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DUCE/DIVO
Masculinity, Racial Identity, and Politics among Italian Americans in 1920s New York City

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This article compares the politics and masculinity of two Italian men—political leader Benito Mussolini and immigrant film star Rodolfo Valentino—who in the early 1920s arguably became the first important media “stars” for New York’s growing Italian American population. Rather than mere icons of a predetermined and “given” Italianness, the two men’s simultaneous popularity, representing such differing political beliefs and embodying such starkly different masculine ideals, points to the complexity of the “Americanization” of urban Italian Americans in the 1920s. Mussolini’s new, heroic manhood offered immigrants an opportunity to celebrate stereotypically male and American values in a self-consciously Italian form. Despite the totalitarianism and racism of the Fascist regime, the Duce’s iconic modernity contributed to his depoliticization. Likewise, Valentino’s exotic, sophisticated, and explicitly vulnerable masculinity participated in the restructuring of gender relationships in the United States. American and Italian American commentators were apparently more nervous about the gender-bending and apolitical yet also vaguely anti-Fascist divo than they were about the Fascist dictator.

Keywords: Valentino; Mussolini; film stardom; Italian Americans; masculinity

The most applauded men in the current world are Valentino and Mussolini. In Rome we witnessed the Fascisti revolution and cheered for Mussolini and Vittorio Emanuele. In London we witnessed Blood and Sand and cheered for Valentino.

Herbert Howe, Photoplay, February 1923

Even though Mussolini had forbidden the showing of Valentino’s pictures in his fatherland, there were plenty of Italian-Americans around to patronize his films.

Brad Steiger and Chaw Mank, Valentino: An Intimate and Shocking Exposé (1966)

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New York City, August 24, 1926. Outside Campbell’s Funeral Church, between Broadway and Sixty-sixth Street, thirty thousand people tried all day to have a chance to pay a last homage to the dead body of the popular film star Rodolfo Valentino. On foot or horseback, the police charged into the crowd: dozens of injured had to be brought to the nearby hospital. Official reports noted that “the rioting was without precedent in New York, both in the numbers concerned and in the behavior of the crowd.” That evening a group of Italian American Fascists set out to place an honor guard around the film star’s flowered bier (see Figure 1). They gained access to the Funeral Church by declaring that Mussolini in person had given such instructions—a claim that was soon challenged. Italian American members of the Anti-Fascist League, who claimed to know the thirty-one-year-old divo’s personal opposition to the regime, tried to prevent the Black Shirts’ physical and ideological appropriation of his body and fame. A fight erupted. Eventually, Fascist representatives were able to stand guard, in an official, military fashion, over the corpse of the Italian actor, to lay a wreath at his side with the inscription “From Benito Mussolini,” and thus, to salute Valentino as one of them. At midnight, they were
asked to leave. As expected, the morning papers spread images of the startling display.

Before Valentino’s death of peritonitis and septic endocarditis, Fascist and anti-Fascist groups in the United States and particularly in Italy had showed little interest in his fame, prestige, or body. At first, the divo Valentino and the Duce Mussolini had peacefully coexisted. In the mid-1920s, however, they came into conflict (see Figure 2). The clash had begun the year before Valentino’s death, in 1925, with the news that the divo’s decision to acquire American citizenship meant taking an oath that renounced his allegiance and fidelity to Italy—not welcome news in Fascist Italy. Hailed as traitor, his films
were initially boycotted and later officially banned. The same year, Valentino sent a public letter to Mussolini explaining his intention to obtain American citizenship but alsopledging his supreme loyalty to Italy. He even posed for a photograph with the Italian ambassador in Washington. Apparently, Mussolini then lifted the ban on his films. Only after Valentino’s death, however, were his films released in Italy, possibly due to popular demand.

The obvious friction between the two public figures was both ideological and personal and based on starkly different notions of masculinity and sexuality. In Italy, the dictator’s antiegalitarian manliness and ideological virilization—molded on the political and discursive repression of the feminine—was hardly compatible with Valentino’s sexually transgressive and ambiguous masculinity, which more resembled the androgynous decadence of another contemporary male political icon, Gabriele D’Annunzio. Apparently, in America—and specifically in New York City’s modern and highly consumerist urban culture and within the racialized and urban Italian American culture developing there—things were different. As port of entry and preferred settlement for hundreds of thousands of Italian immigrants, as heart of the ever-growing publishing and advertising industries, and as an important center of film production before 1915, New York is the ideal place to examine new social practices, media reports, political debates, and film narratives about the fast-changing American race, gender, and sexual relationships that shaped Italian American urban culture.

In this article, I shall limit my discussion to a short period of time, from 1921, the year Valentino emerged as a major film star with The Four Horses of the Apocalypse, to 1926, the year of his death. In this period, Mussolini ascended to power and fame through the March of Rome (October 1922) and the consolidation of his influence in American and Italian American media and politics.

Although it is commonly believed that both Mussolini and Valentino were quite popular among Italian Americans (because, as Italians, they fostered a sense of national pride), I see their popularity as an open historiographical question, to be explored and interpreted as part of the dynamics of Italian Americans’ adaptation in America. With what desires, cultural resources, and rhetorical positions did Italian Americans address Valentino’s decadent masculinity and Mussolini’s austere virility? Rather than formulate both masculinities as “Italian,” I suggest how actual experiences of immigration, urbanization, and displacement allowed the coexistence and, at times, a dialectical appeasement between divergent models of Latin virility and heroism. More than in Italy, New York saw the emergence of a rhetorical space of modern and transnational Italianness (italianità) that the two stars differently addressed.

The conventional and rather intuitive claim that Italian Americans from Italy’s rural South could appreciate the two stars because they were Italians is both too simple and misleading. First of all, it flattens the two stars’ remarkable
differences. Second, and more critically, it discounts the novelty and dynamics of the Italian community’s cultural experiences. In the fast-paced, and often racially and nationally antagonistic, urban environment, Italian Americans articulated a multidimensional sense of Italianness, in ways that were novel and original but also through a dystopian rhetoric of nostalgia that echoed Italy’s celebrated and magnified history. The result was an intense dialogue between vernacular localism, different formulations of Italian patriotism, and the pressing necessity to adapt to America. One memorable report details this relational layering of identities by describing the different, coexisting self-appellations of a local clan member from Sicily: “In America he will be an Italian to all members of other nationalities, a Sicilian to all Italians. In Sicily, he will be a Milocchese. In Milocca, he tends to remain a Piddizzuna [clan] who has moved.”

In metropolitan America, modern configurations of Italians’ identity insisted on reformulations of national and cultural affiliations, ideals of personal identity, self-realization, gender interaction, and in today’s terms, “interethnic” relationships. The historical and cultural circumstances informing these configurations ranged from how Italians were perceived and how they regarded themselves in America to how American and Italian American culture responded to Mussolini’s rise to power and experienced Valentiono’s rise to stardom. Urban Italian newspapers addressed these modern social and cultural tensions with the frequent use of an antimodern and antiquarian rhetoric. Not only did they designate Italy’s greatest representatives (i.e., Dante, Michelangelo, Verdi, Rossini, and Caruso) as emblems of splendid humanism, timeless and authentic Art, and exceptional individual achievement, but they also starkly opposed “Italian Culture” to the “vulgar exchanges” occurring in a mass American society legislated by mechanical reproductions, industrial commerce, and greed.

PREJUDICES, SELF-REGARD, AND URBAN SELF-FASHIONING

Since the 1880s, a set of prejudices deeming Italians racially distinct, emotionally inadequate, and intellectually inferior—and thus, “unfit” for American citizenship—deeply affected Italians’ self-esteem and self-regard. Present-day designations of Italian Americans as an American ethnic group obscures what historically was perceived as Italians’ racial difference from the “native” Anglo-Saxon (and Teutonic) core of American ancestry. At the turn of the century, the process of Americanization for European immigrants granted them the status of “nonnative whites” (an advantage of civic equality denied to Latinos, Asian Americans, and African Americans) but nonetheless marked them with allegations of racial distinctiveness.

Contentions of Italians’ racial inadequacy informed turn-of-the-century eugenics and nativism with their heavily ideologized “scientific” practices of
racial othering. Difference between Northern and Southern Europeans was articulated in terms of racial genealogy, moral standards, intellectual faculty, and assimilative aptitude. If Italians in general were blamed for popery and political radicalism, Southern Italians, who constituted the vast majority of Italy’s immigrants in the United States, were even more heavily racialized. They were in fact described as showing natural tendencies toward deceitfulness, crime, and oversexualization. Making explicit reference to Italian criminologists and anthropologists, from Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) to Alfredo Niceforo (1876-1960), renowned American sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross (1866-1951) stated that “the ignorant, superstitious Neapolitan or Sicilian, heir of centuries of Bourbon misgovernment, cannot be expected to prove us his race mettle.”

For Ross, Southern Italians’ children, although born in America, did not show much improvement. Not only did they rank below the children of the Northern Italians, but in the words of a school superintendent Ross quoted, “they lack the conveniences for thinking.” The American sociologist questioned Italians’ ability to assimilate by virtue of their “different” racial makeup: “After allowing for every disturbing factor, it appears that these children, with the dusk of Saracenic or Berber ancestors showing in their cheeks, are twice as apt to drop behind other pupils of their age as are the children of the non-English-speaking immigrants from northern Europe.”

