

What's his name?! What's his name?!

Joey Skee (February 19, 2009)



Italian-American naming traditions of abandonment, reclamation, nicknaming, and forgetting.

In his recently published "Italian American memoir," author Carl Capotorto writes, "There is a lot in a name. A name is an inheritance. Names are legacies." [Twisted Head](#) [2], the title of his book about growing up in the Bronx in the 1960s and 1970s, is a translation of his surname which Capotorto further parses as "a twisted or demented chieftain." The author's rumination on Italian names serves to introduce his eloquent account of a childhood with a loving yet obsessive and controlling patriarch.



Names have long been a troublesome issue for Italians in the United States. Name changing in America, as immigration officers rechristened newcomers at Ellis Island and immigrants and their descendants found it advantageous to reinvent themselves in an Anglo mould. (In contemporary Italy, new immigrants are learning to similar lessons as Algerian-Italian author [Amara Lakhous](#) [3]'s astutely illustrates in his wonderful mystery novel, [Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio](#) [4].) Much is lost and much is gained by such a nominative metamorphosis. It is not uncommon for third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans to reclaim lost Italian surnames and pronunciation, as well as giving their children Italian first names in an effort to perpetuate a (multi)cultural legacy.

When I was a kid, my family and everyone I knew pronounced our last name Sciorra as "SKEE-or-a." My immigrant father had resigned himself to this Americanization, even from fellow Italian Americans. It was upon returning from a year's sojourn in Italy that I decided to pronounce my last name as "Shee-or-ra," the best approximation I could get in the States of the Italian "Shoar-ra" with its trilled double Rs. Soon my siblings and parents adopted this reinvented Italian way of being.

When I was invited to blog on i-italy, I decided to invoke the old neighborhood nicknaming (sopranome) tradition as way of establishing my online Italian-American persona. (See my June 1988 Fra Noi article about Italian-American nicknames in Williamsburg, Brooklyn.). Joey Skee - a moniker I never had as a kid - sounded like fun for the digital era.

Another, little studied aspect of the Italian-American naming tradition is forgetting. I'm not talking cultural amnesia but short term memory loss. Italian Americans seem to be afflicted with an inability to evoke the first and last names of close friends and neighbors. This propensity for forgetfulness may be attributed to the spot-on nicknames that have all but replaced birth names in the minds of many paesani. I struggle daily to remember the names of colleagues, authors, and actors, often finding myself involved in embarrassing exchanges with those who have prodigious recall, like fellow New Yorkers and i-italy bloggers George De Stefano and Anthony Tamburri, that have resulted in such idiotic moments like this:

Sciorra: You know that guy. What's his name?
Who?

Sciorra: You know. That guy who's in that film about being born an old man? You know. The one who left the actress from the TV show to marry that other one. What's her name? You know, the actress with the tattoos and all those kids? God, what's that guy's name?

I know my lapse of memory regarding names is neither a medical condition (I actually went for a battery of tests, all negative) nor idiosyncratic. My relatives in Italy constantly struggle to remember people's names ("Come si chiama quello la?"), as do countless New York Italians I've interviewed over two decades. Both young and old desperately search for names. Sometimes it is men who forget their next door neighbor's name, sometimes it is women.

I started to notice this tradition of forgetting in literature and films by and about Italian Americans. Martin Scorsese's *Who's that Knocking at My Door?* (1967) and Nancy Savoca's *True Love* (1989) both have scenes where characters invariably ask that most Italian of questions, "What's his name?" I love the kitchen scene in the latter film when the daughter Donna knows



exactly who her exasperated mother is talking about.

And there's that other film. You know, the one with that guy, what's his name? You know, the one who plays a character from New York and he's got a blog that he writes about Italian stuff. You know! What's his name? What's his name?!

(Thank you Lucia Grillo for help on video clips!)

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- [1] <http://ftp.ility.org/files/true-love-nancy-savoca>
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