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A Pedagogy for Crossing the Color Line: Italian-Language Newspapers in Alabama and Louisiana, 1894-1938[1]

Una pedagogia per attraversare la barriera della razza: i giornali in lingua italiana in Alabama e Louisiana, 1894-1938

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Abstract. This article examines the pedagogical role of Italian-language newspapers in Alabama and Louisiana between 1894 and 1938, arguing that the ethnic press functioned as an informal but consequential educational system for Italian immigrants navigating the racial order of the Jim Crow South. Positioned as racially ambiguous, Italians relied on newspapers such as *Il Gladiatore*, the *Columbus-Balbo Review*, *L'Italo-Americano*, and *La Voce Coloniale* to acquire linguistic discipline, civic knowledge and behavioral norms associated with respectability and social acceptance. In contexts where segregated public schooling offered few integrative pathways, these periodicals promoted literacy, standard Italian, moral education and civic participation, framing education as a strategy for negotiating proximity to whiteness. Through editorials, educational campaigns and coverage of cultural and associational life, the press articulated a regional pedagogy that linked language instruction to racial positioning. The article situates these practices within broader debates on migration, education and the uneven regional incorporation of Italians into American whiteness.

Keywords: Italian ethnic press, informal education, racial formation, migrant pedagogy, language teaching.

Riassunto. Questo articolo esamina il ruolo educativo dei giornali in lingua italiana in Alabama e Louisiana tra il 1894 e il 1934. La tesi proposta è quella secondo cui la stampa etnica fungesse da sistema educativo informale, ma coerente, per gli immigrati italiani impegnati nella complessa navigazione delle strutture razziali del Sud delle leggi Jim Crow. Occupanti una posizione razziale ritenuta ambigua, gli italiani si affidavano a giornali come *Il Gladiatore*, la *Columbus-Balbo Review*, *L'Italo-Americano* e *La Voce Coloniale* per acquisire competenze linguistiche, educazione civica e norme comportamentali associate alla rispettabilità e all'accettazione sociale. In contesti in cui

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la scuola pubblica segregata offriva pochi percorsi per una possibile integrazione, questi periodici promuovevano l'alfabetizzazione, l'italiano standard, l'educazione morale e la partecipazione civica, promuovendo l'istruzione come strategia per rendere possibile un avvicinamento all'ideale della razza bianca. Attraverso editoriali, campagne educative e cronache della vita culturale e associativa, la stampa articolava una pedagogia locale che collegava l'insegnamento della lingua al riposizionamento razziale. L'articolo colloca queste pratiche nell'ambito del dibattito su migrazione, educazione e non uniforme incorporazione degli italiani nella concezione americana di cultura e razza bianca.

Parole chiave: stampa etnica italiana, educazione informale, educazione razziale, pedagogia dei migranti, insegnamento delle lingue.

RACIAL AMBIGUITY, EDUCATION AND THE ITALIAN-LANGUAGE PRESS IN THE JIM CROW SOUTH

Italian immigrants arriving in the US South during the first three waves of immigration were frequently perceived as racially suspect, neither securely white nor unequivocally excluded from categories of "non-whiteness" (Guglielmo and Salerno 2003, Deschamps 2000). Violence, accusations of criminality and nativist rhetoric repeatedly associated Italians with African Americans and other marginalized groups, reinforcing this unstable status and culminating in episodes of anti-Italian violence, most notably the 1891 New Orleans lynching, which entrenched Italians' association with criminality and racial otherness in the Southern public imagination (Jackson 2020, Gauthreaux 2010, Gambino 1998, Baiamonte 1992, Botein 1979; Salvetti 2017, Jäger 2002, Rimanelli and Postman 1992).[2]

While anti-Italian stereotypes in mainstream political discourse and the press have been widely documented (Connell and Gardaphé 2010), the cultural narratives produced within Italian communities through the ethnic press of the Deep and Gulf South remain comparatively understudied (Deschamps 2020, Vellon 2014, Sergi 2010, Deschamps 2002).

Italian-language newspapers published in Alabama and Louisiana – *Il Gladiatore* and the *Columbus-Balbo Review* in Birmingham, *L'Italo-Americano* and *La Voce Coloniale* in New Orleans – functioned as key sites of identity negotiation.[3] Across all titles, editors interacted with nativist mainstream newspapers and with Italian-language presses from other communities, while devoting significant space to news from Italy, international politics and key regions of emigration, especially Sicily, reflecting a transcommunity circulation of information. Primarily addressing first-generation readers with variable command of Italian and dialect within a pragmatic, business-oriented framework, these periodicals operated as cultural anchors and as platforms of public pedagogy aimed at countering anti-Italian stereotypes and instructing readers in the behavioral norms associated with American respectability.

