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# The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man: Charles Atlas, Physical Culture, and the Inscription of American Masculinity

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# “The World’s Most Perfectly Developed Man”

## Charles Atlas, Physical Culture, and the Inscription of American Masculinity

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The major wave of Italian immigration between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries coincided with the growth of the physical culture movement in the United States. A principal participant in both phenomena was the Italian male, with a particularly fascinating case being that of the bodybuilder and fitness guru Charles Atlas. Born Angelo Siciliano in Calabria, Italy, Atlas provides an interesting window into how the Southern immigrant became American and how that Americanization was written on the muscled, male body. This article examines how Siciliano/Atlas transformed himself into the world’s most perfect white man at a time when Italians’ whiteness was contested and how not only bodybuilding but also the textual discourses surrounding it, including the fitness plan itself and the male physique photography that accompanied it, played essential roles in that metamorphosis.

**Keywords:** *Charles Atlas; Italian immigration; physical culture; masculinity*

In the February 1921 issue of *Physical Culture* magazine, two entries appear within pages of each other. The first in numerical order is the serialized “The Adventures of a Modern Hercules,” the autobiography, “with more or less poetic or literary license” (Coryell 1921, 30), of the bodybuilder Clevio Massimo Sabbatino. The box print accompanying the story informs the reader of its origins:

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**Author’s Note:** I would like to thank the Humanities Institute at Stony Brook for giving me teaching release to begin work on this project in 2003 and my excellent undergraduate research assistants, Michele Tedesco and Emily Fedele. Charles Atlas Ltd. graciously allowed us to consult its archives, and the members of the Columbia Film Seminar in 2006, especially its respondent, David Gerstner, contributed astute comments and pointed questions. The New York State United University Professionals Professional Development Fund provided additional financial support for periodical consultation. A special thanks goes to the undergraduate students in my spring 2005 “Masculinity in Popular Culture” class for challenging me to articulate my argument, Mark Adams, and Giorgio Bertellini for his unwavering critical eye. Please address correspondence to Jacqueline Reich, Department of European Languages, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794-5359; e-mail: [jacqueline.reich@stonybrook.edu](mailto:jacqueline.reich@stonybrook.edu).

We need scarcely to remind you that in the subject of our story we have an example of the most Herculean type of Ancients. Mr. Sabbatino, indeed, was born on one of the hills not far from the Eternal City. One needs not more than a single glance at the photographs of this amazing athlete to be convinced that in his person we have a living reproduction, which is another way of saying a lineal descendent, of a prominent Roman family, doubtless one of the most distinguished among the stouthearted and iron-muscled men who during those glory days of antiquity, fought and won the wars of Rome, entertained in the gladiatorial arena and supplied the inspiration for those antique works of sculpture that still live. (Coryell 1921, 30)

The story bears little resemblance to an autobiography. In its narrative and rhetoric, it reads as an attempt to connect a contemporary bodybuilder to the glories and heroics of ancient Rome. Accompanying each installment are several photographs of Mr. Sabbatino exercising a specific group of muscles—back, chest, legs—as well as various sketches illustrating his Latin ancestors' gallant exploits.

Several pages later, another entry announces a prize of \$1,000 for "The World's Most Handsome Man" (Macfadden 1921, 54). The contest's judge was the magazine's publisher, Bernarr Macfadden, who would choose the winner on the basis of "equal consideration of the facial appearance and the bodily form and development" (Macfadden 1921, 54). The young man who won the contest, based on the submission of several photographs in which he assumed classical poses dressed in a leopard loin cloth, was the Italian Angelo Siciliano (1893-1972), who subsequently Americanized his name to Charles Atlas. With his brilliantly marketed fitness plan, Atlas went on to become one of the most widely recognized icons of American masculinity. The fact that these accounts appear in the same publication and employ the common visual rhetoric of bodybuilding is highly significant: They both signal an important deviation in contemporary representations of Italianness in the United States. They rely on the classical associations with Italy's celebrated, ancient past rather than the omnipresent images of gloomy immigrant destitution.

