Since the late 19th century, millions of Italians have migrated to the New World, with Italian Americans now comprising approximately 11% of the US’s population. However, the Italian-American story has largely remained untold. Despite the fact that Italian Americans are increasingly prominent in many fields, those outside the community of Italian Americans are not aware of its history (for a comprehensive history, see Mangione and Morreale 1992).

The Italian-American image has been largely shaped by perceptions constructed through media stereotypes. Past studies have flattened the image of ethnic groups in the US into a common cognitive perception (for a study on this subject see Glazer and Moynihan 1963). In regards to Italian Americans, research shows that portrayals of topics like the Mafia and ethnic characters frame and package these issues, oversimplifying them and rendering a distorted view of their history, culture and civilization. Movies like *The Godfather*, which has become a landmark in the history of the film depiction of Italian Americans, illustrate the power of the media to influence audience thinking and public belief (Cortes 1987: 107). Specifically, Puzo’s novel (1969) ‘has left a permanent imprint on the American cultural scene through [the] creation of a mythic filter’ (Gardaphé 1996: 89). Such narratives have reduced the complex reality of the Italian presence in the US, and have greatly oversimplified the reality of the Italian migrant story (for a comprehensive recording of Italian American stereotypes, see DeConde 1971). In fact, media representations of this particular group have created a discrepancy between reality and what Lippman, in *Public Opinion* (1922 [1965]: 3–20), calls ‘pictures in the head’ (for a recent study on Italian Americans and mass communications, see Keller 1997). Furthermore, research shows that cinematic treatment of topics like the Mafia frame perceptions and modes of thinking of viewers into packages (Lowery and DeFleur 1995; Gamson 1988, 1989).

How can a rethinking of Italian-American historiography reshape the stock images, which have been created by mass communication and American popular culture? Gardaphé believes that, to free ourselves from them, we must move into new dimensions and critically examine the Italian-American contribution to American literature. Thus, we must avoid reading Italian