Treating Alabama and Louisiana together responds to a regional logic. As Luconi has argued, Italian Americans' incorporation into whiteness unfolded unevenly across regions, shaped by local racial orders and configurations of non-white populations (Luconi 2021). Birmingham and New Orleans, two major economic centers of the Deep and Gulf South, were connected by sustained patterns of migration and press circulation, forming a shared regional space for debates on language, education and racial belonging.

These newspapers also reveal the transnational dimensions of racial discourse. Editors drew on ideas circulating in Italy – including the post-Unification North–South divide and positivist criminological theories (D'Agostino 2002) – to interpret local racial dynamics, while simultaneously asserting Italians' claims to cultural legitimacy and racial respectability within the Jim Crow order (Deschamps and Sergi 2021, Deschamps 2020, Sergi 2010).

This article examines how the Italian-language press in Alabama and Louisiana articulated the relationship between education, race and ethnic identity between 1894 and 1938, from the earliest surviving issues of *L'Italo-Americano*, one of the two principal Italian-language periodicals in New Orleans, to the systematic pedagogical project articulated by *La Voce Coloniale* under Frank L. Loria through the end of his honorary editorship. Drawing on editorials, civic commentary and coverage of cultural life, it shows how newspapers promoted language instruction, literacy and moral pedagogy to negotiate Italians' position within the racial hierarchy of the Jim Crow South.

[2] For related episodes of anti-Italian violence in the South, including the Tallulah lynchings, see Deaglio 2015 and Haas 1982; on the 1910 Tampa lynching and its racial implications, see Luconi 2009. See also Webb 2002.

[3] Digitized issues of the newspapers discussed here, together with information on their archival locations, are available at https://www.mscadashow.com/newspapers

ITALIANS, RACE, SCHOOLING AND WHITENESS IN THE SEGREGATED SOUTH

From the mid-nineteenth century to the Second World War, Southern education developed within a system structured by racial hierarchy, economic dependence and weak state capacity (Reese 2005; Anderson 1988; Kaestle 1983; Cremin 1980). While Reconstruction briefly challenged this order through Black educational activism and demands for universal schooling, these gains were quickly undermined by segregationist governments and discriminatory funding practices (Merritt 2017; Butchart 2010; Leloudis 1996). By the late nineteenth century, Black schools remained chronically underfunded, while white schooling expanded comparatively, often with philanthropic support that mitigated deficits without dismantling structural inequality (Yacovone 2022; Fairclough 2007; Hoffschwelle 2006; Fairclough 2001; Walker 1996; Orfield and Eaton 1996).

Within this rigid Black–white framework, immigrant groups such as Italians occupied no clear position in educational policy and received little institutional support (Reese 2005; Anderson 1988). As a result, they relied on churches, mutual-aid societies and the ethnic press to pursue literacy, language maintenance and civic instruction, particularly in urban centers such as New Orleans and Birmingham (Butchart 2010; Fairclough 2007; Walker 1996).

It was within this stratified and exclusionary educational order, rather than outside it, that the Italian-language press of Alabama and Louisiana framed its pedagogical ambitions between 1894 and 1934, strongly encouraging access to education, advocating language instruction, promoting literacy and positioning education as a means of navigating the South's racialized social and institutional landscape.

Between post-Reconstruction and the interwar years, Italians in the Deep and Gulf South – who had largely settled through chain migration and in response to local labor demand – occupied a precarious position between Black and white communities, shaped by rigid racial hierarchies and local regimes of segregation (Carlson 2020, Vellon 2018, Vecoli 2006, Fasce 2002, Gambino 1998, Barrett and Roediger 1997, Vecoli 1995, Orsi 1992).[4] In both Alabama and Louisiana, newcomers from Italy were frequently perceived as racially ambiguous and, at times, openly racialized in the nativist press as «the blackest negro in existence» (Cunningham 1965, 34), neither fully white nor clearly outside the categories applied to African Americans (Luconi 2021, Fede 1994; Flynt 1989, Magnaghi 1987, Aguglia Beavers 1969). Catholicism, darker complexions, limited English proficiency and working-class origins reinforced this ambiguity, shaping Italians' economic opportunities, residential patterns, exposure to violence and strategies of cultural adaptation.

In rural Alabama, this ambiguity was especially coercive as Italians often entered agricultural labor through fraudulent contract schemes that trapped them in debt peonage and spatial segregation, housed neither with white workers nor alongside African Americans (Cinel 1990; Magnaghi 1987). In industrial Birmingham, Italians occupied an intermediate position within company towns, physically and symbolically situated between white and Black populations, a condition reflected in labels such as "Dago Hill" (Brera 2017, 156; Flynt 1989, 120-124). Economic mobility through small-scale commerce – particularly family-run stores serving African American customers – offered partial advancement but also generated white hostility, reinforcing the need for strategies of respectability and racial differentiation.

In Louisiana, especially in New Orleans, Italians operated within a more urban and commercially oriented environment that offered greater access to trade, parish networks and associational life. While racial suspicion persisted, these conditions facilitated earlier entry into small business, civic participation and limited residential mobility, allowing cultural capital and linguistic refinement to be more readily translated into claims of respectability.

