

## **IDENTITY, PRIVILEGE AND SURNAME: A REFLECTION ON 21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY POLITICAL ONOMASTICS**

Leah DiNatale  
The University of Alabama

### **Introduction: Political Onomastics**

Since the early 1980's, political onomastics, the study of the ways in which names embody and create power relations, has sought to critique relations of power and privilege in a variety of settings. Despite the field's nearly forty-year history, the "politics of naming," as pioneer onomastician Valerie Alia (p. 457) terms it, is still often relegated to the margins of anthropology, linguistics, political science, sociology, and cultural studies. Perhaps this is because on a superficial level naming serves as a basic way to classify an environment. The practice of naming also plays a crucial role in creating the power relationships within families, states, nations, and an increasingly globalized world (p. 457). Names simultaneously include and exclude individuals from a given group dynamic, both establishing kinship and constructing the other.

Within contemporary political onomastics there seems to be a push to explore the parallels and similarities between the names and naming practices of disparate ethnic communities. In order to examine my own relation to Italian American identity and white privilege, this essay will explore the history of the Anglicization of Italian surnames in the United States. It is my contention that while a name may certainly suggest something of an individual's "status, politics, and power," as Alia suggests, it may also betray his or her position to a dominant power structure. An individual's given surname can never fully signify race, class, gender, ability, or sexual identification within the complex social matrix of 21<sup>st</sup> century American culture (p. 463). Here I begin my inquiry into the history of the Anglicization of Italian surnames within the United States as the practice relates to the politics of naming.

### **A Brief History of Surnames**

Inherited surnames are historically an almost exclusively western phenomenon. Within many indigenous cultures, marginalized communities, and in the Far East, individuals keep their given birth names secret. For example, various groups such as the Inuit of the Arctic Circle and the people of the Jewish Diaspora have used and continue to use traditional names in private while adopting the names of the majority culture within the public sphere (Alia, p. 463). Such naming practices serve practical and political purposes, as knowledge of given private names affords a certain degree of power to individuals within these communities.

Even on the European continent, surnames are a fairly recent construction. They did not begin to be used in France until A.D. 1,000 and the Romans were the first to establish a clear and definite surname structure stressing clan membership. Within the Roman Empire an individual usually had three names. The first name or the *praenomen* corresponded to the modern idea of a forename or a Christian name and was usually followed by a second clan or race name. Finally a *cognomen* or surname was given (Pine, p. 11). During the dark ages in Western Europe, after the

fall of the Roman Empire, the Roman surname system was lost. Later, during the Middle Ages (from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onward), surnames gradually came back into usage and the system began to spread throughout Europe. The Greeks never had a system which corresponded with the Roman system of classification and instead chose to denote familial relationships by using a form of the “son of” nomenclature (Pine, p. 11).

Before the Norman conquest of England during the 11<sup>th</sup> century, surnames as we understand them today in Great Britain did not exist at all. It was not until somewhere between the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century that surnames were recognized as fixed names or marks by which people were known in England (Pine, p. 10). In Wales they came into usage much later, and in Ireland and Scotland the classification criteria differed considerably. In England surnames fell into four classes: patronymics, place names, occupation names, and nicknames. However, these names were not permanent or exclusive and were subject to change. Although a few patrilineal names have persisted and have been passed down for centuries in England, the vast majority of surnames has experienced considerable changes (Pine, p. 25). The reasons for these changes range from the linguistically pragmatic to the political.

### **Surnames in the United States**

In the United States surnames have been imported, exported, and adapted in a variety of different forms of American English. These changes reflect the incredible linguistic and cultural diversity found throughout the United States. The history of American English did not begin with the arrival of English speakers, as linguists Walt Wolfram and Natalie Schilling-Estes note in their text *American English*. Many dominant characteristics of American English can be traced to speech differences originating in the British Isles before the British began to colonize the North American continent (p. 29). Further differences in very early American dialects result from language contact from regions of the globe spanning from the Caribbean to the west coast of Africa (p. 29). After the initial colonization of the northeast by the British, settlement of the continent by non-native English speakers continued. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, American English dialects distinctive from British varieties were beginning to form, influenced by Native American, French, German, and Spanish dialects (p. 33). Today some linguistic evidence suggests that American regional and social dialects are intensifying, and Wolfram and Schilling-Estes go so far as to argue “that as long as the English language exists, it will be full of dialect diversity” (p. 28).