Overall, similar racial taxonomies impaired Italians’ access to associations, jobs, and neighborhoods and shaped their highly discriminatory urban media representations, ranging from vaudeville, to newspaper cartoons, to moving pictures.

In America’s cities, Italy’s immigrants also experienced a complex, new phenomenon of self-discovery, self-positioning, and self-fashioning. Emigrated from isolated rural southern villages, where a modern sense of Italian national belonging could not compete with century-old municipal identities, Italy’s immigrants settled, for the most part, in urban America. The largest group of them lived in New York City. Their residential patterns reproduced Italian villages’ traditional close-knit life, isolation, and diffidence toward the outside world. Urban cultural agencies also played crucial educational roles in heightening their sense of Italian national identity while encouraging the development of American national allegiance. The establishment of national parishes, a flourishing Italian American press of both nationalist and vernacular orientation, and such theatrical venues as café concerts exhibiting dialect plays and sketches contributed to linking Sicilian or Neapolitan, Italian, and Italian American identities. Throughout the year, street feste and religious processions constituted mimetic performances, ethnographic self-celebrations, and expressive enactments of past local affiliations but also highlighted the new relationships with regional, national, and multinational geocultural entities. The figure of Enrico Caruso (1873-1921), in this sense, is most emblematic. Beginning with his engagements at the Metropolitan Theatre in New York
in 1903, the Southern Italian Caruso was known for his countless high-class society connections, yet he enjoyed parading his Italianess (as masterful operatic performer) and his Neapolitanness (in the recording of vernacular popular songs such as Addio Napoli or Campane a Sera for major record companies like Victor and Columbia). It is this rich yet rarely documented continuous dialogue, profoundly urban and relational, between vernacular distinctiveness and Italy’s well-known cultural repository, that marked Italian Americans’ modern cultural identity.

In America, in fact, national belonging was required for public recognition. To this purpose, the Italian Catholic church, the ethnic press, and urban popular entertainments such as opera, theatre, and imported Italian historical films, all echoed a proud sense of patriotic allegiance. Through these various cultural venues, Italianess became a cluster of humanistic values and a deposit of timeless history and artistic excellence that American industrial modernity could not erase, let alone compete with, conferring on even Southern Italian immigrants a sense of high cultural entitlement. Specifically, it provided them with resources to affirm a distinction from American culture and way of life but also their necessary inclusion within the realm of Western civilization in the face of harsh nativist allegations of racialized inferiority.

Similarly, from feste to vernacular literature and theater—mostly Neapolitan and Sicilian—Southern Italians nourished pride in their geographical and cultural descent (see Figure 3). Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Southern Italian vernacular theater provided evidence of Italians’ ethnogenesis in the United States. Several of their plays were not just reprisals of original Neapolitan skits but expressed diasporic themes. Weaving a topological and exilic poetic, melodramatic plays of love, jealousy, and revenge as well as dialect sketches interpellated immigrants’ specific and “original” place while critiquing the process of adaptation and assimilation through a satire well grounded in Southern Italian popular culture. For instance, the Neapolitan character sketches of Farfariello addressed the condition of extraneousness, inadequacy, and out-of-placeness that Southerners widely felt in modern cities such as New York. His macchiette coloniali (“colonial sketches”) buffooned both typical American figures and the American behavior of fellow migrants. Performed in dialect, vernacular songs and vaudeville routines celebrated regional origins and turned them into a platform of communal identity. Still, praise for moderate adaptations went hand in hand with anxieties over modern American configurations of gender relationships, the “new womanhood,” and the dangerous prospect of complete assimilation seen as self-annihilation. In short, Farfariello’s sketches were a shorthand vision of a Southern Italian community in transition. It is in this delicate and dynamic cultural context, amid Italians’ proud exploration of their regional and national culture and the yearning for America’s acceptance, that the political and media stardom of Mussolini and Valentino emerged.
THE CULT OF MUSSOLINI IN URBAN AMERICA

By “the Tribal Twenties,” this racially hostile combination of eugenics, nativism, and Americanizing crusades had produced anti-immigrant legislation, increased isolationism, and widespread distrust of any entanglement with Europe, embodied most obviously in the postwar Red Scare. Before and shortly after the March on Rome of 1922, Mussolini was extremely interested in persuading Americans that his swift rise to power constituted a positive, if not normal, event, both for Italy and for the relationship between Italy and the United States—particularly in relation to standing contentions about war debts and new immigration restrictions. The Duce knew that his reassurance of political stability and economic discipline, coupled with his unequivocal anti-Communist stance, made him appear to be the commanding leader that Italy...
needed to achieve domestic progress and prosperity as well as international (and American) respect.

Through countless interviews and an efficient press service (established with the help of J. P. Morgan), Mussolini fostered in the American media a personality cult that deterred any serious questioning of the corporate state or military nationalism of his regime. He was also particularly interested in changing the resilient perceptions Americans had of Italians as destitute and ignorant individuals, cursed by a natural penchant for lawlessness and violent instincts. His public-relations efforts hardly needed an initial encouragement. On November 3, just a few days after the March on Rome, the New York Herald praised the forty-year-old Mussolini as “regenerator of the Italian nation, who occupies a place similar to that of Garibaldi, who was the founder.”

Many flattering remarks about Mussolini followed, enhanced by a series of “exclusive” interviews and his weekly columns published in Randolph Hearst’s syndicated newspapers. On November 21, 1925, the Herald again described him as “a modern Caesar, the Napoleon of 1925.” In his autobiography, A Diplomat Looks at Europe, U.S. ambassador to Rome Richard Washburn Child spoke of Mussolini as creator of “a new Italy.” On October 8, 1926, less than two months after Valentino prematurely died, the Daily News wrote that “like Cavour, Mussolini has been able to revitalize the [Italian] national spirit.” And when rumors of Fascism’s violent and antidemocratic political methods began circulating, the Saturday Evening Post, which would soon publish the installments of Mussolini’s autobiography, argued that “desperate diseases need desperate remedies. Italy was a surgical case that called for a major operation” (see Figures 4 and 5). By then, Il Duce had become the “the Doctor Dictator.”

Gaining legitimacy with American political and media leaders, Mussolini emerged as the Mediterranean embodiment of Victorian values such as earnest character, hard work, patriotism, and antimaterialist plainness. Son of a blacksmith, self-made, and equipped with stamina and self-discipline, Mussolini’s well-constructed biography resonated quite well within the American value system but also with the modern, adventurous figures of film and sport stars. Unsurprisingly, he was praised for his practical heroism and often compared to political leaders like Bismarck and Theodore Roosevelt, to aviators like Charles Lindbergh, to actors like John Barrymore, and to athletes like Jack Dempsey. As the new leader of a renovated, pragmatic, and virile Italy—quite different from that represented by the destitute immigrants of the Lower East Side—Mussolini matched the white American male’s notions of manliness (vigor, self-mastery, and self-restraint). Still, personal praise for Mussolini did not end racialized critiques of Italians as a whole. After all, Mussolini stood out as a “new man,” endowed with character, integrity, and determination—all the qualities that the devitalized nation of Italy had been missing since the Roman Empire.
were instead described as a population most in need of a nondemocratic regime like Mussolini’s to finally achieve “efficient self-government.” In the American republican rhetoric of citizenship (“free white persons fit for self-government”), Italians before (or without) Mussolini were ill-equipped to assimilate in America.

Mussolini’s masculinity and heroism were politicized but also personalized and sexualized, particularly but not exclusively by women writers, who insisted on his gracious chivalry, charming personality, and handsome physical features. Victoria De Grazia has noted that in Italy, “Mussolini was the first contemporary head of state to vaunt his sexuality: stripped to the waist to bring in the harvest or donning the sober black shirt of condottiere [leader] before Fiat workers, decked out as a pilot, boat commander, or virtuoso violinist to show off his Renaissance skills.” De Grazia concludes that he “was as vain as any matinee idol pandering to his ‘female’ publics.”

In American culture, these modern features did not go unnoticed. Some commentators attributed to him a Byronic character with the appeal of a great lover. After one of many scandals involving Mussolini broke in the papers, Alice Rohe of the Literary Digest remarked, “Il Duce knows how to get what he wants from women,
whether it is a grand passion or a grand propaganda.\textsuperscript{25} His body, particularly his clean-shaved face, histrionic gaze, and theatrical intonation, became the embodiment of his charisma. Muckraker Ida Tarbell, a Progressive who supported some of Fascism’s new labor policies, lovingly addressed him as a despot with a dimple.\textsuperscript{26} In 1926, the \textit{Chicago Evening American} described him as a movie star, by strictly correlating his physical appearance and his role character: “He is a dominator, born to dominate and his face shows it: Fear is utterly unknown to him.”\textsuperscript{27}