Across both regions, however, the Jim Crow school system offered immigrants few integrative mechanisms (Anderson 1988; Butchart 2010). Southern public education, designed to uphold segregation, proved ill equipped to accommodate racially ambiguous newcomers, rendering access to schooling uneven and contingent. As a result, extramural pedagogies – newspapers, parishes, mutual-aid societies and cultural associations – became central to Italians' pursuit of literacy and the cultural resources necessary to obtain civic recognition and acceptance. Whether under the coercive conditions of rural Alabama or the more flexible yet still racialized context of urban Louisiana, Italians confronted the same imperative: to learn and perform whiteness as a condition of survival and social mobility in the Jim Crow South.

The Italian-language press functioned as a key pedagogical agent in teaching immigrants how to navigate the South's racialized social order. By linking respectability,

[4] See also Gardaphé 2004, pp. 123–125, and Vellon 2018, pp. 203–215. For studies on other US regions, see Caiazza 2025, Guglielmo 2003, Luconi 2001, Mormino and Pozzetta 1987 and Nelli 1970. According to U.S. Census data, by 1920, the Italian-origin population numbered roughly 2,100 in greater Birmingham (up from just over 500 in 1900), while in Louisiana it reached approximately 43,000 by 1910, with New Orleans as the principal hub of settlement.

linguistic discipline and civic loyalty to social inclusion, newspapers instructed Italians in the practices through which whiteness was performed and recognized.[5]

EDUCATIONAL ORIENTATION AND THE PROMOTION OF AMERICANIZATION IN THE BIRMINGHAM DISTRICT: *IL GLADIATORE* (1925-1933)

In a region where public schools offered few pathways for immigrant acculturation and where Italians occupied a precarious position within the structures of Jim Crow, *Il Gladiatore*, which is said to have started publications in 1919 (Aguglia Beavers 1969, 58) took on the role to teach its Italian readers how to embody the norms that governed social acceptance and operated as an instrument of behavioral regulation.[6]

An early indication of *Il Gladiatore*'s educational mission appears in the editorial "Scuole Superiori" (19 September 1925), where the newspaper adopts a didactic tone to guide Italian parents through the unfamiliar landscape of American secondary schooling. By distinguishing among academic, commercial and technical high schools and by noting that the generic term "high School" could be misleading, the editors offered a practical orientation meant to illuminate the choices available to families who had completed only elementary schooling in Italy. The piece framed secondary education as indispensable for social mobility, insisting that prosperous Americans already ensured such schooling for their children and urging immigrant families to do likewise. In explicitly connecting the pursuit of education with the acquisition of «le più brillanti vie del futuro,» the editorial tied schooling to Americanization, presenting it as a means through which Italians could overcome prejudice and secure a legitimate civic position in a racially stratified environment.

This emphasis on schooling is reinforced and expanded a month later in "Scuole Serali", which invited young Italians who had «for one reason or another» abandoned formal education to enroll in the district's evening classes. The article explains that these courses – held in all the local high schools, including those in Ensley and Woodlawn – offered instruction in Americanization, commercial subjects, mechanics and other practical fields. By publicizing the schedule and stressing accessibility, the newspaper presented evening schools as an inclusive bridge into American civic and economic life. The tone is explicitly exhortative: youths are warned not to miss such opportunities, and parents are told that continued study offers long-term benefits. Evening education thus emerged as a second chance for acquiring English, vocational skills and the cultural competencies necessary for full participation in local society.

This educational trajectory is further illustrated by "Giovane che si distingue" (6 February 1926), which celebrates the scholastic success of Joseph Fiore, a high-school graduate enrolled at Birmingham Southern College. Presented as «intelligente» and committed to pursuing «una alta professione,» he is held up as a model for the community, underscoring that formal education functioned as a pathway to broader ethnic uplift.

By highlighting a youth who had successfully navigated the local school system and advanced into higher education, *Il Gladiatore* reinforced its core pedagogical message: American civic belonging required scholastic ambition and the mastery of the cultural and linguistic competencies acquired through schooling.

Another pedagogical axis around which revolved the rhetorical strategy of *Il Gladiatore* concerned moral and behavioral reform. The newspaper reprimanded Italians who behaved as «cafon[i] coloniali,» embarrassing the community by seeking political favors rather than acting as disciplined and respectable citizens, insisting that such conduct harmed «la nostra comunità» and violated American civic expectations ("La nostra politica"). Likewise, the paper explicitly combated stereotypes portraying Italians as «asini, analfabeti e sporcaccioni,» instructing readers to maintain cleanliness and decorum as a means of dismantling racial prejudice ("A voi Siciliani").