As a result of America’s long history of immigration and language change, the etymology of surnames in the contemporary United States is often relatively opaque. Even an English surname is not necessarily English. Words that sound and are spelled as if they were English may originally be Cornish, Welsh, Gaelic, Latin, or even French (Clark, p. 316). Further complicating the matter is what H. L. Mencken terms “the wholesale Anglicization of surnames” (p. 271). During their mass exodus from Europe during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, many immigrants deliberately (although sometimes unwittingly) changed their surnames in order to adopt a new American identity. Through this process they further sought to speed assimilation, avoid detection, deter discrimination, or to “just be better for the businesses they hoped to start in their new homeland,” as Sam Roberts, staff writer for the *New York Times Online*, explains.

The political motives associated with surname change further highlight a blatant classism that permeated the social milieu of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century America. Because most heavy manual

labor was performed by immigrants during this time, many Americans came to associate inferiority with anything or anyone recognized as foreign. Many citizens native to the US resented the competition presented by immigrants in the workforce and looked upon these workers with great suspicion and antipathy. So, many immigrants internalized this racism. They believed their surnames were not only hindrances to upward social mobility but also intrinsically discreditable markers of their identities. During an era of unparalleled economic hardship and opportunity, vast numbers of naturalized Americans attempted to level the playing field by attempting to rid themselves of at least one perceived social handicap (Mencken, p. 279).

The first surnames Anglicized in America were French and Dutch, although German names experienced wholesale Anglicization as well. Although the conscious decision to Anglicize a surname was undoubtedly political, the decision to change a last name also served practical purposes. Because many of the sounds that characterize the German language such as the *ü* and the guttural in the *-ch* and *-g* are often very difficult for non-native speakers to pronounce, large numbers of immigrants chose to change their surnames entirely, *i.e.*, *Grün* became *Green*, *Führ* went to *Fear* or *Fuhr*, and *Bloch* changed to *Block* or *Black* (Mencken, p. 274). In other cases, spellings changed in order to preserve vowel sounds represented differently in German and English. For example, *Blum* changed to *Bloom* and *Reuss* to *Royce*. Due to the American aversion to accented letters, *Fürst* became *Furst* and *Löwe* transformed into *Lowe*. Even when there is no indication of an accent, diphthongs foreign to native American English speakers can be difficult for them to pronounce (Mencken, p. 274).

Whether for political or pragmatic reasons or both, legally changing a surname was often an informal and fairly simple process during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Naturalization Act of June 29, 1906 signed into law by Theodore Roosevelt required all immigrants to gain fluency in the English language. As a part of this law, naturalized citizens could deliberately choose to change their surnames to an Americanized form. Although many of these changes were consensual, some newspapers from the period suggest changes were made without solicitation or even against an individual's will (Mencken, p. 281). Name change became official upon the granting of legal naturalization paperwork, although additional changes were allowed by application to a court of record at a later date. Here I temporarily set aside my historical inquiry in order to explore my own relationship to ethnic surname, identity, and white privilege.

### **What's in an Italian Name?**

I can trace my earliest thoughts regarding my surname and my identity to my father. I remember as a little girl coming home from kindergarten one afternoon perplexed. One of my teachers informed me that I had misspelled my last name by capitalizing the letter N in the word. Confused, I explained to my father what the teacher had said. I vividly remember how angry he became. In no uncertain terms he told me that the letter N in my last name *was* and *always should be* capitalized. When I asked him why, he explained that both his maternal and paternal grandparents had immigrated to the United States from Sicily in order for my great-grandfather to start a new life as a cobbler away from the "old country."

