Memories of Italianness
Pride, Prejudice, and Consumption

I wanted to be a Yankee. I wanted to be more American.

Andrew La Motta hovered over dinner at his kitchen table. I sat across from him with my back against the window. Looking through the panes, only the contours of the trees were visible since the darkness of the New England winter had settled on this late afternoon. Andrew looked up from his plate and unveiled his memories to me:

I'm not a typical Italian, Italian American ‘cause uh, I grew up in, um, Yankee environment which was basically white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. (...) And ahm, most Italians grow up in an Italian ghetto. Like, ahm, like Worcester or Providence or Fall River, you know East Boston, that sort of thing. And ah, and I didn't. So my story is (...) is that of an Italian American in a WASP, in WASPish communities.¹

Andrew’s very first disclaimer—“I'm not a typical Italian”—is not an uncommon response. Often the offspring of Italian immigrants feel that they do not fit into some kind of—often medially disseminated—prototype for Italianness. Micaela Di Leonardo’s interviews, which she conducted in the early 1980s, resonate with the experience I had when interviewing descendants of Italian immigrants. Di Leonardo asked Gino Angeluzzi, an interviewee, what he thought about Italian Americans. His response: “Sometimes it’s a little hard for me to say because as kids we didn’t live in an Italian community.”² This feeling of not belonging is characteristic of Andrew La Motta’s memories. In this introductory passage, he summarized his life story, which still holds true today, as signified by the simple present “My story is (...) is that.” Right from the beginning, Andrew’s overall motif insider/outside (difference) became relevant: Andrew depicted himself as an outsider. It is a position he maintained consistently throughout his biographical reminiscing. In spite of not having been raised in a New England Italian community, like Worcester, Providence, or Fall

¹ Interview Andrew La Motta, January, 2, 2003, p. 1.
River, he identified himself as Italian American, which is something he repeated in our second conversation two days later when I asked him how he would label himself. Andrew replied: “Well, I think I consider myself as a, an Italian American.” By putting stress on two nouns in the introductory segment, “Protestants” and “ghetto,” he carved out two opposites, on the continuum of ethnicity: The “ghetto”—or Italian community—is where most Italian Americans experienced their childhood, whereas Andrew came of age on the opposite end of the spectrum in a “Yankee environment.” To get to the ethnic core of his world as a youth not any fewer than five different terms came to his mind—“Yankee,” “white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant,” and “WASP.” It is the repetition of one phenomenon spoken in so many words that leads me to name the first motif Anglo-Saxon standard.

Racism shaped the term “ethnicity” at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century when immigrants from southern and eastern Europe found themselves categorized as racially inferior people. In this time period the lines between the concepts of race and ethnicity were blurry: A clear social distinction between what is understood to be a genetically determined race on the one hand and a voluntary and culturally determined ethnicity on the other hand did not emerge until after World War II. Therefore, the history of race and ethnicity must be studied together because they are deeply intertwined concepts.

This chapter provides a short overview of this history of the concepts race and ethnicity. Against this backdrop I analyze the interviewees’ speech pertaining to ethnicity/race with the following questions: What meaning does ethnicity/race hold for them? How do they label themselves? Have they ever had experiences where they referred to themselves or were perceived as Italians, Italian Americans, or ethnic Americans? In what contexts have they become aware of society labeling them with ethnic terms? What motifs surface in their speech about ethnicity/race? How do class, gender, residence, and

3 Interview Andrew La Motta, January 4, 2003, p. 51.
4 I named this motif on the basis of Jacobson’s use of the “Anglo-Saxon standard,” see Jacobson, Roots Too, 2006, p. 2.
8 When analyzing ethnic/racial identities, I will express ethnicity/race with notions of “Italianness,” “whiteness,” “Irishness,” “African Americanness” and so forth as inspired by Anderson’s use of “nationness.” See Anderson, Imagined Communities, 2006, p. 139.