A second dimension of the paper's pedagogy is civic instruction. *Il Gladiatore* guides readers on participation in local and national elections. During the 1928 presidential campaign, front-page articles offer explicit directions on how to mark ballots and stress the moral duty of political participation, with a clear endorsement of the Democratic candidate Alfred E. Smith ("Italiani! Andate

[5] Beyond documented subscription records, direct evidence on modes of distribution is limited; it is nevertheless reasonable to infer that Italian-language newspapers also circulated through community venues such as grocery stores, clubhouses and associational spaces.

[6] According to an interview quoted in Aguglia Beavers 1969, the weekly *Il Gladiatore* was "an enterprise directed by businessmen rather than professional journalists" (58). Founded by Carl Mazzara and Mike Canzonieri, the paper appeared regularly until 1933, when one of its later co-editors, Elviro Di Laura, launched the *Columbus Balbo Review*, published until his death in 1938. *Il Gladiatore* had an estimated circulation of about 500 copies per week, consisted of four to six pages, and was written in an Italian marked by English and Sicilian contact phenomena; it occasionally serialized middlebrow fiction, especially by Carolina Invernizio. The paper had been preceded by *Il Libero Pensiero* (c. 1904, editor "S. L. Guarino") and *L'Avanguardia* (edited by "Signor Cotti"), both mentioned in the *Birmingham Age-Herald* (11 October 1907; 13 October 1909). In 1931 a further weekly, *L'Aquila*, was launched by Francesco Bellandi and Salvatore Ceravolo to represent local Italian lodges and societies; the date of its cessation remains unclear.

alle urne"; "La battaglia finale"). In the buildup to the 1932 presidential elections, the paper again urges Italians to vote, linking electoral discipline to full membership in the civic body ("Italo-American Go to Polls").[7]

A third pedagogical component concerned community formation through association. Articles instructed Italians to join federated societies in order to be «meglio protetti e rispettati dalle persone indigene,» presenting unity under the Order of the Sons of Italy as a means of resisting internal divisions and external hostility ("Per l'unità della colonia").

Il Gladiatore also had a linguistic-educational function. Alongside its editorials, it published bilingual naturalization Q&A columns designed to help newcomers prepare for citizenship examinations – practical tools that guided readers through American civic language and expected knowledge.[8] These sections operated as informal schooling for miners and shopkeepers with limited access to formal instruction.

Finally, the newspaper promoted cultural literacy by framing religious festivals, patriotic commemorations and ethnic traditions within an American civic narrative, pairing Garibaldi with George Washington as parallel models of republican virtue ("Commemorazione di Washington e Garibaldi"). Articles on the celebrations of San Calogero in Ensley and the Madonna del Balzo across the Birmingham district similarly encouraged Italians to express their heritage in forms compatible with American public culture ("Per la celebrazione della Madonna del Balzo"; "Santo Calogero").

Il Gladiatore thus acted as a community school by correcting behavior, combating racial stereotypes, teaching civic participation, providing linguistic tools for naturalization and fostering communal discipline. Its pedagogy was explicitly designed to transform a dispersed, stigmatized immigrant workforce into a coherent Italo-American community capable of navigating – and surviving – the racial and civic order of the U.S. South.

THE *COLUMBUS–BALBO REVIEW*: EDUCATION, CIVIC IDENTITY AND THE PROGRESSIVE RACIALIZATION OF ITALIAN AMERICANS (1933-1938)

Unlike the commercially oriented *Gladiatore*, the *Columbus–Balbo Review* conceived its mission in unequivocally pedagogical terms, though charged with fascist ideals. Published in Birmingham between 1933 and 1938 under the direction of Elviro Di Laura, the periodical stands as a revealing laboratory for understanding how Italian immigrants in the Deep South sought to educate themselves into whiteness, civic respectability and transnational cultural authority.[9]

The *Review* consistently depicted Italians as participants in Alabama's civic and educational life, reinforcing the notion that well-conducted Italians were fit for inclusion in the white public sphere. From its earliest issues, the *Columbus–Balbo Review* framed education as the principal pathway to civic legitimacy and upward mobility. An October 1933 editorial celebrated young readers' achievements while reminding the community to «encourage our students to rise ever higher» ("Felicitations"), establishing education as an ethnic duty whose success reflected on the entire Italian colony in Alabama.

This theme acquired deeper transnational undertones a year later when Italy was praised as the cradle of Western knowledge and its universities as «the glory of civilization» ("Italy's Long Lineage of Learning"). The editorial forged a symbolic continuity between Italy's intellectual heritage and the aspirations of second-generation Italian Americans, using scholarly prestige to legitimize the advancement of Italian-descent students in American institutions. In the same issue, young Italians «distinguishing themselves in their studies» were presented as evidence that education functioned as a performative means of racial positioning, demonstrating Italians' cultural compatibility with whiteness in the Jim Crow South ("Students of Italian Descent").

