

Anthony Antonucci Ph.D Candidate
University of Connecticut

My dissertation, “Americans and the *Mezzogiorno*: United States Relations with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies from Thomas Jefferson to Herman Melville, 1783-1861” brings together the intersections of American tourism, literary production, commercial expansion, and state-level diplomacy between the United States and the southern Italian Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during the period between the end of the American War for Independence in 1783 and the demise of the Bourbon monarchy in Naples at the hands of Garibaldi’s army in 1860.

Constituting the vast domains of the *Mezzogiorno*, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies comprised a territory made up of the Italian mainland south of Rome as well as the island of Sicily. From Thomas Jefferson’s time as U.S. Minister to France through Herman Melville’s visit to Bourbon Naples three years before Garibaldi’s invasion, foreign relations and the exchange of goods and ideas between people living in the United States and in the Two Sicilies exerted a substantive influence on the economic and cultural development of both countries. Contrary to the stereotype that the *Mezzogiorno* is an isolated and state land “frozen in time,” the south “has long been a part of the world,” as its varied relations with the United States between the 1780s and the 1860s make plain. My study documents that the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies was a significant interest in nineteenth century American politics and culture, as well as a place of strategic military and economic importance to Americans’ aspirations for commercial empire in the Mediterranean.

Prior to 1861, Americans did not visit, do business, or enter into diplomatic relations with “Italy,” But they did so with more than half a dozen separate states on the peninsula and its offshore islands, including the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. By examining the specific dynamics of U.S. relations with Bourbon Naples, my study brings together the

perspectives of U.S transnationalism¹ and the New History of the *Mezzogiorno*, to uncover a vital, though largely overlooked, domain of American and Southern Italian history inside and outside their borders.

On its most basic level, the fundamental premise of this study is that the critical examination of Americans' experience abroad is essential if we are to open up the U.S. national story to the full complexity of its global past. More specifically, my work shows us that in an age when the new republic was focused primarily on its domestic affairs, many Americans were in fact deeply engaged with Europe, including its southern frontier. These encounters were important experiences in the making of American regional and national identities throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The same claims also apply to Italy.

To demonstrate how these relations evolved between 1783 and 1861, my study draws upon a range of American and Neapolitan sources in English, Italian and French, as it examines a series of seven chronological "sites of encounter" that mark formative events in the intertwined political, economic and cultural history of American relations with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Chapter One examines U.S. relations with the Two Sicilies

¹ A guiding principle of trans-national historical scholarship begins with Benedict Anderson's insight that "national communities are to be distinguished by the style in which they are imagined," and then extends its critique of the nation-state to include ideas drawn from Etienne Balibar, Homi Bhaba and other theorists of nationalism who argue that nations do not arise solely in conversation with themselves.¹ Rather, a trans-national perspective posits that nations come into existence through the articulation of their differences from other nations based on dynamic interactions in both real and imagined spaces. Leading contributions to this approach to historical studies include: Thomas Bender, *A Nation among Nations: America's Place in World History* (New York, 2006) Thomas Bender, ed., *Rethinking American history in a global age* (Berkeley, 2002) Leon Fink, ed., *Workers across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History* (New York, 2011) Donatella Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta, ed., *Women, Gender and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (Toronto, 2002); Axel Korner, Nicola Miller and Adam Smith, eds. *America Imagined: Explaining the United States in Nineteenth Century Europe and Latin America* (London, 2012) Daniel Rogers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge Mass, 1998) Ian Tyrell, *Transnational Nation: United States History in Global Perspective* (Basingstoke, 2007). University College London now funds a Center for Transnational History and offers an M.A. degree in Transnational History. Pierre-Yves Saunier, "Going Transnational? News from Down Under: Transnational History Symposium, Canberra, Australian National University, September 2004." *Historical Social Research*, 31:2 (2006), pp. 118-131.