Hollywood, too, was attracted to the Italian dictator. In 1927, screenwriter Anita Loos and her husband John Emerson met Mussolini in Rome (see Figure 6).\textsuperscript{28} The Looses were part of the same intellectual circle that included screenwriters June Mathis and Francis Marion—both crucially involved in launching and furthering Valentino’s career.\textsuperscript{29} In the columns of the Paris \textit{Herald Tribune}, Anita Loos was quoted referring to Il Duce as “the most forceful, the most earnest, and the most heroic personality I have ever met.” Reciting the
slogans, “Viva Fascismo! Viva Il Duce!,” was how in 1934 Mary Pickford remembered her 1929 meeting, in the company of husband Douglas Fairbanks, with Mussolini. Overall, Hollywood’s encounter with Mussolini was part of an older infatuation with Italy, its admired archeological and natural landscape as well as its cinematic productions, ranging from sentimental love melodramas to historical epics. In one case, Mussolini himself was cast in an American film, titled *The Eternal City*. Released in 1923, the film was liberally adapted from the eponymous Hall Caine’s 1901 socialist novel by screenwriter Ouida Bergere and directed by her husband George Fitzmaurice, who would later also work with Valentino. The film included real footage of the March on Rome and showed Mussolini in his role as head of government. Already a real-life celebrity and perfect exemplar of the modern star’s charismatic relationship with his fans, the Duce scarcely needed to be transfigured into a fictional character. If *The Eternal City* cast him in a cinematic celebration of his public and political achievements, other American films glorified (and fictionalized) his personal and intimate life, as in the biopic *The Private Life of Mussolini*, directed in 1938 by Fascist enthusiast Edwin Ware Hullinger.
ITALIAN AMERICANS AND IL DUCE

Several studies have already examined how leaders and institutions of the Italian American community enthusiastically embraced Fascism and, in particular, Mussolini’s forceful and charismatic personality. In New York, a dense web of cultural and political associations promoted the advent and the establishment of Fascism. New York housed such pro-Fascist organizations as the publishing firm Italian Book Company and the cultural association Società Dante Alighieri and provided the major force within the Fascist League of North America, which ultimately provoked harsh diplomatic tensions between Italy and the United States. New York was also the critical site of operation of the Order of Sons of Italy—a national association under the direct dispositions of Italy’s Ministry of Culture—and the Italy America Society, founded and directed by Thomas W. Lamont of Morgan Bank, which lobbied American banks to guarantee Mussolini low-interest loans, vital for Italy’s economic development and for the Italian dictator’s international reputation as a resourceful and efficient leader.

New York was also home to a rich Fascist press, which included such newly emerged periodicals as Il Carroccio and Il Grido della Stirpe, founded, respectively, in 1921 and 1922, as well as to established newspapers such as Il Corriere d’America and Il Progresso Italo-Americano, owned and edited by powerful leaders or prominenti of the Italian community—not to mention the leaflets distributed by the Biblioteca Italiana per l’Informazione. Even before 1922, these agencies highlighted Italy’s new leadership and political identity, encouraging both Mussolini’s popularity within the Italian community and the formation of an effective Italian American political lobby. The very existence of this lobby was a delicate matter as the degree of Italians’ involvement in American politics led to significant disagreements within the Fascist cohorts. The main dispute was whether to invite Italians to acquire American citizenship (as voters, they could become a more effective pressure group) or to compel them to remain Italian citizens living abroad. Throughout this period, most diplomats, ambassadors, and Italian American association leaders opted for the former, more-assimilative solution, while party officials and Mussolini himself insisted on the need to foster a more intense spirit of national belonging rather than pressing toward the constitution of an Italian American political faction. Pressured by his own ambassadors’ lobbying ambitions and by American officials’ request of noninterference, Mussolini publicly accepted the American duties of naturalized American citizens of Italian origin yet personally insisted on a spiritual bond with Italy that no law could obliterate.

What did not falter was Mussolini’s constant and direct address to the Italian American community. His radio speeches and newspaper columns—two resources best available within urban environments—persistently promoted his version of italianità and of Italian masculinity. The circulation of Fascist
state ideology was achieved through a strict control of the media, through exclusive contracts with the news agency Agenzia Stefani and with advertisers that treasured business relationships with Italy, and through the mobilization of loyal Fascist cultural constituencies such as the Order of Sons of Italy, Catholic schools, and the schools of the Società Dante Alighieri.

Conventional explanations of Mussolini’s popularity among Italian Americans have rightly rejected the hypothesis of deep-seated political and ideological convictions. Instead, Italians’ experience of harsh racial prejudices made them enthusiastically embrace the new image of Italy that the Duce proudly embodied. The argument that Mussolini’s stardom primarily succeeded by fostering communal compensation, pride, and self-respect within a logic of resentment and retaliation, however, rests on two problematic assumptions. It postulates Italian immigrants’ scarcity of cultural resources and, thus, a widespread sense of inadequacy in America (which the Duce allegedly overturned). Second, it presumes Italian American culture’s oneness and immobility. Italian immigrants’ lively dialogic culture had instead numerous dimensions, dependent on regional origin, class, and political orientation. These different facets, whether vernacular, patriotic, or international, differently reacted to the American milieu. They actively interacted with American mainstream culture through novel formulations of identity and citizenship or held onto a defensive, nationalistic, and scholastic rhetoric closely related to Italy’s bourgeois, literary culture. Fascism itself and Mussolini’s media image presented, too, a range of cultural aspects differently interacting with American culture.

Fascism’s views of gender difference and family life, for instance, showed several features that rural Italians, in particular, found familiar. The relationship between patriarchal, forceful, and sexually active men and submissive, monogamous, and childbearing women resonated with the gender ideology of Italian Catholic culture. Consistently articulating itself as a secular religion, the Fascist ideology often superimposed an imperialist and nostalgic idea of military manhood onto an all-too-familiar Christian patriarchy. Quite famous was Mussolini’s statement that “war is the most important event in a man’s life, as maternity is in a woman’s.” Fascist gender ideology denied women an active sexual life and desire of their own (“naturally” granted to men), while nationalizing women’s bodies as childbearing in the name of the state’s demographic, economic, and military interest. By contrast, Valentino’s popularity in Italy and America, among men but especially among women, ran counter to this ideological (and idealized) arrangement as it rested on the premise of individuals’ pursuit of personal, romantic involvement and sexual pleasure.

Furthermore, rather than a simple matter of national reparation, Italian immigrants’ embrace of Mussolini (i.e., more than Fascism in general) was also an index of cultural transformations connected to the demands, desire, and dynamics of adaptation to a multicultural urban environment—a dynamic that should not be confused with assimilation. In New York, Italian
immigrants did not relinquish cultural identities and national affiliations; on the contrary, the configuration and proud appropriation of Italian national culture helped and nurtured immigrants’ adaptation in America. Patriotic parades and processions along important avenues had the capacity to foster group cohesion among Italians of different regions and dialects and, because of this, to enhance acceptance in the multinational American metropolis.

In the name of Mussolini, such “collective redemption” encouraged a “dialogue between peers,” between Italy’s immigrants and their urban environment. The media-hyped plasticity of his modern appeal carried a remarkable national and political charge—although not necessarily an ideological one. Italian American newspapers and news agencies presented the Italian dictator more as a national warrior and composed leader than as a Fascist ideologue or a charming individual hero.45

At the same time, Mussolini’s combination of personal stardom, overt virile sexuality, and encouragement of continuous national self-improvement resonated quite well with the new consumerist fabric of American popular culture. Mainstream American cinema and popular periodicals such as American Magazines, New Success, Athletic Journal, and later, Esquire celebrated new notions of masculinity centered on personality, attractiveness, perfectibility, and self-creation through consumption. They did so while still indebted to Victorian precepts of character, athleticism, self-reliance, and integrity.46 Functioning as Italy’s self-made patriarch, leader, and most valuable man of action, Mussolini’s image and reputation could speak to both American and Italian American mainstream cultural constituencies. As such, it contributed to shaping what I have come to address as Italian American modernity.

Business and political leaders of the Italian American community recognized this quite well. With the arrival of Fascism in Italy and in the United States, the prominenti skillfully catalyzed the nationalist sentiments of Italian immigrants by fusing and aligning the support institutions they had created and controlled from the very beginning (i.e., mutual-aid societies, patriotic and religious organizations) with Fascism’s progressively full-blown ideological and symbolic universe. Also, by claiming the modern language and rhetoric of masculine Italian nationalism, they provided the ground for conciliatory and nondefensive interactions between Italianness and Americanism. As a result, they institutionally sustained and catered to immigrants’ beliefs, attachments, needs, and aspirations and, as such, contributed to fostering the adaptation of Italy’s immigrants as Italian Americans.47 Their hold over the city’s cultural associations, social institutions, and news media did not leave room for other constituencies’ institutional activity and rhetoric. Little discursive space was left for radical Fascist propaganda—often coded as seditiously anti-American48—and for a full-fledged ideological alternative to Fascism that would include popular and competitive gendered models of Italian citizenry and pride, essential for Italians’ adaptation within New York’s multiracial society.49 “You have got to admit one thing,” declared an Italian American girl.
who herself was, significantly, anti-Fascist, “he enabled four million Italians
in America to hold up their heads, and that is something. If you had been
branded as undesirable by a quota law you would understand how much that
means.”

In all fairness, the gender discourse within the anti-Fascist culture still rep-
resents a challenging historiographical blind spot. The few scholars proficient
in the Italian language, who have examined Italian radicals’ periodicals, pam-
phlets, and speeches, have not yet examined how radicals reacted to, and
engaged with, the new gender models circulating in America’s increasingly
mass-produced and mass-consumed popular culture as well as in the nearby
Bohemian Greenwich Village. The relationship between radicalism and popu-
culture is still one awaiting further and systematic research. We know that
Italian radicals were often playwrights and that, in a few isolated cases, they
interacted with the artistic and intellectual community of the Village, with
which they shared anticlerical and antibourgeois ideas about free love and sex-
ual liberation. For instance, Arturo Giovanniti, a poet, leading socialist activ-
ist and editor of Il Proletario, contributed a few times for The Masses. Yet
these were rare instances. As Martin Green has pointed out, “The two social
worlds, that of the immigrants and that of the artist-intellectuals—the Ninth
Ward and Greenwich Village—did not mix. The former seemed to the latter to
care nothing for ideas and education of reform, while the Villagers seemed to
their neighbors, Italian or Irish, to spend recklessly, to eat meagerly, and to live
loosely—the free women of the Village turned the whole quarter into a
disorderly house.”