The magazine continued to cultivate this argument through editorials linking Italian culture to the American democratic tradition, notably by asserting that Thomas Jefferson had admired the Italian language as «one of the most perfect tongues for literature and science» ("Jefferson and the Love of Italian"). This claim aligned Italian learning with American foundational ideals, suggesting that bilingualism and cultural retention strengthened rather than weakened Italians' Americanization, rendering Italian language not foreign but foundational.

The February 1935 issue developed the argument further in "Italian in Public Schools", the *Review*'s most explicit statement on the pedagogical value of the language. The editors argued that teaching Italian would benefit the entire school system, calling it «a language every cultured person should know» and asserting that

[7] See Luconi 2011 on the role of the Italian-language press in mediating U.S. political culture and civic literacy for Italian immigrants.

[8] The column "Per ottenere la cittadinanza americana" appeared with some regularity in *Il Gladiatore* across multiple issues between 1925 and 1933.

[9] Published as an English-language monthly, *The Columbus–Balbo Review* targeted a more acculturated readership and relied on collaborators, including Di Laura's Birmingham-born wife, to produce idiomatic English-language content.

its inclusion would elevate the intellectual quality of American education. At a time when foreign-language instruction was often attacked as un-American, this stance reframed Italian as a marker of refinement and a legitimate academic pursuit for all students.

In October 1935, the *Review* broadened its educational philosophy into a theory of civic pedagogy. An unsigned editorial on the mission of the press argued that newspapers must uphold «truth and dignity,» presenting journalism as a moral institution capable of shaping responsible citizens. Although framed in general terms, it functioned as a self-description, casting the *Review* as a moral educator guiding Italian Americans toward civic respectability and disciplined public participation.

The culmination of these themes appeared in October 1936 when the *Review* advanced a racialized discourse of Italian excellence, praising youth who «labor more sacrificingly than others» and portraying Italians as a distinct group endowed with industry, intelligence and patriotism aligned with dominant white norms ("Italian Race Making Its Mark"). A brief note praising an Italian American girl for her scholastic distinction – noting that she «honors her family and our people» – similarly affirmed that educational attainment signaled collective ethnic worth ("Studentessa Italo americana").

As Italians embraced these aspirational narratives, the *Review* also confronted external challenges to their inclusion, most clearly in its reaction to Westbrook Pegler's syndicated attacks on Italian Americans. The magazine condemned Pegler's remarks as «unjust and ignorant,» insisting on Italians' loyalty, industriousness and civic virtue, and reframing his prejudice as a betrayal of American ideals that violated principles of fairness and democracy ("The Italian Race is Slandered"). This rebuttal thus functioned as an affirmation of belonging, positioning Italian Americans as defenders of American decency against nativist hostility and reinforcing claims to whiteness and full civic membership.

Through celebratory notices, historical essays and editorials linking Italian culture to American democratic values, the periodical crafted a coherent narrative in which schooling, linguistic cultivation and civic responsibility formed the foundations of respectable ethnic identity. The *Columbus–Balbo Review*'s progressive racialization of Italians – culminating in claims that the «Italian race» contributed uniquely to American civilization – reveals how immigrants used print to negotiate their place within a rigid racial hierarchy. By defending education, promoting cultural pride and countering external attacks, the periodical sought to uplift its readership and secure their position within the American racial order.

EDUCATING NEW ORLEANS' ITALIANS: LANGUAGE, LABOR AND CIVIC DISCIPLINE IN *L'ITALO-AMERICANO* (1894-1917)

Italian ethnic newspapers, especially early ones, conceived their mission as explicitly pedagogical, aiming to «educare gli immigrati, insegnare loro la lingua di Dante» and to discipline reading habits through feuilletons and moral commentary (Deschamps and Sergi 2021, 194). Written Italian thus functioned as a tool of social elevation, distinguishing readers from stereotypes of illiteracy.

Founded in New Orleans in 1885, *L'Italo-Americano* followed this blueprint and quickly established itself as the «organo ufficiale della colonia italiana degli Stati del Sud,» a reputation confirmed in its mastheads and in contemporary testimonies from secondary sources.[10] From its earliest issues, the newspaper assumed an explicit educational mission: to provide the dispersed, mostly Sicilian community with linguistic, moral and civic instruction when formal schooling was inadequate or culturally hostile. The newspaper thus functioned not simply as a conduit of information but as a pedagogical institution shaping the colony's aspirations, behavior and self-perception.

The bulk of its readership consisted of Sicilian immigrants with limited formal education, often literate only in dialect. For this public, *L'Italo-Americano* acted as a surrogate school in print, exposing readers to standardized Italian through serialized literature, moral tales and didactic essays. The feuilleton was particularly central to this function: the novels by Carolina Invernizio (*Il delitto della contessa*, *Il segreto dell'avvelenatrice*, *Anime di fango*, *Satanella*) and by foreign authors such as the French Xavier de Montépin were selected for their accessible prose and exposure to such texts provided linguistic discipline while reinforcing a model of Italian associated with middle-class qualities repeatedly opposed to the stigma attached to dialect speech.

