Lecturing at Harvard University in April 2011, Ngai asserted\textsuperscript{1} that the concept of the United States as a “nation of immigrants,”\textsuperscript{2} with its implied immigrant paradigm, is applicable to the experience of white ethnic migrants of southern and eastern Europe who were incorporated into society and experienced social mobility. However, Ngai stated, their experience was a unique phenomenon: white ethnics profited from conditions other groups, such as Asians, could not enjoy. Namely, they benefited from the creation of the welfare state through government support between the 1930s and 1960s in the form of the New Deal, as well as the GI Bill, Medicare, and Medicaid. These circumstances, together with the post–World War II economic boom, elevated the descendants of white immigrants into the middle class. These conditions for the children and grandchildren of white immigrants are, thus, not applicable to other (“non-white”) groups. Ngai concluded that the experience of white ethnics was not the norm, it was the exception.

I suggest, based on my empirical research together with insight acquired from secondary literature, that even the Italian success story can only hold true if one ignores a large piece of national and international history. Firstly, the coerced Americanization experience—most grotesquely implemented through the lynching of Italians in the South, West, and Midwest in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries,\textsuperscript{3} together with their prolonged exclusion from Anglo-Saxon society—has left a very heavy footprint on Italian-American consciousness. Hence, an identification with Italianness might go beyond representing merely a safe way to be ethnic or a reaction to the civil rights movement (though both are elementary factors). Italianness for many descendants, among them Beatrice, Andrew, Sandra, and their sister, comes with painful memories of discrimination. Making it in America the way Andrew, Sandra, and Antonella understood it did not come easy—as it did for other descendants of Italian Americans. As Fred Gardaphé states:

\textsuperscript{1} Presentation: Mae M. Ngai: A “Nation of Immigrants”: A Short History Of American Immigration History. A CGIS, Harvard University, April 27, 2011.
\textsuperscript{2} For more information on “immigrant paradigm” see introduction.
\textsuperscript{3} Guglielmo, No Color Barrier, 2003, p. 35.
For Italian Americans, “making it” has come with a high price. It has cost them the language of their ancestors—the main means by which history is preserved and heritage passed on from one generation to the next. They have had to trade in or hide any customs that have been depicted as quaint, but labeled as alien, in order to prove equality to those above them on the ladder of success.4

It is only once the United States starts to celebrate multiculturalism that “badges of pride”5 overlay the shamefulness of being Italian American. The “new ethnic” pride of the 1960s, as the results from the interviews show, covered up Italians’ history of being undesirable citizens and racially suspect. Of course, the Italian case is by no means comparable to the history of continued exclusion as experienced by African Americans or other non-white groups who have fewer options in choosing an ethnic identity.6

Secondly, the argument that descendants of southern and eastern European immigrants formed the ideal type for the “immigrant paradigm” ignores that during the Italian migration of the turn of the last century almost half of all Italians who traveled to the United States returned to their home country. When passing through the “golden door” they had no intentions of becoming American.7 We can see that in the biography of Beatrice La Motta’s uncle, Vincenzo Stranieri, who crossed the Atlantic several times until a cardiac arrest in Taranto in 1974 put his transnational life to rest.8 Moreover, his parents, after having lived in the United States, returned to Italy for good: for them becoming American was not the prime goal of their lives. Thirdly, Ngai’s argument does not capture the experience of the thousands of southern Italians who had the intention of migrating to the United States, yet were barred from entering as a result of the Immigration Act of 1924.9 The narrative of the “nation of immigrants” neglects all those people. Fourthly, not everybody found the lure of suburbia enticing. Some of my interviewees had a proud history of continuity

6 Waters, Ethnic Options, 1990, p. 18.
9 Gabaccia, Race, Nation, Hyphen, 2003, p. 56.