Accounts of how Italian American women (and not just activists) respond-
ed to Mussolini’s gendered popularity and to the male consensus around it
have been equally scarce despite recent critical methodological advance-
ments. New York was a place where, more than anywhere else, women, both
married and unmarried, earned wages outside the family. Their partial auton-
omy and ability to circulate more freely within the American metropolis
allowed them to come into contact with the city’s racially inflected consumer
culture of stage and movie theaters, dancing clubs, and fashion shops. This
social and cultural exposure is often dubbed as a dynamic of Americanization.
Having experienced various forms of racial (as well as gender) discrimination,
however, Italian female shirtwaist and dressmakers, finishers or operators,
employed at home or pieceworkers, were not at all insensitive to the nationalist
emphasis pervading Italian American street and printed culture. Several activ-
ist women were similarly patriotic, and their contribution, inside or outside
labor institutions, is finally gaining visibility among historians. Drawing on
cultural codes of honor, respect, and racial pride, for example, labor organizer
and factory operative Clara Zara wrote, “You are not Italians, you who trample
on our revolutionary traditions; you are not Italians who dishonor and betray
the holy and sublime cause of our work . . . . You have massacred our reputa-
tion, our dignity, our honor, [and created] the suspicion that Italian immigrant
women workers have inherited. The post–World War I repression of radicalism (which had challenged U.S. racist and imperialist policies) and the racialization of American politics and culture leading to immigration restrictions of 1921 and 1924 produced an environment where women activists and workers assembled around the Italian-language locals of their unions. Here, we have a rarely explored cultural convergence of political militancy with racial, class, and gender identity.

Nevertheless, nationalism and its Fascist formulations held among Italian Americans a nearly exclusive rhetorical hegemony. Mussolini was a modern social hero: not only did he “redeem” immigrants’ racialization and known discriminations, but most importantly, he also enabled their sense of selfhood to converse with, and relate to, the multinational American public opinion on a parity of exchange. It is this equality of communication and move away from insularity that I would term “adaptation.” Seen as a kind of interface, Mussolini was political not just because of his ideological message but also because his coming to stardom enabled a new exchange between the American and Italian American communities—both real and imagined. As a modern dux, the Italian leader could rhetorically embrace Italy’s renowned cultural past but also lead Italians beyond the long-established but often rather contrived glories of Roman architecture, Renaissance painting, and national opera.

Not by chance, the most vivid expressions of Mussolini’s modern presence among Italians in New York, especially after the mid-1920s, were his speeches, regularly broadcast by newly emerged Italian American radio stations, in between programs of dialect stage shows. Listened to in public and outdoors, in crowded barber shops, during religious feste, or at community gatherings, 1920s radio broadcasting fostered among Italians a public and highly communal form of reception. As a comparison of Mussolini’s reception to that of Valentino shows, however, radio and film media could evoke remarkably different receptions and responses among urbanized Italians.

WHOSE STAR? CLASS, RACIAL, AND SEXUAL FACETS OF VALENTINO’S POPULARITY

Unlike Mussolini, whose modern, Italian stardom appeared to enjoy also American overtones, Valentino’s popularity was primarily a construct and an expression of American popular culture. Born in 1895 in Castellaneta, Apulia, to a fairly prosperous family, Rodolfo Pietro Filiberto Guglielmi did not have to face the grim destiny of hard work and misery of the average Southern Italian. As a young man, he traveled through Italy and visited Paris to study and to find a professional identity suitable to his artistic aspirations. In 1913, he left for New York, where he first landed jobs as a gardener, then a dancer, and eventually moved to Hollywood to appear as an extra and secondary character (often a dancer) in more than a dozen unremarkable melodramas of forbidden
romance and social betterment. In several of his earlier roles, he appeared as a competent dancer and an American. In a few instances, he played foreigners and Italians. He was an aristocratic Italian gigolo in *A Married Virgin* (1918), a Bowery gangster in *Virtuous Sinner* (1919), a prince in *Passion’s Playground* (1920), a rich Milanese benefactor in *Once to Every Woman* (1920), and a Brazilian writer in *Stolen Moments* (1920).

Up to the early 1910s, the vast majority of cinematic portrayals of Italians in American screen relied on master narratives of exotic picturesqueness and, more often, mafia criminality. After 1915, little-known feature films starring Irish American performer George Beban inaugurated a genre of sentimental racial melodramas that cast Italian men and women as more sympathetic protagonists. Beban’s films, regularly set in New York, told stories of racist abuse, destitution, and tragic fatality for spectacular purposes. Fostering a new poetic relationship between American cinema and racial difference, his films were tear-jerking tenement dramas that for the first time humanized Italian immigrants’ lives, although too often presenting them as childlike and emotional.

Yet if Beban’s characters discontinued the representation of Italians as natural criminals and outlaws—a radical change recognized by the Italian American press—the characters never intended to or could establish some form of close intimacy or identification with the audience. Valentino’s overt mobilization of erotic desire, on and off screen, was unprecedented for a foreign, racialized character played by a foreign, racialized actor.

The Italian star’s arrival in Hollywood coincided with the studios’ increasing and systematic concentration of production, distribution, and exhibition, functional to the industrial consolidation of a single, nationwide film market. The 1920s was the era of movie palaces, the explosion of film magazines, and the emergence of film stardom, with stars’ biographies and public lives manufactured by well-run film companies. Valentino’s cinematic and off-screen figure was in many respects one of the most emblematic products of the silent American film industry.

By acclaiming him as “the continental hero, the polished foreigner, [and] the modern Don Juan,” film studios fictionalized and publicized his numerous love affairs, while a sensationalist press denounced his decadent lifestyle, his penchant for flamboyant furs and custom-made suits, and his alleged sexual ambiguity evident in his known fondness for slave bracelets. As the Hollywood machine turned Valentino into a spectacle and a fetish—with write-in campaigns, popularity contests, photographs, autographs, and star paraphernalia—his success as androgynous dancer (on the model of the Ballets Russes’ oriental dance dramas) and as exotic object of erotic desire was repeatedly described as emasculating him (see Figures 7 and 8). Charges of sexual ambiguity ran parallel to accusations of physical frailty and—possibly the most un-American indictment of all—financial dependency on women. Because of his gender transience and deviance from a vigorous, athletic, and all-American masculinity, a hostile discourse about Valentino’s difference insisted that
Figure 7: The Seduction of Valentino’s Exotic Dancing I
SOURCE: Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive.
NOTE: The Argentine tango in *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse* (1921).

Figure 8: The Seduction of Valentino’s Exotic Dancing II
SOURCE: Courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art / Film Stills Archive.
NOTE: The cotillion in *Monsieur Beaucaire* (1924).
women were not supposed to like the “tango pirate,” while all American men were supposed to hate him.\textsuperscript{63}

Valentino’s diegetic and real-life darker skin color, even when narratively motivated as the result of a dual birthright—in *The Sheik*, his character’s father is English while the mother is Spanish—elicited racial slurs from male and female reviewers who attacked his deviation from Caucasian standards of male beauty.\textsuperscript{64} At a time in which eugenics’ racial taxonomies had been popularized in the media for over two decades, the studios reacted to such racial allegations either by emphasizing Valentino’s aristocratic and continental charm or by telling the Horatio Alger–like story of his landing penniless at Ellis Island and making it in Hollywood. Valentino himself was quite sensitive to issues of color and racial misrecognition. During an interview with *Motion Picture Magazine* in 1922, he jokingly responded in his thick accent to a question regarding his unwillingness to sunbathe: “Now I cannot swim much at thees California beach, because I am very dark in complexion, an’ the sun it burn me too black for pictures. I become like a neegroe.”\textsuperscript{65}

Racializations notwithstanding, Valentino was the first Italian actor whose American screen presence was designed to draw admiration, identification, and desire from female but also male fans who en masse seemed to be drawn to the polished exoticism of his deviant eroticism (see Figures 9 and 10). To
best discuss how and why American and Italian American spectators either embraced or rejected Valentino, it is important to place his emergence to fame within a larger discussion of how the gender and sexual identities encouraged by urban consumer culture called into question reified notions of gender and sexuality among both middle-class Americans and Italian immigrants. Recent studies have addressed Valentino’s racialized sexual stardom and examined the American audience’s film reception, with particular emphasis on the psychological and cultural dynamics of 1920s female spectatorship. The fascination for the “Italian masher” has also been articulated as part of a set of gender-differentiated pleasures rooted in the prevalence of female-oriented magazines, dance, Orientalist fantasies, and new consumerism.

His cult, however, was not just an exclusive fixation of mainstream, middle-class female patrons, as fights over his body after his death revealed. Immigrant women and men also reacted to the star. In fact, one of his biographers has claimed that “gum-chewing schoolgirls, mascaraed flappers, shabbily shawled women and expensively dressed dowagers filed past the coffin for a two-second look at the emaciated features of their idol. Young men and boys, ‘sheiks’ and collegians, were also in evidence. Those of all ages, all colors and all classes had come to bid farewell to ‘Rudy’.”