[10] The surviving documentation of *L'Italo-Americano* is fragmentary, making it necessary to rely on external bibliographical repertories such as Bernardini 1890 to reconstruct its history. Founded in 1885, the paper was published in New Orleans twice weekly before becoming a weekly; nothing is known about its founder. Bernardini described it as a "giornale politico democratico" and identified A. L. Rubino as proprietor. From the first surviving issues (1894), Paolo Montelepre appears as owner and editor. In 1897 the paper was sold to Gian Battista Cipriani and merged with the *Gazzetta della Nuova Orleans*, whose existence is documented indirectly through citations in Italian regional periodicals. By 1898, the editor was Enrico Cavalli, who later investigated the Tallulah lynching. Circulation figures range from about 2,500 copies to an unsubstantiated estimate of 4,000. Editorial continuity persisted until 12 November 1921, when editor G. Vestri redefined the paper's profile by adopting a new masthead and the subtitle "Giornale politico commerciale marittimo finanziario. Organo ufficiale della camera di commercio italiana."

This linguistic pedagogy was embedded within a broader educational project centered on collective organization and moral uplift. Reports on the Circolo Educativo Italiano and the Società Italiana Giovani Bersaglieri, early New Orleans cultural and civic clubs, presented these associations as spaces «di istruzione e di progresso,» explicitly linking education to discipline and solidarity ("Circolo Umanitario Educativo"). Such societies were described as essential for «inculcare nei giovani l'amore allo studio e all'ordine,» reinforcing the newspaper's insistence that moral education was inseparable from communal advancement (ibid.). Communal rituals further consolidated these lessons: coverage of banquets organized by mutual benefit societies and the Italian parish conducted «con decoro e compostezza,» as public demonstrations of respectability ("Banchetto società mutua beneficenza"; "Parrocchia italiana"). A recurring column reporting from communities in Alabama, Florida and nearby states similarly framed everyday behavior as a moral test, praising industrious settlers while condemning conduct that «nuoce al buon nome della colonia» ("Dalle Colonie del Sud").

In 1898, a decisive moment in the paper's pedagogical strategy came with the promotion of its bookstore at 635–637 Decatur St, conceived to place books «alla portata di tutti» ("La Libreria Economica Italiana"). Framing access to print culture as self-improvement – reading as «il primo passo verso il miglioramento morale ed economico» (ibid.) – the newspaper positioned itself as a gatekeeper of knowledge and a substitute for formal schooling. The same logic informed coverage of the Società Colombiana, presented as a site where Italians learned «disciplina, ordine e rispetto di sé» through structured associational life ("Società Colombiana").

By the early twentieth century, *L'Italo-Americano* extended its pedagogical focus to welfare, culture and spatial identity. Articles on the Italian Charity Hospital framed assistance to the sick as a «dovere sacro della collettività,» presenting healthcare as moral education and evidence of communal maturity. Coverage of music emphasized its civilizing role as a force that «eleva l'animo e affina i costumi» ("L'Italian Night"). The 1912 acquisition of the Italian Hall at 1020 Esplanade was similarly celebrated as a space for «istruzione, riunione e progresso,» a physical embodiment of the newspaper's educational mission ("L'Italian Hall è sorta").

At the same time, the paper increasingly linked education to economic ascent, urging readers to abandon precariousness and pursue stability through property and entrepreneurship, reminding them that «il rispetto si conquista col lavoro e col Risparmio» ("Importante lettera aperta agli italiani"). While linguistic refinement remained valued, education was framed instrumentally, subordinated to economic consolidation and middle-class respectability.

This pragmatic turn intensified during WWI, in 1917 and 1918. A 1917 editorial argued that newcomers must be taught «non solo a lavorare, ma a vivere secondo le leggi del paese che li ospita» ("Immigrazione ed educazione"). Education was broadly understood as respect for the manners and customs of the host country and instruction in duties, obedience and civic comportment, with diminishing emphasis on preserving Italian language or literary culture as Americanization was increasingly recommended.

Wartime pedagogy thus came to place greater emphasis on behavior and functional skills. Exhortations against food waste framed restraint as a patriotic obligation ("Non consumare cibo"), while articles on cinema stressed its capacity to «istruire anche chi non legge» ("La cinematografia della Guerra"). A decisive shift followed in the promotion of English-language instruction: manuals promised to teach English «rapidamente e senza maestro» ("Libro completo"), the paper endorsed adult evening "moonlight schools" as «una grande opportunità per chi lavora di Giorno» ("Scuole del chiaro di luna"), and advertisements for an Italian–English grammar sold through the bookstore reinforced the newspaper's role as a mediator of knowledge ("In vendita presso la libreria").

These articles reveal how *L'Italo-Americano* functioned as a flexible pedagogical institution, progressively shifting from linguistic refinement and moral uplift toward economic stability, civic discipline and racial respectability, as education became a negotiated instrument of immigrant incorporation and social ascent in post-lynching New Orleans.