Thousands of naturalized Italian Americans like my great-grandfather anglicized their surnames between 1880 and 1920, a period when over four million Italians immigrated to the

United States in order to escape overpopulation and the economic sanctions imposed on Southern Italy (most notably in Sicily, Campania, Abruzzo, and Calabria) during the Italian unification of 1861 (Cavaoli, p. 214). According to Joseph Fucilla, leading Italian American lexicographer and onomastician, these anglicized Italian surnames can be divided into six distinct categories: translations, dropping of final vowels, analogical changes, French influences, de-compounded and other clipped forms, and phonetic respellings.

Because translations of surnames from other languages are so numerous within the United States, German in particular, Fucilla contends that the average non-Italian may assume that translation is the most common form of Anglicization. This assumption largely results from many surnames that have English baptismal equivalents, *i.e.*, *Bonifazio*, *Lorenzi*, *Martini*, and *Olivieri* (translated to *Boniface*, *Lawrence*, *Martin*, and *Oliver*) (p. 26). Some Italian surnames discard the preposition *di* or *de* or the article *la* when this change is made. The majority of these articles however are usually retained in Italian surnames, as is the case in *De Georges*, *De John*, *De Mark*, *De Mary*, *Di Caesar*, *La Frank*, and *La Mark* (p. 26). Other times, in an addition to a translation, an Italian surname adds an *s* in order to imitate the possessive ending common in many German and English patronymics, such as *De Clements*, *De Michaels*, and *De Peters* (p. 26), to name just a few. Conversely, surnames that derive from Italian sanctuaries (*St. Angel*, *St. John*, *St. Marie*, and *St. Peter*) usually translate both elements, if translated at all (p. 27). Other Italian surnames are derived from nicknames, occupations, geographical areas, and from dwellings, in much the same way German names were. Translations from these groups are rare.

Rather than exist as a literal translation, the final vowels of most anglicized Italian surnames are dropped. This modification follows the general pattern of English words ending in consonants. Additionally, some Italian names that have consonant endings (*Battistell*, *Bertell*, *Borrell*, *Capparell*, etc.) follow a similar group of English names that end in *-ell* (*Bartell*, *Pennell*, and *Purcell*) (p. 28). The addition of a consonant to an Italian word ending in a vowel is very rare. Fucilla notes the anglicization of *Grecol* for *Greco* as his only example of this phenomenon.

In his 1943 article "The Anglicization of Italian Surnames" Fucilla states that the Italian surnames he cites throughout his study are drawn largely from cases he is personally familiar with or from cases that have been reported to him by friends and relatives. These examples are supplemented by surnames found in city and telephone directories, marriage license lists, and obituary notices appearing in newspapers. (The cities and/or states where he found these documents are not listed.) Fucilla states he found additional surnames in the Italian-American *Who's Who* (New York, 1939) and U. M. Pesaturo's *Italo-Americans of Rhode Island* (Providence, 1940).

Just as in French, a number of Italian surnames follow a pattern of analogical changes, such as *i*-endings to *y*-endings and *i*-endings to *e*-endings. While some names adhere to the German convention of pronouncing the final *e* in names, others do not. Common words such as *beauty*, *glory*, *library*, *brunette*, *novelette*, *rosette*, *marine*, *nicotine*, *routine* have also influenced the change of Italian surnames ending in the letter *i* (28). When both an Italian and non-Italian name closely approximate one another in pronunciation, the Italian name frequently changes into the non-Italian name. *Canadeo* becomes *Kennedy*, *Cestaro* becomes *Chester*, etc. (p. 29). Sometimes this analogical change is the result of a similarity between of the beginning parts of two names,

and the ending is of no consequence. For example, *Baratta* becomes *Barry* or *Carsella* changes to *Carsey* (p. 29).

