contradictions, revealing their commodity-driven aesthetic veneer.