FROM UPLIFT TO BOUNDARY-POLICING: EDUCATION AND RACIAL FORMATION IN *LA VOCE COLONIALE* (1919-1938)

If *L'Italo-Americano* established the earliest pedagogical template for Italians in Louisiana, *La Voce Coloniale* recast it for the radically different racial and political context of the post-WWI and Fascist decades. Founded in 1915 and shaped from the 1920s onward by Dr. Frank Leo Loria ("Ariol"), the newspaper became the cultural and educational engine of the New Orleans italian colony.[11]

[11] *La Voce Coloniale* was founded in New Orleans in the summer of 1915 by Frank Cabibi, a Sicilian immigrant from Lucca Sicula (Agrigento) with limited formal schooling, who learned the printing trade at the *Times-Democrat* before opening his own print shop. According to Frank

Under Loria's direction, *La Voce Coloniale* turned education into an explicit instrument of racial positioning. From the early 1920s onward, the newspaper combined a rhetoric of civilizational uplift with explicit forms of racial boundary-policing, mirroring the Jim Crow environment in which Italians sought inclusion while operating within Fascist cultural frameworks abroad.[12]

Already in the immediate postwar years, *La Voce* framed education as a public and collective responsibility. A 1919 article on public libraries ("Le biblioteche pubbliche") presented them as civic institutions essential to immigrants' moral and intellectual elevation, casting access to reading as a prerequisite for social advancement and a duty toward both the Italian colony and American society.

This educational mission was soon institutionalized through organized cultural associations. "La prossima conferenza della 'Dante Alighieri'" presented the Dante Alighieri Society of New Orleans as a vehicle of cultural legitimacy, emphasizing the civilizing role of Italian literature in positioning Italians among "cultured" peoples. A few months later, "La scuola italiana" stressed the need for structured Italian instruction for U.S.-born or raised youth, framing schooling as a bridge between ethnic continuity and American respectability.

The pedagogical project of *La Voce Coloniale* expanded beyond cultural uplift to explicit racial instruction. This shift is visible in the 1922 article "Come un negro può diventare bianco", which, drawing on pseudo-scientific endocrinology, rejected racial equality and warned that proximity to Blackness entailed social risk. Education thus functioned as admonition, teaching Italians to recognize racial boundaries and avoid behaviors jeopardizing their claim to whiteness. In the same issue, coverage of a Dante Alighieri Society event reaffirmed the complementary logic that, if biology fixed hierarchies, culture – especially Italian culture – asserted civilizational worth.

Throughout the 1920s, *La Voce Coloniale* linked education to collective discipline and moral conduct, an emphasis that intensified around 1930 as the newspaper mobilized the colony around educational fundraising and institutional consolidation.

Religious life was explicitly pedagogized. Notices on missions and liturgical functions «nella nostra bella lingua italiana» framed worship in Italian as educational, disciplining language and identity ("Ai nostri cari italiani"). Repeated appeals for funds and reports on banquets supporting Italian classes turned philanthropy into a public affirmation of cultural commitment, making education a visible marker of respectability ("Per il Fondo Educativo"; "Cena e Danza").

The newspaper also highlighted Catholic institutions within this educational network. A 1930 article on Catholic schools stressed the role of parochial education in preserving language, morals and discipline ("Le scuole cattoliche"), while coverage of the Italian Hall of Baton Rouge emphasized funding for a parochial school as an anchor of Italian educational life in the South ("Baton Rouge"). Reports from Sicily linked diasporic schooling to Italy's internal literacy campaigns, framing education abroad as an extension of a broader civilizing mission ("Scuole elementari in Sicilia").

The pedagogical project of *La Voce Coloniale* culminated in overt racial boundary-policing. In 1931, reporting on the killing of an African American man by a young Italian woman, Josie Baragona, the newspaper turned the episode into a racial admonition, concluding that:

> Ciò ci dà ancora un monito a noi di Razza Bianca di tenere a dovuta distanza i negri poiché ciò che da parte nostra è stata considerata come umanità da questi è stata interpretata come uguaglianza. ("La signorina Josie Baragona")[13]

The educational infrastructure promoted by *La Voce Coloniale* consolidated around Loria's dual leadership of the Virgilian Society (founded in 1931) and the Dante Alighieri Society of New Orleans. Loria and George Piazza founded the Virgilian Society to promote «a better understanding of Italy, her people, her language, and her heritage as a contribution to the enrichment of the English language» ("The Virgilian Society"). Through his honorary editorship of *La Voce Coloniale* (1931–38), Loria used the newspaper to publicize his collaboration with Tulane University, where he taught in the School of Medicine. In a letter of 1 February 1934, he expressed satisfaction at Tulane's decision to include Italian in the curriculum for the following academic year ("Letter to Edward A. Bechtel").