Many Italian surnames begin with the prepositions *da*, *de*, *di*, *d'* or the articles *li*, *la* or *lo* (p. 29). These prepositions and articles are almost always separated from the principal part of a name. However, when a name such as *Da Dario* is introduced into the United States, it commonly changes to *Dadario* (p. 29). Such a change frequently takes place in surnames lengthened from shortened or pet forms of personal names, such as *De Rosaria*, *De Natalis*, and *Di Michele* (p. 29). In the case of my own last name, *Di Natale* became *DiNatale*. Although in Italy it is very unusual to have a single surname consisting of a preposition, article, and noun, such a combination is common in the United States. While this convention may be the result of the spelling of names orally without capital letters or apostrophes, it is far more likely that this practice imitates the composition of French names, which are numerous throughout the United States.

A strong French influence accounts for odd forms of Italian surnames, such as *De Larosa* and *De Larocca*, in which prepositions are separated from the main word, but continue to be linked to an article (p. 29). French language influence also dictates the change of the letters *a* and *o* to *e* in many Italian names in the United States (*Bellome*, *Campagne*, *Esposite*, etc.) p. (29). In terms of sociolinguistics, many Italian immigrants to the United States were strongly influenced by French culture and formal language training in French. In this sense Italian immigrants' conscious appropriation of French patterns and language structures in terms of their surname structure acts as somewhat of an alternative to Anglicization (p. 30).

Italian surnames are often decompounded or take on clipped forms in the United States as a result of the application of the law of minimum effort. Often times an Italian surname will be reduced to one of the two elements that comprise it, as is the case with the name *Mastro* which is derived from the likes of *Mastrofrancesco* (p. 30). This convention results largely from a lack of an equivalent word in the English language. Sometimes names lose a modifying word and change into a completely different word, as in the case of *Filippella* to *Philips* (p. 30). Other times surnames experience a partial decompounding, and the second element does not disappear entirely and remains in an almost unrecognizable abbreviated form, such as the name *Arcidiacono* becoming *Arcide* (p. 30). Noncompounded surnames with more than three syllables are often clipped, as in *Patri* for *Patriglia* (p. 30).

Finally a considerable amount of phonetic respelling of Italian surnames exists. Often times, in order to preserve the Italian pronunciation *ch* [k], the *ch* is replaced with the letter *k* (31). More commonly, however, the *c* remains and the *k* is substituted for an *h* (*Giackino*, *Luckino*, *Quattrocki*, etc.) (p. 31). Other times, the soft *c* before the letters *e* or *i* changes to *ch* (p. 31). We see this change in the transformation of *Amici* to *Ameche* and *Cerri* to *Cherry* (p. 31). In order to avoid a disharmonious sound in names containing *gl*, the *g* is sometimes eliminated. Double *z* also sometimes becomes *tz*. Furthermore, some double consonants in Italian surnames are reduced to only one consonant in English (p. 32). Because Italian double consonants do not sound the same as English double consonants, Fucilla confidently asserts that this convention illustrates yet another attempt to anglicize pronunciation.

Despite the cultural and linguistic factors that influence surname modification, Fucilla's research overwhelmingly suggests that the distinctive character of an Italian surname never fully

disappears, even in its anglicized form. I can personally attest to Fucilla's findings. Although my great-grandfather most probably Americanized the spelling of his surname, resulting in a pronunciation change from [dinatáli] to [də'nætəli], the capital letter N remained. For my father, this remaining Italian linguistic marker represents a fierce pride in his ethnic heritage. For me the symbol has led to an inquiry into the way I recognize and reflect on my own cultural identity.

### **Italian Americans or European Americans?**

A century ago when my great-grandfather and so many Italians immigrated to the United States, the vast majority of southern European immigrants were poor and illiterate. Although "the attractive opportunities of a democratic and rapidly developing urban/industrial society pulled them to America," Italian emigrants faced considerable discrimination and prejudice upon their arrival in the United States (Cavaioli, p. 215). Because the social elite favored a Jeffersonian model of an agrarian-rural society, Italian Americans were often blamed for the overpopulation and moral corruption of many major US cities (Cavaioli, p. 215). Exacerbating this sentiment was a prevalent understanding of Social Darwinism which posited Anglo-Saxon, Nordic, and Germanic peoples as superior to Italians, Jews, Greeks, and Slavs through the process of natural selection. In general, northern and northwestern Europeans were viewed as socially, morally, and intellectually superior to southern, central, and southeastern Europeans (Cavaioli, p. 215).