from Thomas Jefferson's first effort to secure a commercial treaty with Naples in 1783 through his election as President in 1800. Chapter Two analyzes the American-Neapolitan military alliance in the war against Tripoli (1801-5). Chapter Three examines U.S. perceptions of southern Italian identity before 1830 through a critical reading of Washington Irving's collection of short stories *The Italian Banditti* (1824), fictional works based on the author's visit to Sicily in 1804-5. Chapter Four investigates American efforts to secure an indemnity and a commercial treaty under the administrations of Andrew Jackson and James K. Polk in response to the confiscation of forty U.S. vessels under Joachim Murat, King of Napoleonic Naples, in 1809-10. Chapter Five examines American visions of law and governance in southern Italy in the period between 1830 and 1850 through an analysis of American travel writing, including Henry T. Tuckerman's novel, *Isabel, or Sicily* (1839). Chapter Six investigates American engagement with the Two Sicilies in the wake of the Bourbon regime's international isolation following the failed revolution of 1848, concluding with an analysis of Herman Melville's writings about the *Mezzogiorno* in response to his 1857 visit to Naples. The final chapter examines the experience of southern Italians in the United States between 1815 and 1861, focusing on Neapolitan diplomats in Washington, D.C. and on political exiles, including Achille Murat in Florida, Joseph Bonaparte in New Jersey, the dissident poet Pietro D'Alessandro in Boston, composer Filippo Trajetta in Philadelphia, and painter Michele Felice Corne in Salem, Massachusetts.

My dissertation shows us that although it is not widely known, there is a long history of commercial, political and cultural exchange between the United States and Southern Italy. Thus far scholars on both side of the Atlantic have looked at aspects of this relationship, but their work has addressed the topic according to a sharp split between cultural studies of literature and tourism on the one hand and political, economic, and military affairs on the

other. At first glance, this fragmentation might be explained in terms of the tensions between various disciplinary orientations, with political historians emphasizing the United States' pursuit of practical advantage and a literary studies approach focusing on Americans' construction of an Orientalized Italian "Other." My dissertation seeks to bring these hitherto separate areas together. But in so doing it faces a problem.

The more one looks at the history of U.S. relations with Southern Italy, the more one sees a significant distance between travelers' reports and diplomatic history. That is because citizens of the young American republic engaged the *Mezzogiorno* with a double consciousness that saw Southern Italians as at once similar and different to themselves, depending upon the domain of their encounters. While trade and State level U.S. foreign policy was shaped by political realism, cultural perceptions of the *Mezzogiorno* developed in response to complex and abiding tensions between Americans and the Old World—in particular with their former mother country, Great Britain. As a result of these differences, my dissertation is written as a history of Americans' relationship with the *Mezzogiorno* on two tracks, with literary and touristic relations played off dialectically against the political, commercial and military. Working chronologically, I attempt to bring them together where and when they coalesce, but I am equally attentive to their divergences.

In addition to balancing the rich and varied story of Americans' political, cultural, and economic relations with the *Mezzogiorno*, my study includes an analytical and narrative account of Southern Italian perspectives on the United States. Here my work shows that between 1783 and 1861 the United States' reputation in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies evolved from the status of an unknown country to that of a prosperous "land of liberty." I also document how the meanings Sicilian subjects attached to the United States' reputation depended upon their own political and economic interests as either supporters or critics of

the Bourbon state. My project's investigation of how southern Italians and Americans viewed each other offers a larger understanding of both cultures in the transnational worlds of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-centuries—and hence helps chart our way to a new history of Italians, Americans and Italian-Americans.

In the last dozen or so years, the "transnational turn" is arguably one of the most important development in academic history. As Mae M. Ngai writes in the December 2012 issue of *Perspectives on History*, the newsletter of the American Historical Association, "if social history rewrote history from the bottom up, transnational history proceeds from the outside in." But while the perspectives and methodologies of transnational history continue to stir debate, reports of the death of national frameworks for interpreting the past are greatly exaggerated.

As a work of trans-national history my findings are of interest to historiographical debates in several fields, including the history of early American foreign relations, American Studies, Italian-American history and the New History of the Italian South. As I approach my dissertation defense one of the conceptual (as well as practical) challenges I anticipate facing with my doctoral work is how to market a project whose subject and sources stand betwixt and between several different fields. At the Colonial Society's Graduate Forum, I would like to invite critical discussion of the distinctive risks and opportunities for young scholars interested in pursuing careers as historians of "America in the world." My presentation will include consideration of the challenges of research in foreign archives using non-English language sources for students of early United States history.