In this article, I leave Clevio Massimo Sabbatino for other scholars to investigate. Instead, I turn my attention to how early twentieth-century physical and visual culture inscribed Americanization on Angelo Siciliano's immigrant body. Scholars Elizabeth Toon and Janet Golden (2002) regard Atlas as health advisor on a medical stage that combined both mainstream and alternative health practices. It is my goal, instead, to consider the Atlas fitness plan as a manual of formation of mainstreamed American masculine identity. Charles Atlas was a major exponent of the physical cultural movement that spread throughout the United States right at the moment of the major wave of Italian immigration between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This article examines how Atlas transformed himself into the "world's most perfect" American man at a time when Italian immigrants' whiteness was probationary and their racial difference uncontested. Through the countless images, captions, and instructions that accompanied his fitness plan and that appeared in features and advertisements in specialized and general periodicals, Siciliano/Atlas

transcribed his masculinity according to the codes of classical iconography typical of male bodybuilding photography in the early twentieth century. In doing so, he was safely able to transcend his contemporary racial standing by drawing on the ancient roots of his heritage. Furthermore, the Atlas fitness plan itself, one of the first direct-mail business successes, presented a hypermasculine, cleansed version of the foreign male body, employing some of the same medical and eugenic rhetoric used to discriminate against the Italian immigrant population.

This inquiry follows several paths: American racial and political history, the history of immigration, and representations of the muscled male body in interwar visual and physical culture. It treats the Atlas fitness plan not only as a physical fitness manual but also as a discursive window into American social, political, and gender constructions in the 1920s. One area into which I will not venture is theorizing bodybuilding as textual discourse in and of itself. Many scholars have interrogated the built body's various meanings, drawing on psychoanalysis and/or poststructuralism in their critiques of bodybuilding's gender, race, and class constructs (Brady 2000; Goldberg 1997; Heywood 1997; Holmund 1997; Klein 1993; Moore 1997). My aim is to make up for what these approaches often neglect: a historical grounding, respecting what Richard Dyer (1997) calls "the historicity and the textuality" of the subject (p. 289). By anchoring Atlas's body in a historical perspective, the complexity of its representations at the crossroads of very different cultural dynamics becomes increasingly apparent.

For the purposes of this article, I would like to make a crucial distinction between Angelo Siciliano and Charles Atlas. When I refer to *Siciliano*, I intend the actual, historical individual born in Italy who immigrated to the United States. When I discuss *Charles Atlas*, on the other hand, I speak of the cultural representation, an ideal of American masculinity that necessitated a name change to be accepted as such. Siciliano negated his Italianness by changing his name into a timeless American cultural icon, fashioning himself, in the process, into a classical fitness warrior. This process constitutes, in my opinion, a racial remapping of interwar Italian identity onto the muscled American male body.

## **An Italian Becomes American**

Several myths surround Angelo Siciliano's makeover from skinny, infirm immigrant child to the world's most perfectly developed man. As is often the case with the mythology surrounding bodybuilders' pasts, it is difficult to separate the fiction from the facts. This is especially the case with Angelo Siciliano, in particular after 1929, when he formed a partnership with a young advertising executive named Charles Roman. Roman was only twenty-one years old when he began working for the Benjamin Landsman advertising agency, to which Siciliano had turned to help differentiate his fitness plan from an increasingly crowded market of competing

programs. Four months into their business collaboration, he offered Roman half the business and in a few short years, created the Atlas mythology of physical transformation and in turn transformed the business into one of the major direct-mail-order successes in American business history (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982).

Nevertheless, Siciliano's journey from Italy to the United States typifies many Italian immigrant experiences. Although some of the specific details remain murky, what is clear is that Angelo Siciliano was born in the small Calabrian town of Bisignano, Italy, in 1893 and arrived in the United States in February 1904 with his mother, Francesca Fiorelli. According to a 1942 profile in *The New Yorker*, Atlas claims his father accompanied them but returned soon after they arrived, failing to see "the superiority" of the United States (Taylor 1942, 22); his official biography states that Atlas's parents separated before he came to the United States (Gaines et al. 1982, 17). The official ship's passenger manifesto (Figure 1) supports the latter claim, as there is no record of his father's immigration from the ship's passenger record. Together, Angelo and his mother settled with his uncle in Brooklyn, where his mother found work as a seamstress in a sweatshop. According to a 1940s article in the *Saturday Evening Post*, the young Angelo Siciliano became so weak in the United States that he was unable to climb the stairs to the family flat, which forced the family to move to the ground-floor apartment on Front Street, in the area right around the Brooklyn Bridge. As a small, skinny boy pushed around by bullies, the *Post* reported that when Siciliano was fifteen, he was severely beaten up on Halloween night and then beaten again by his uncle for getting into the fight (Zolotow 1942). By that time, he had left school and found work in a pocketbook factory, where, being both literate and smart, the factory superintendent took him under his wing.