Such blatantly racist social ideology contributed significantly to the restrictive immigration laws of the 1920's. These laws severely limited Italian immigration to the United States during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. In 1965 President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Hart-Celler Immigration and Nationality Reform. This act allowed thousands of Italians on the immigration waiting list entrance into America after World War II had left Italy in shambles. Italian immigration reached its peak in 1970 after the law came into effect. As demand for immigration was met and the Italian economy began to improve steadily, immigration from Italy to the United States significantly declined. As a result of what Frank J. Cavaioli calls the "evolving improvements in the social, economic, and political conditions in the homeland," a sharp downward trend in Italian immigration to the United States has continued well into the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In contrast to the marginalized, assimilationist immigrants of the past, present-day Italian immigrants are "well-educated, career-driven, and focused on preserving their traditions and language" (Cavaioli, p. 213). They feel no pressure to anglicize their surnames because according to Cheryl R. David, former chairwoman of the New York chapter of the American Immigration Lawyers Association, "For the most part, nobody changes to American names any more at all" (as cited in Roberts, 2010). This dramatic difference is largely the result of the multiculturalism legitimized by the civil rights movement of the 1960's and better access to legal and identity documents such as driver's licenses and passports ("New Life in U.S. No Longer Means New Name"). A further implication of diversity promotion and multicultural policies is the self-identification of Italian Americans in official census reports (Cavaioli, p. 223).

Due to this increase in self-identification amongst Italian Americans, scholars such as Cavaioli have questioned whether Italians have entered into what he terms the "twilight of ethnicity," an era in which they are "becoming more like what was once the dominant white Anglo Saxon culture through intermarriage, education, and economic and political success" (p. 225).

Cavaioli contends the result of such a “twilight of ethnicity” is a “symbolic ethnicity” or “recreational ethnicity” rather than a direct link to old-world heritage (p. 225). With the current influx of Hispanic and Asian immigrants, other Italian Americans and their organizations feel compelled to establish themselves as distinctive from the emerging and more general ethnic group called *European Americans* (p. 225). Currently Italian Americans are not a protected class under civil rights laws, except within the City University of New York’s Calandra Institute (Cavaioli, p. 223).

Such a divide amongst Italian Americans causes Cavaioli to beg the following questions - “Will Italian Americans merge into a new ethnic group called *European Americans*, quite distinct from the recent immigrant arrivals from the Caribbean, Latin America, and Asia? Or will they retain their predominant cultural heritage?”

### **Italian Ancestry and White Privilege**

Before attending the 2014 Conference on College Composition and Communication in Indianapolis, Indiana, I had never considered my own thoughts regarding the answer to this question. After attending a particularly provocative sociolinguistics panel regarding Afrocentric pedagogical practices, an African American friend and I decided to have lunch at an adjoining TGI Fridays. Over our appetizers I expressed my interest in adopting Afrocentric teaching practices, but also the reservations I felt in doing so as a white person. My friend looked at me, somewhat surprised, and remarked, “But, Leah, you aren’t white. Your last name is a dead giveaway.” I was shocked. Although I have always been proud of my patrilineal Italian heritage, I have always identified as white in terms of my racial identity. I had always assumed others identified me the same way. My friend’s comment made me seriously question my self-perceived whiteness and whether or not I should begin to identify primarily as an Italian-American. After thinking through the issue at length, I have come to the conclusion that to identify primarily as an Italian American, separate from the ethnic group of European Americans, would be largely to perpetuate a cycle of white privilege which confers dominance and systematically overpowers other ethnic groups such as African Americans.