Regrettably, those studies of women’s urban moviegoing that address immigrant working-class women do so through “narratives of liberation,”
which equate trajectories of adaptation to American leisure-time habits with Americanization.64 Existing research is also almost completely monolingual. As a result, we still know little about how Italian immigrant women and men were attracted to the divo; we can only assume that Valentino did not present to them the same excitement of racial otherness he could for American audiences.65 Existing accounts focus on the attractions of Americanism as a liberating possibility for women still bound to a repressively patriarchal immigrant culture. In New York City, the argument goes, large numbers of wage-earning immigrant women on the way to and from work encountered models of femininity that little resembled those of their neighborhood. They could see “women dressed in ready-made American clothes, women running to work, billboards and poster graced with women in the latest styles, women carrying schoolbooks under their arms, women in the streets and in restaurants, women speaking openly to men on the streets. While the mothers attempted to reassemble the terms of a known life, their daughters were busy decoding the messages, disassembling the old life, stepping into the present.”70 “The one place I was allowed to go by myself,” recounted Filomena Ognibene, a New York Italian garment worker, years later, “was the movies. I went to the movies for fun. My parents wouldn’t let me go anywhere else, even when I was twenty-four. I didn’t care. I wasn’t used to going out, going anywhere outside of going to the movies. I used to enjoy going to the movies two or three times a week. But I would always be home by 9 o’clock.”72 Through observation, contact, imitation, and acquisition of modern urban habits such as window shopping and moviegoing, the argument concludes, young Italian men and women had a chance to step into the present of American popular culture.72

The problem with this generally compelling position is the unquestioned assumption that moviegoing, more or less in and of itself, was an agent of racial and cultural abnegation. In the account above, there is no mention of which movies these women were watching or reference to the overt racial diversity of characters, acting styles, and performers of the American cinema of the time. Moviegoing, I would argue, ought not to be construed as erasure of immigrants’ or their children’s awareness of racial and cultural diversity, especially during the era of silent films. Before World War I, the number of foreign productions circulating in America and principally in New York constituted a remarkable index of cultural diversity, which was as pervasive as the nationally heterogeneous moviegoing crowds.73 In the 1920s, racial and cultural diversity had fully impacted every dimension of American cinema: a number of Hollywood’s most celebrated stars were either immigrants or children of foreigners, as the racialized screen stardom of Theda Bara, Greta Garbo, Colleen Moore, Pola Negri, Ramon Navarro, and Rudolfo Valentino best reveals.74 Undoubtedly, the figures of sensual vamp, Irish flapper, or elegant seducer may have not been that common to Italian immigrant women, but the experience of racial discrimination was.75 These stars’ daring on-screen performances allowed a unique convergence of such modern tropes as youth,
success, elegance, and sensual romance with the familiar but never static
notions of national and racial pride.

Nor was Valentino’s success based exclusively on a thoroughly feminine
expression of heterosexual romance. Anglo-Saxon and Italian men, homosex-
ual or not, were also fascinated with him. Within New York City’s hedonistic
culture of commodity consumption, Valentino embodied a fashionable model
of masculinity based on youth, personality, success, perfectibility, and self-
improvement. Different from the one-sided figures of the “Christian Gentle-
man” or the “Masculine Achiever,” the Italian film star personified a comp-
ound ideal of modern lover, untiringly pursuing pleasure, elegance, and
recreation while exuding an exotic and primitive physicality. Valentino’s tal-
ent for dance and his love of fine clothing were well attuned with a growing
urban bachelor subculture that incited men to regularly attend the city’s dance
halls (both high- and low-end), nightclubs, and movie palaces and to consume
almost religiously the same mass-circulating fashion magazines. In these real
and imaginary venues, dreams of lavish lifestyles and consumer fantasies
could be unleashed. 76

Indeed, the fans of the racialized and sexualized Valentino complicated
notions of masculinity and produced more dynamic possibilities for film specta-
tors’ experience and self-definition. As Richard De Cordova writes, “Film stars
not only recapitulate sexual knowledge, they constitute . . . important instances
of historical receptions, ones that can tell us a great deal about the interests and
expectations of historical cinema audiences.”77 Valentino’s fandom point to a
widely shared receptivity for deviancy, not just for established, “respectable”
notions of gender and sexual identity. What Valentino’s sexualized icon opened
was, as Mark Lynn Anderson notes, a “queer space for the reception of mass
culture”—a cultural and discursive space that does not require its individual
adherents (including Valentino) to be, secretly or not, queer. 78 Instead, this
space spoke a subversive and sensationalistic language of looser sexual mores,
linked to the unruly social world of public amusement and mass leisure—from
dance clubs, vaudeville, burlesque, and moving pictures—intersecting with
the city’s immigrant and working-class neighborhoods. The same idiom was
spoken in Hollywood, which, since the the mid-1910s, had often been described
as “Babylon.”79 In the 1920s, however, the familiar Hollywood scandals
acquired strong racial connotations: more than Anglo-American performers,
stars like Bara, Moore, Garbo, Negri, and Valentino could exhibit an expanded
and more-daring range of sexual behaviors—on and off screen. The intersec-
tion of racial and narrative dynamics within American cinema was not entirely
new: it resonated with nineteenth-century eroticized black stereotypes and
coon songs and, of course, with turn-of-the-twentieth-century immigrant char-
acterizations pervading the New York vaudeville scene. For titillating charac-
ters who “did not share the precepts of Victorian culture” regarding sexual
tensions between men and women—as vaudeville historian Robert W. Snyder
writes—immigrant characters were highly preferred.80
In New York’s jumble of different racial and cultural communities, in its grimy working-class quarters (and mainly only there), the visibility of male gender deviance was already quite remarkable. In his study on gay life in New York, George Chauncey notes that while participants in the city’s gay culture belonged to all social classes, the sites of participation were the working-class and immigrant venues and the bohemian establishments of Greenwich Village and Harlem. Not only were Harlem and the Village the city’s center for commercialized vice and prostitution, but they were also sites where male gender deviance, including fairy culture, was casually tolerated within immigrant and working-class manly coarseness. The absence of stigma for “masculine” men who interacted with fairies suggested quite different values from those publicly articulated in the middle-class city.

In the Lower East Side and in the immigrant quarters of Harlem, Italian men and, in particular, Southern Italian males either had occasional encounters with fairies or, not infrequently, took part in the city’s alternative sexual culture. And for a number of reasons (demographic, religious, and cultural), they did so more than their neighboring Jews. Unlike Jewish immigrants who had left their native land with their families, Italians more often arrived as single men or unaccompanied husbands and, thus, tended to attend all-male social gatherings. Second, although both Catholic and Jewish religion condemned homosexual relations, Catholic catechism and Southern Italian customs focused more on the dangers—related to individual “sin” and family “honor”—of sexual contact between men and women rather than on sexual contact among men. In the city’s Southern Italian neighborhoods, the strong gender segregation and strict rules of chaperonage did not allow young men and women to interact freely and, thus, forced men to remain longer in a largely male world. 

Although from the outside, the “excesses” and male gender deviance of homosocial bonding were thus closely associated with the city’s unruly immigrant and working-class districts, the association of Southern Italians with homoeroticism was centuries old. By the end of the nineteenth century, literary and photographic travelogues, as well as reports by gay men traveling to the south of Italy, had encouraged the classicist and antiquarian notion that Mediterranean sexual culture in general was more open to homosexual relations. Obviously, romantic, poetic, and often, not-too-cautious descriptions of Italy—particularly Central and Southern Italy—as “hermaphrodite peninsula” betrayed all the signs of a sexual racialization of the primitive other, inclusive of ethnographic field evidence and attributions of atavistic lack of inhibitions.

Similarly, the urban practice of “slumming” by the genteel middle and upper classes often included visits to the numerous “resorts” (saloons, clubs, and dance halls) located on the Bowery to meet and interact with the “local degenerates.” This practice paralleled popular, “ethnographic,” and voyeuristic facets of American culture, catalyzed by sensational and social journalism (Jacob Riis, Lewis Hine, Pulitzer’s World, and Hearst’s Journal) and
American “realist” literature (William Dean Howells, Henry James, and Theodore Dreiser). Within this context, it was not utterly surprising that Valentino, as a Southern Italian and former destitute immigrant, could display a deviant masculinity. However, his astounding popularity and his widespread media visibility as a refined and sophisticated dandy were also perceived as forms of invasion and “class transvestitism” and, as such, attracted a long series of classicist, nativist, and eugenicist protests. To blame was the new and unregulated mass-media culture, which was popularizing and, thus, valorizing the exemplar of a racialized low social and moral order, belonging to the transgressive forces of deviancy, sexual promiscuity, and corruption of middle-class gender identity. Interestingly, dystopian reactions to Valentino’s popularity (and death) were not limited to the mainstream American press.

**RHETORICAL ANTIMODERNISM AT THE BED OF THE EXCELLENT CADAVER**

Since the early 1900s, and with the exception of Beban’s post-1915 films, the Italian American press had repeatedly complained about the cinematic representations of Italians as curious, irrational, and ineffectual characters and, worst of all, as criminals and blackhanders. Yet several major Italian American papers printed in New York (*Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and *La Follia di New York*) did not even review Valentino’s films as they were released. This seems especially remarkable when the worsening of Valentino’s health, in late August 1926, suddenly awakened the editorial offices of the two newspapers into a frenzy of coverage.