Between February and June 1934, Loria used *La Voce Coloniale* to articulate a coherent educational philoso-

L. Loria, the paper's early editors were Nicola Ricciuti, Paolo Montelepre and Leonardo Munna; Loria became Honorary Editor in 1931 and contributed until 1938. Circulation grew from about 1,500 shortly after launch to roughly 7,500 in the 1930s. The newspaper survived the Great Depression and ceased publication in 1955, when Cabibi's son closed the press after joining Delgado College (*La Voce Coloniale*).

[12] On Fascist cultural and educational mobilization among Italian communities abroad, particularly the use of language instruction as an instrument of national discipline, see Pretelli 2010.

[13] "This gives us yet another warning, as a White Race, to keep Black people at a proper distance, since what we considered humanity was interpreted by them as equality." Translation mine.

phy, advocating foreign-language study while lamenting that Italian was «unfortunately neglected» and invoking Italy's intellectual lineage from Dante onward to present Italian as a vehicle of civilization ("Italian," 3 February 1934). The editorial "Modern Education" (24 March 1934) traced learning from antiquity to the American public school system, praising U.S. efforts to eradicate illiteracy while warning against mechanical instruction. "The Teaching of Italian" reviewed Bruno Roselli's *Italian Yesterday and Today* (Boston: The Stratford Company, 1933) and criticized Louisiana for enrolling only 459 students in Italian, asking rhetorically: «Where is that Italian pride the world knows so much about?»

In June 1934 *La Voce Coloniale* announced Loria's appointment as president of the Dante Alighieri Society of New Orleans, presenting him as a Tulane professor, surgeon and civic leader. This dual framing captured the paradox of the newspaper's pedagogy: simultaneously a vehicle of Italian nationalism (and Fascist cultural diplomacy) and a practical engine of immigrant betterment aimed at consolidating Italian respectability and whiteness in the South.

Through these campaigns – libraries as "schools of Americanization," Italian classes in public schools, philanthropic mobilization, public lectures and an academic presence for Italian at Tulane – *La Voce Coloniale* developed the most sophisticated educational program among Italians in the U.S. South. It translated racial anxiety into pedagogical discipline by linking linguistic and cultural refinement to the performance of whiteness, while creating the institutional bridge that led to the Dante Alighieri library-school complex at 1020 Esplanade in New Orleans, whose holdings (textbooks, children's readers, Risorgimento biographies, Fascist school literature) document the colony's attempt to craft an Italian American curriculum aimed at social elevation and racial legitimacy.[14]

CONCLUSIONS: REGIONAL PEDAGOGIES AND THE MAKING OF ITALIAN WHITENESS IN THE SOUTH

This article has argued that the educational experiences of Italian migrants in the American South are best understood through a regional framework that places race at the centre of analysis. In Alabama and Louisiana – two contexts shaped by rigid yet locally differentiated racial regimes – Italians developed alternative pedagogical infrastructures that operated largely outside formal schooling. Newspapers, associations, libraries, parish halls and university-linked initiatives collectively performed the work of education by transmitting language, regulating conduct and instructing migrants in how to navigate the racial order of the Jim Crow South.

This regional perspective builds on the insight that Italian Americans did not follow a uniform national path toward whiteness but experienced locally contingent processes of racial incorporation. The evidence examined here shows that education – broadly conceived – was a primary mechanism through which these processes were enacted. In the Southern context, pedagogy was less about assimilation into an abstract American norm than about managing racial vulnerability within highly structured local hierarchies.

The Italian-language press emerged as the central arena of this pedagogical project. Across Alabama and Louisiana, newspapers constructed an implicit curriculum linking linguistic discipline to civic respectability and racial literacy to social survival. Editorials, educational campaigns and moral commentary taught readers how to interpret local racial expectations, identify behaviors that risked racial ambiguity and mobilize cultural refinement to stabilize Italians' social position.

Associational life translated this textual pedagogy into everyday practice. Cultural and educational organizations embedded instruction in ritual, sociability and collective performance, disseminating a vision of Italian identity that was diasporic yet strategically aligned with locally acceptable forms of whiteness. Comparison between Alabama and Louisiana reveals significant intra-regional variation: in Alabama's industrial environments pedagogy emphasized behavioral discipline and public conformity, while in Louisiana denser associational networks enabled a more articulated infrastructure centered on language, culture and institutional legitimacy.

Ultimately, this study shows that education in the Jim Crow South operated as a regional pedagogy rather than a formal institutional process. Through print culture and communal instruction, Italians learned how to read racial codes, discipline behavior and align language with respectability. Whiteness, in this context, was not merely acquired but actively taught, learned and unevenly secured.

[14] A body of unpublished material on the Dante Alighieri Society of New Orleans has recently emerged, including catalogues from its Italian library preserved in the Italian Clubs Collection at the University of New Orleans. These sources document a structured pedagogical program based on curated reading and language instruction and clarify Loria's role in shaping the Society's cultural agenda in the 1930s; a separate monographic study is in preparation.

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