Feminist scholar Peggy McIntosh defines white privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that [she] can count on cashing in each day, but about which [she] was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious” (p. 31). To illustrate her definition, she cites a list of twenty-six examples ranging from “Whether I use checks, credit cards, or cash, I can count on my skin color not to work against the appearance of financial reliability” to “I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help my race will not work against me” (pp. 32-33). I can firmly count on all twenty-six of the conditions McIntosh lists, while, unfortunately, my friends of other races and ethnicities cannot say the same. I cannot think of any instance in which I have not felt as if I belonged to the majority culture. I also cannot say that I have ever been discriminated against specifically on account of my Italian heritage. Because of my very light olive complexion, blonde hair, and blue eyes, I, like McIntosh, can fairly freely criticize the prevailing ideologies within American culture without fear of retribution. In this very literal sense, my heritage has put me at an advantage rather than at a disadvantage. Because I can viably claim a white phenotype, I have been afforded many privileges that I have not earned by my merit or on my own account.

Although my last name identifies my Italian heritage I cannot take ownership of the oppression experienced by my great-grandparents or even my grandparents, for that matter. I have never been to Italy and most unfortunately I do not speak the Italian language at all. I also have, thankfully, never experienced the racism and prejudice they undoubtedly came into contact with during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. As a result of the lived experience of my white identity, I cannot claim a stake in an Italian-American identity separate from a European-American identity. Any attempt on my part to do so would be to unethically engage in the “symbolic” or “recreational” ethnicity Cavaoli references. While I certainly cannot speak for those individuals who do identify separately as Italian-American, I would argue there is a real danger in correlating identity with surname in a one-to-one ratio. By not acknowledging the nuances of the politics of naming we risk ignoring the ways in which race, class, gender, ability, sexual identification, and ethnic identity intersect and sometimes seem to contradict one another. Because racism, classism, and heterosexism are not the same things, we should not view them as linguistically identical. In order for the field of onomastics to be politically transformative it must work to not only uncover linguistic inequality, but also unacknowledged linguistic privilege.

My proficiency in formal and informal Standard English and the upward professional and social mobility it affords me is probably beyond the wildest dreams of my immigrant great-grandfather. I am deeply humbled and very proud of the fact that both he and my great-grandmother spoke Broken English, a language my deceased grandmother described as mostly Italian with a couple of English words and phrases added for emphasis. When my great-grandmother immigrated to the United States, women did not have the right to vote or attend public universities. The idea that I will teach at a university as a tenured professor of English would probably have been completely unfathomable to both her and my great-grandfather. Because of the unearned privilege their immigration arbitrarily afforded me, I have a responsibility to challenge unequal systems of oppression such as language which keeps power in the hands of the few rather than in the many. Nonetheless, I continue to spell my surname with a capital N, yet say the word with an American pronunciation.

### Works Cited

- Alia, Valerie. “The Politics of Naming: A Personal Reflection,” *Names* 55.4 (2007): 457-464.
- Cavaoli, F.J. “Patterns of Italian Immigration to the United States,” *The Catholic Social Science Review* 13 (2008): 213-229.
- Clark, G. *The Son Also Rises: Surnames and the History of Social Mobility*. Princeton (NJ) and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2014.
- McIntosh, P. “White Privilege: Unpacking the Invisible Knapsack,” *Independent School* 49.2 (1990): 31-35.
- Mencken, H.L. *The American Language: A Preliminary Inquiry into the Development of English in the United States*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1919.
- Pine, L.G. *The Story of Surnames*. Rutland (VT): Charles E. Tuttle, Inc., 1966.

Roberts, S. "New Life in U.S. No Longer Means New Name," *The New York Times* 25 Aug 2010: Retrieved from [http:// www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/nyregion/26names.html?\\_r=1&pagewanted=print](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/26/nyregion/26names.html?_r=1&pagewanted=print)

Wolfram, Walt and Natalie Schilling-Estes. *American English*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Malden (MA): Blackwell, 2006.