The Italian press’s numerous accounts of Valentino’s sudden illness, hospitalization, and death in New York on August 23, 1926, resemble eulogies on the occasion of a long-awaited homecoming. The medicalization of his public figure, and thus, the emphasis on the most physical and primeval dimension of his body, produced intense discussions about the novelties of his modern masculinity and Italianness. At work was a series of rhetorical dualities, opposing, on one side, the Italian and Italian American culture and communities (inclusive of vernacular subcultures) and, on the other side, American media and anonymous crowds. These polarizations were further correlated with notions of virile versus flamboyant masculinity, natural authenticity versus contrived masquerade, and timeless art versus industrial commercialism.

The day after Valentino’s death, the openly pro-Fascist *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* and the far less biased humor paper *La Follia di New York* were quite generous with articles, poems, and songs, all praising the deceased Italian actor. In various formats, they constantly emphasized how the “outside world,” from the Hollywood elite to the American public at large, had come to admire, respect, and adore the Italian actor, before and after his death (see Figures 11 and 12). The Italian American press filled its front pages with daily
reports on the crowds of people standing in line outside Campbell’s Funeral Parlor in Upper West Side Manhattan, regularly singling out the names of famous producers, directors, and film stars who were paying due homage to the Italian divo. Still, the funeral services, as several reports insisted, were also displays of Valentino’s Italianess, evident from the nationality of his closest friends and the priests officiating the services but also from the nationality of the accompanying music and its performers. Repeatedly emphasized was the fact that Valentino’s old Italian American friends had come to visit him while he was alive at the hospital and how reverently, after his sudden death, fellow Italians had paid tribute to him at the various cities where the train transporting his coffin stopped on the way to Hollywood, where he was to be buried.

Accounts of his death stressed Valentino’s Italianess, yet as an “Italianess lived abroad.” Exilic and displaced, his national identity revealed both solid bonds to his Italian origins and culture and a profound allegiance to American life and customs. For Italian Americans, the fact that he was to be buried in Hollywood and that a year before his death he had expressed the intention to obtain American citizenship did not undermine his Italian loyalty. In any case, having not completed the necessary paperwork, Valentino had died an Italian citizen. Quite aware of both this complex cultural context and Valentino’s double devotion, Valentino’s brother, Alberto Guglielmi, declared upon arrival in

Figure 11: The Plebiscite of Grief
New York from Italy, “Valentino had made America his adopted country. . . . I have decided to give to the American people the dearest thing to my heart—my brother—because it has been clearly indicated to me that they love him and want him.”

Weeks before his death, however, Valentino’s Italianess had emerged in a much more controversial fashion—one that the Italian papers took the opportunity to report and comment upon only post mortem. A few American dailies had openly questioned his virility by resorting sarcastically to the classist and racialized image of the fairy. A Chicago Tribune editorial published in July 1926 alleged that Valentino was regularly using beauty powder and complained that now that the Italian divo had become an American male model, one needed to wonder what was happening to American masculinity (“Homo Americanus!”).

It is time for a matriarchy if the male of the species allows such things to persist. Better a rule by masculine women than by effeminate men. . . . Is this degeneration into effeminacy a cognate reaction with pacifism [sic] to the virilities and realities of the war? Are pink powder and parlor pinks in any way related? How does one reconcile masculine cosmetics, sheiks, floppy pants, and slave bracelets with a disregard for law and an aptitude for crime more in keeping with the frontier of half a century ago than a twentieth-century metropolis? . . . Holly-
wood is the national school of masculinity. Rudy, the beautiful gardener’s boy, is the prototype of the American male. Hell’s bells. Oh, sugar.94

Valentino wrote a public response in the pages of the rival Herald-Examiner where the “double consciousness” of his challenge was most explicit: the defense of his Italian name was paramount, but the terrain of the challenge was American masculinity, with its familiar muscular codes of heartiness and athleticism:95

The above mentioned is at least the second scurrilous personal attack you have made upon me, my race, and my father’s name. You slur my Italian ancestry; you cast ridicule upon my Italian name; you cast doubt upon my masculinity. I call you, in return, a contemptible coward and to prove which of us is a better man, I challenge you . . . to meet me in the boxing or wrestling arena to prove, in typically American fashion (for I am an American citizen), which of use is more a man . . . I do not know who you are or how big you are, but this challenge stands if you are as big as Jack Dempsey. . . . Hoping I will have an opportunity to demonstrate to you that the wrist under a slave bracelet may snap a real fist into your sagging jaw and that I may teach you respect of a man even though he happens to prefer to keep his face clean.96

By late August, Italian American papers, whether pro-Fascist or not, were vigorously defending Valentino’s virility. For Il Progresso, his success in America was due to his artistic talent and to a unique combination of youth, refinement, and beauty—unrivaled in Hollywood upon which he ruled arbiter elegantiarum. Referring to Giacomo Casanova but insisting on Valentino’s new variety of italianità, the front page of Il Progresso celebrated his virility by stressing the star’s desire, on screen and in his private life, to constantly please his female fans.97

The reclaiming of Valentino’s virility, especially in the pro-Fascist press, went hand in hand with a fetishization of his Italian name, widely circulating in newspapers, film posters, and advertisements.98 A similar effort of recovering his Italianness was performed by Il Grido della Stirpe, one of New York’s most unashamedly Fascist Italian papers. Addressing the touchy issue of Valentino’s American citizenship and declaring that there had never been any rivalry with Mussolini, one editorial reported in block capitals a long declaration of absolute Italian loyalty that Valentino had allegedly pronounced during one his trips to Italy.99 Such nationalist claims on his name, body, and national allegiance included the placing of Mussolini’s funeral wreath. If this were indeed done on Mussolini’s personal order, the episode must be viewed as an expression of Italian, not Italian American, national appropriation, as it insisted on an exclusive, 100 percent italianità unmarked by competing or coexisting allegiances.100

Yet Valentino was not Mussolini, whose modern reconfiguration of Italian masculinity did not clash against traditional and official Italian models of gender relationship. The Italian American, male-dominated press had trouble
accepting, let alone embracing, the divo’s male gender deviance in both his on-and-off-screen personalities. His repeatedly declared fondness for cultural sophistication and Art’s timelessness had limited rhetorical usefulness: it was loaded with a sexual ambiguity that the respectable, Italian middle class found unconventional and disturbing (see Figures 13 and 14). The relative silence of the Italian newspapers of New York at the release of his films—I would claim—was connected to this general uneasiness. On and off screen, Valentino was not easily assimilable to familiar “respectable” standards, and he ultimately catalyzed such “disturbing” phenomena as female fandom.

At the time of his death, however, papers could not remain quiet. Pressed by the urgency of the coverage, Italian American editorialists could have dis-owned the Italian divo as Italian. Or they could have blamed the expressions and demographics of his popularity as a most un-Italian phenomenon. In the end, this is what they did, as they described the stardom he enjoyed throughout his life with a familiar repository of misogynist and dystopian language. In brief, Valentino may have been Italian, as the mainstream Italian American press contended, but the excesses of modern fandom around him was considered an American affair.

The never-before-seen behavior of crowds of younger and older women “boisterously” and “shamelessly” cheering at Valentino’s screen appearances
was deemed unacceptable. The press described the throngs of women of any age, class, and race, gathered outside his funeral parlor, as a “rowdy scene of hysteria.” The Fascist weekly _Il Carroccio_ disparagingly called this gathering a spectacle of “female exhibitionism” but also pointed the finger at the cinema’s induced craze for protagonism and fame:

> What a mob! Nothing could be more insincere, dirtier, and more idiotic than what this horde has done around the coffin of the dead Sheik . . . an irreverent crowd of empty-headed girls, who were fainting or crying on command; of professional chorines who thought of putting on airs by mixing with actors and actresses, authentic or not, hoping that the reporters’ cameras focused on them.

Like many other papers, _Il Carroccio_ attributed the unprecedented mass frenzy occurring at the funeral and at the screening of Valentino’s films to the workings of the American film industry and to the American press coverage. The U.S. media were thus held primarily responsible for enabling such
widespread (and gendered) popular exhibitions that had now even captured Italian women.

What was morbid was not just the disproportion between the event [of Valentino’s death], though poignant, and its consequences, but the openly quack manner with which the Hollywood clique was fueling it, with the newspapers’ intentional or unintentional complicity, which let both themselves and the audience to influenced by means of suggestions.103

Il Progresso also attributed the masses’ fanatical behavior to the medium of motion pictures. It was cinema, according to the newspaper, that unlike other forms of popular entertainment (including radio), was inciting and attracting hordes of people into the realm of popular culture through an unprecedented and ultimately dangerous intimacy between star and fans.104 Such fatal attraction and illusory proximity was gendered as feminine, according to a misogynist mystification that since the late nineteenth century, had opposed modernism, with its high-art asceticism, to the popular and serialized genres of mass culture and contrasted rationality with the “effeminate” crowd.105 As a result, Valentino’s adoring female crowd embodied for several commentators, in tune with the day’s social and anthropological scholars, a danger of irrationality, atavism, and retrograde civilization.106

Newspapers of widely different political orientations portrayed Hollywood, and the media universe in general, as both an exploitative and a feminizing and hysteria-provoking machine. Just a few days after Valentino’s death, as ads for newsreels and songs related to Valentino’s death (see Figures 15 and 16) were published in the Italian press, Marziale Sisca, the anti-Fascist director of La Follia, wrote a series of long, dystopian, and misogynist editorials. Sisca, whose nom de plume was Riccardo Cordiferro, criticized the excesses of the mass gathering at Valentino’s funeral home and the hysterical reactions of the crowd that he identified as constituted mainly of “typists, bookkeepers [sic], seamstresses, ironing-women, midwives, nannies, waitresses, servants, door-keepers, cocottes, flappers, and carefree girls . . . of all kinds.”107

In the following weeks, La Follia and other papers attempted to bring what they believed was a “sense of proportion” to the unwarranted popular reactions to Valentino’s death.108 They did so by distancing themselves from the official grief of the moment. Insisting on the great divide between highbrow modernism and lowbrow popular culture, Cordiferro complained about the excesses of attention and grandeur attributed to such stars as Valentino when honest and gifted writers, playwrights, and poets—symptomatically, all elected “modernist artists-creators”—were kept in humiliating conditions.109

Overall, Valentino’s status as a Hollywood film idol, whose closeness to America’s masses was uniquely enhanced by the modern film medium and built on the emergence of female fandom, challenged and complicated but did not hamper, the nationalization of Valentino as an Italian. A process of national
rechristening gained momentum and urgency after his death—which may explain both the Fascists’ overnight coup at Campbell’s Funeral Church and the Italian American newspapers’ wide and daily coverage. Yet, in differing and veiled ways, in the days after his death, the Italian press of New York often suggested that Valentino had somehow lost, or sold, his Italian soul. A number of Italian American male journalists and commentators criticized the Italian divo because to become and remain famous, he had allegedly refused any contact with his fellow countrymen. Others disparaged him because he had purportedly discouraged being exclusively identified as Italian, preferring instead a generic and undetermined Latin designation.
Caught between urgencies of national identity and pressing experiences of popular culture and new gender relations, the Italian American press offered a familiar polemical devaluation of mass culture as feminine and an equally familiar and polemical endorsement of high modernist notions of masculinity and national identity as the realm of discipline, vigorous character, and self-control. These reactions to Valentino’s fame reveal the modernity rather than the folkloric dimensions of Italian American culture. To claim that Musso- 

| Mussolini, as white male hero and man of action, could be politicized and claimed as an acceptable “new Italian” through his modern actualization of Italy’s glorious Roman past—much in line with America’s vision of Rome’s political mores—without reference to what a Fascist dictatorship actually was. Through such nationally charged truisms as love and romance, the gallant and refined Valentino could emphasize his Italian heritage by striking a delicate balance between his identity as a Latin lover and a ladies’ man or, weeks before his death, insist on a muscular and pugnacious virility while vehemently rejecting allegations of effeminacy. His controversial relationship with Mus-
solini but, perhaps more decisively, the polarizing discourse about his popularity made him less fitting for nationalistic politicization. Not by chance, the only way American Fascist groups could appropriate and nationalize his larger-than-life persona was by placing their symbols around his lifeless Italian body. At the same time, Valentino’s fame made him more suitable for the new public intersections between Italian pride and the novel models of gender relationships emerging in America’s popular culture. Rather than agents of radical transformations, the two modern stars participated in the wider, dynamic scene of Italian American culture, more engaged in processes of adaptation than in patriotic insularity and busy testing new formulations of Italian national pride and belonging away from home.

NOTES

6. For instance, in the fall of 1926, Roman distributors re-released three of his titles at one time: The Sheik (1921), The Eagle (1925), and The Son of the Sheik (1926); James Hay, Popular Film Culture in Fascist Italy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 86. On film stardom in 1920s and 1930s Italy, see Stephen Gundle, “Film Stars and Society in Fascist Italy,” in Jacqueline Reich and Piero Garofalo, eds., Revisiting Fascism: Italian Cinema, 1922-1943 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 315-39.
8. Throughout this article, I treat and address Mussolini as both a political and a media “star” due to his remarkable and unprecedented mastery of modern media, from radio broadcasting and photojournalism to filmed newsreels. On Mussolini’s media performances, particularly his speech and bodily rhetoric, see Ernesto G. Laura, Immagine del Fascismo: La Conquista del Potere, 1915-1925, vol. 1 (Milan, Italy: Longanesi, 1973); Ermanno Leco et al., eds., La Lingua Italiana e il Fascismo (Bologna, Italy: Consorzio Provinciale Pubblica Lettura, 1977); Laura Malvano, Fascismo e Politica dell’Immagine (Turin, Italy: Bollati Boringhieri, 1988); and Pierre Milza, Mussolini (Paris: Fayard, 1999). A useful discussion of the “media synergy” between Mussolini and the Istituto Luce, the news-making agency created in 1924, is in Sergio Luzzato’s L’immagine del Duce: Mussolini nelle Fotografie dell’Istituto Luce (Rome: Editori Riuniti/Istituto Luce, 2001).


14. Suffice it to mention here the “Prince of Pulsinellis” Giglielmo Ricciardi, Sicilian actor-playwrights Antonio Maiori and Giovanni De Rosalia, dialect stage divi Mimi Aguglia and Giovanni Grasso (who, although famous since 1908, arrived in the United States only in 1921), and the most popular of them all, Neapolitan Eduardo Migliaccio, known as Farfariello (Little Butterfly).


21. Ibid. Irving S. Cobb of Cosmopolitan reported that it was fairly common to address Mussolini as the Italian Roosevelt; Irving S. Cobb, “A Big Little Man,” Cosmopolitan, vol. 82, January 1927, 145-46. It is worth reminding that Roosevelt himself was once described by Henry Adams as “pure act.”
22. Child, A Diplomat Looks at Europe.
27. What made viable and easier the comparison between Mussolini and modern film stars and athletes was also the Duce’s constant and insisted exhibition of youthfulness—an utter novelty for a political leader in Italy. Decades later, novelist Italo Calvino noted, “No one then had ever heard of a Prime Minister who was only forty. Nor had anyone ever seen in Italy a statesman without a beard or a mustache, and this in itself was a sign of modernity.” See “Il Duce’s Portraits: Living with Mussolini,” trans. Martin McLaughlin, New Yorker, January 6, 2003, 34 (originally appeared as “Cominciò con un Cilindro,” La Repubblica, July 10-11, 1983).
28. The image, now apparently lost, appeared in Gary Carey’s Anita Loos: A Biography (New York: Knopf, 1988), 65. I wish to thank Mr. Carey for productive conversations. Unsuccessful attempts have been made to contact the Anita Loos Estate regarding rights.
29. Mathis had insisted to cast Valentino as the protagonist of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (1921), which she had written. She was also the author of the scripts of other Valenti’s films, such as Camille (1921), The Conquering Power (1921), Blood and Sand (1922), and The Young Rajah (1922). Marion, one of Hollywood’s highest paid screenwriters, wrote The Son of the Sheik (1926), Valentino’s last picture.
31. Initially blocked by the Fascist authority who clearly had no intention of supporting a film that favored Socialist characters, the script was rearranged to such an extent that in the new version, the “good” protagonists were the Fascists. Fitzmaurice had old ties to Italy and imminent ones with Valentino: between 1919 and 1923, he had completed in Italy a series of love melodramas, and in 1926, he directed Valentino’s last film, The Son of the Sheik.
32. See also a seven-reel film titled Mussolini Speaks, released by Columbia Pictures in 1933.
33. Upon his return to the United States, Hullinger wrote a long account for Photoplay about his experience as the first filmmaker to actually capture the domestic and everyday dimension of Italy’s national leader, paired to a “movie star” and whose “attraction among the flickering marquee lights above the box office” made him comparable to Clark Gable and William Powell; Edwin Ware Hullinger, “Mussolini Movie Star,” Photoplay 52, no. 8 (August 1938): 87.
34. Gaetano Salvemini, Italian Fascists Activities in the United States, edited and with an introduction by Philip V. Cannistraro (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1977); and Philip V. Cannistraro, Blackshirts in Little Italy (West Lafayette, IN: Bordighera, 1999). See also the bibliography in Stefano Luconi, La “Diplomazia Parallela”*: Il Regime Fascista e la Mobilizzazione Politica degli Italiani-Americani (Milan, Italy: Franco Angeli, 2000), 11, note 9.
35. On the Fascist League and its relationship with both Italy’s Fascist Party and the U.S. government, see Cannistraro, Blackshirts, chap. 4.
36. See Jean McClure Mudge, The Poet and the Dictator: Lauro de Bosis Resists Fascism in Italy and America (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002), 74. The role played by the Casa Italiana at Columbia University headed by Giuseppe Prezzolini between 1930 and 1940 (he had been teaching at Columbia since 1923) has been source of harsh debates. Diggins, Salvemini, and Cannistraro, among others, have not shied away from alleging that the cultural activities of Prezzolini and the Italian department at Columbia were disturbing examples of loyalty to Fascism. Prezzolini repeatedly and vehemently rejected the charge in a number of venues, including Prezzolini sul Fascismo (Milan, Italy: Pan, 1975) and The Case of the Casa Italiana (New York: American Institute of Italian Studies, 1976).
39. In the late 1920s, Mussolini started limiting and even outlawing the practice of emigration and came to address past emigrants as “Italians abroad.” Beginning in 1928, Mussolini understood that to better foster future Fascist causes in North America, the Italian American community had to be permitted to acquire American citizenship. G. Salvemini, Italian Fascists Activities in the United States, 59.

40. For a discussion on radio broadcasts during Fascism, see Luconi, La ‘Diplomazia Parallela’, 77. Much research on Italian radio broadcasting before World War II still needs to be systematically undertaken. For an initial discussion, see E. Aleandri, The Italian-American Immigrant Theatre of New York City (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 1999), 101-28.


44. On the “nationalization of women” in Fascist Italy, see De Grazia, How Fascism Ruled Women.

45. Earlier studies have approached the political and institutional dimension of his popularity, but as usual, the realm of popular culture remains one of the most elusive ones for historians of immigration.


47. Goodman, The Evolution of Ethnicity, 211.


50. Diggins, Mussolini and Fascism, p. 79.

51. All too rarely, however, famous and established performers interpreted their plays. An exception was the famous Sicilian actress Mimì Aguglia who in 1916, at the Broadway Gaiety Theatre, played the protagonist in Giovanniti’s political drama Il Proletario. On August 25, 1911, activist Abele Fanchi in an essay titled “Cinema as a Factor of Civilization,” published in Tenebre Rosse (Come era nel Principio) (“Red Tenebrae: As It Was in the Beginning”).


59. Beban’s film career began in 1915 with the two hits, *The Italian* and *The Alien*, but continued until 1926.


62. Gaylyn Studlar has been the most perceptive about the connection between Valentino’s fame and the exotic and Orientalist dance culture (or “madness”) of the 1910s; G. Studlar, “Optical Intoxication: Rudolph Valentino and the Dance Madness,” in *This Mad Masquerade: Stardom and Masculinity in the Jazz Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 150-98.

63. “I hate Valentino! All men hate Valentino”; Dick Dorgan, “A Song of Hate.”
64. “Valentino with his small eyes, his flat nose and large mouth, fails to measure up to the standard of male beauty usually accepted in this country”; Adela Rogers St. Johns, “What Kind of Men Attract Women Most?” Photoplay 25, no. 5 (April 1924): 110.


69. Valentino’s Italian origins were widely known to audiences in America through fan and film magazines, although, after 1921, only in Cobra (1925) did he play the role of an Italian character.

70. Ewen, Immigrant Women, 67.


77. Richard DeCordova, Picture Personalities: The Emergence of the Star System in America (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 107 [italics in original].


80. R. W. Snyder, The Voice of the City: Vaudeville and Popular Culture in New York (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 145. It must be noted that Valentino's raced diversity was not registered or perceived in the same way among black performers and filmmakers. In 1928, race-film director Oscar Micheaux, whose work never achieved any popularity outside black audiences, referred to Lorenzo Tucker, the film star of his newly released Ages of Sin, as the "colored Valentino." In a 1985 interview, the light-skinned Tucker commented on Micheaux's publicity gimmick: "If you really want to know, I was even lighter than Valentino himself." Richard Grupenhoff, The Black Valentino: The Stage and Screen Career of Lorenzo Tucker (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1988), 66.


82. Ibid., 72.

83. Ibid., 74.

84. Ibid. In his remarkably researched The Seduction of the Mediterranean: Writing, Art and Homosexual Fantasy (London: Routledge, 1993), Robert Aldrich discusses the literary works of Lord Byron, Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater, and E. M. Forster; the paintings of Hans Von Marées; and the photographs of Wilhelm Von Glöden, with their scenes of arcadian beauty, classicist poses, but also sensual abandonment and sexual seduction between Northern European artists and intellectuals and Southern Italian peasants, often set amid ancient ruins and landscapes.

85. Carlo Bertelli, "La Penna Ermafrodita," in C. Bertelli and Giulio Bottali, ed., Storia d' Italia. Annali 2/1 L'Immagine Fotografica 1845-1945 (Turin, Italy: Einaudi, 1979), 84-86. The same contention was shared by scholars and commentators active in Fascist Italy. In 1934, writing about the Abruzzi, the Central Italian region where decadent Italian writer Gabriele D'Annunzio was born, established literary critic and historian Mario Praz contended that it was a "remote and ignorant" land whose inhabitants practiced a primordial and instinctive (sexual) life; C. Mario Praz, La Carne, la Morte e il Diavolo nella Letteratura Romantica (1930; Florence, Italy: Sansoni, 1976), 309. For a general discussion on homophobia in Fascist culture, see Dario Petrosino, "Traditori della Stirpe: Il Razzismo contro gli Omosessuali nella Stampa del Fascismo." in Alberto Burgio and Luciano Casali, eds., Studi sul Razzismo Italiano (Bologna, Italy: Clueb, 1996), 89-108.

86. Chauncey, Gay New York, 33.


89. La Follia di New York (FdNY) published poems in Neapolitan that dealt with Valentino's terrible illness and sudden death but also that joked about his amazing appeal to all women, Italian and not, young and mature; Ernesto Castellucci, “A Rodolfo Valentino,” FdNY, August 29, 1926, 4. In earlier September 1926, FdNY published other, more-serious poems, composed in Neapolitan and Sicilian, celebrating his talent and memorializing with great affection his tragic destiny. Pasquale Buongiovanni, “Povero Valentino,” FdNY, September 5, 1926, 4 [Neapolitan]; Giovanni De Rosalia, “Rodolfo Valentino,” FdNY, September 9, 1926, 4 [Sicilian]; Francesco Amadio, “A Morte e ‘e Valentino,” FdNY, September 19, 1926, 4 [Neapolitan]. In the city's Italian ghetto, eulogistic records ("Povero Valentino") were sold, and filmed footage about his funeral was widely and repeatedly exhibited at the local movie theatres; FdNY, September 5, 1926, 3.
90. After his death, his last movie, The Son of the Sheik (United Artists, 1926), broke all box office records. See Moving Picture World, September 11, 1926, 2; and MPW, September 18, 1926, 172. Italian papers also advertised the re-release of Valentino’s films and their enormous success; PIA, August 29, 1926, 3.

91. PIA, August 31, 1926, 3. The New York requiem mass, held at the St. Malachy Roman Catholic Church on Forty-ninth Street (the so-called actors’ church), was co-celebrated by Father Giuseppe Congedo of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and Mary, who was also Valentino’s child friend in Castellaneta and who had heard his confession on the day before his death. The music accompanying the mass was performed by two Italian soloists, Guido Ciccolini of the Chicago Civic Opera and Demetri Onofri of the San Carlo Opera Company.

92. See PIA, August 25, 1926, 3. On the Chicago Memorial, see PIA, September 1, 1926, 3; and PIA, September 5, 1926, 2.

93. PIA, August 25, 1926, 2; and PIA, August 27, 1926, 3. I have used the English version of the quote as it appeared in MPW, September 11, 1926, 1. See also PIA, September 3, 1926, 3.


96. Rodolfo Valentino, “To the Man (?) who wrote the editorial headed ‘Pink Powder Puffs’ in Sunday’s Tribune,” The Chicago Herald-Examiner, July 19, 1926, now in Ullman, Valentino, 187-88. This response was quickly flashed over wires and cables to other newspapers and periodicals. Valentino’s sister-in-law continued to defend Valentino’s virility after his death: see “Dichiarazioni della Cognata di Rodolfo Valentino,” PIA, August 28, 1926, 1.

97. See I. C. Falbo, “Rodolfo Valentino,” PIA, August 24, 1926, 1; PIA, August 25, 1926, 1; FdNY, August 29, 1926, 1.

98. PIA, August 24, 1926, 3.


100. PIA, August 26, 1926, 3. See also footnote 1.


103. Ibid.


106. At the turn of the twentieth century, the interest for the modern crowd was a shared subject of study among a number of European and American social theorists. See, for instance, Scipio Sighele, I Delitti della Folla (1891; Turin, Italy: Bocca, 1903); and Gustave Le Bon, Psychologie des Foules (Paris: F. Alcan, 1895), trans. in The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind (New York: Viking, 1960), 38-39. In America, the most popular work on the subject was Robert E. Park, The Crowd and the Public and Other Essays (1904; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).


108. PIA refused to start raising money for a memorial monument for Valentino because another, implicitly more important, fund-raising regarding Italy’s war debts was under way; PIA, August 31, 1926, 3.


111. This derogative gendering of mass culture was not an exclusive feature of Italian American patriotic criticism. The most advanced form of Italian leftist criticism reproduced the same masculinist allegations. In his 1917 review of the film-acting style of Italian silent film diva Lyda Borelli, the Italian Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci explicitly opposed the feminine realms of sexual enticement and spectatorial craze to the dominion of masculine rationality and artistic restraint allegedly achieved over centuries of intellectual progress. Quite interestingly, in an article about Valentino published in fall 1926, Fascist commentator

112. By the late 1930s and early 1940s, the increasing political and military antagonism between Italy and the United States, not to mention the attack on Pearl Harbor (December 1941), ended the somewhat unproblematic coexistence of Fascism and Americanism. World War II was also the period in which the modern Italianness of Valentino could be recaptured as it occurred in literary fictionalizations of Valentino’s life in the Italian American community such as Cav. D. M., *Vita Amorosa di Rodolfo Valentino* (New York: Italian Book Company, 1944).

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