According to his official biography, *Yours in Perfect Manhood, Charles Atlas*, written in part by Charles Roman, Siciliano experienced two so-called eureka moments that prompted him to begin a physical fitness regimen. In the 1910s, during his teenage years, he took a trip to the Brooklyn Museum with other children from the Italian settlement house where he was studying English. There, he saw the many classical statues of the Greek gods, in particular, that of Hercules, and asked his teacher, Mr. Davenport, how he might become like them. Mr. Davenport then took him to the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), where he could observe the various exercises the men performed to enhance their musculature. Inspired by them as well as the beauty and muscles of the statues at the museum, he started doing exercises in his own room, with handmade barbells consisting of a stick with two stones of approximately twenty-five pounds each. He read Bernarr Macfadden's *Physical Culture* magazine, writing away for the free booklets advertised by various fitness champions.

The second eureka moment occurred, as later described in Atlas literature, when he went to the Bronx Zoo and observed the caged lions and tigers stretching and yawning. In a 1969 article published in *The Sunday Times Colour Supplement* and accompanied by Diane Arbus's photos of still-fit Atlas in his sixties, he states,

**Figure 1**  
**Ellis Island Documentation for Angelo Siciliano (listed second from top)**

REICH, CARL, AND OTHERS ALIENS MUST BE COMPLETELY MANIFESTED FOR ENTRY IN THE STEAMSHIP PASSENGERS.

LIST OR MANIFEST OF ALIEN PASSENGERS FOR THE U. S. IMMIGRATION OFFICER AT PORT OF ARRIVAL

Required by the regulations of the Secretary of the Treasury of the United States, under Act of Congress approved March 3, 1903, to be delivered to the U. S. Immigration Officer by the Commanding Officer of any vessel being such passenger on board upon arrival at a port in the United States.

S. S. LAHN  
calling from Liverpool 5<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 1906 Arriving at Port of NEW YORK February 19, 1907

No.	Name in Full	Age	Sex	Color	Religion	Marital Status	Place of Birth	Profession	Education	Occupation	Duration of Stay	Remarks	Signature	Initials	Number of Family	Number of Children	Number of Dependents	Number of Dependents
1	Joseph of Francesco	28	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
2	Antonio	24	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
3	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
4	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
5	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
6	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
7	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
8	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
9	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
10	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
11	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
12	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
13	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
14	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
15	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
16	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
17	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
18	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
19	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
20	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
21	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
22	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
23	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
24	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
25	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
26	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
27	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
28	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
29	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
30	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
31	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
32	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
33	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
34	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
35	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
36	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
37	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
38	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
39	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
40	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
41	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
42	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
43	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
44	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
45	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
46	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
47	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
48	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
49	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0
50	John	21	M	White	Catholic	Single	Italy	Merchant	High School	Merchant	10/10/06	Arrived at New York	[Signature]	[Initials]	1	0	0	0

Source: Ship's manifest courtesy of the Statue of Liberty Ellis Island Foundation Inc., [www.ellisland.org](http://www.ellisland.org).

I saw the cat in the morning doing all kindsa tricks—stretching back and forth. I thought maybe I'll go to the zoo and see what the lions and tigers do. I got up very early as I had to walk all the way up to the Bronx, Prospect Park—it was five cents car fare then. And here comes the lion out of his cage, stretching himself and rolling and yawning. The tigers did the same thing. I thought I should apply this to the human being. So I hit on this idea of pitting each muscle of the body against each other. The beauty of this is that, the stronger you grow, the more weight you can add. (Norman 1969, 76)

This quote is significant because it introduces a common motif into the Atlas vocabulary: the animal magnetism and primal masculinity.

According to his official biography, Siciliano's body did not begin its real transformation until he began working out in this new way, later dubbed (and trademarked) the "Dynamic-Tension" method. Dynamic-Tension is, in many ways, a precursor to Pilates and isometrics: the focus is on building strength through one's own resistance rather than weights or what we call today *resistance training*, where the subject pits one muscle group against another to gain strength. In less than

twelve months, Siciliano apparently doubled his weight and beat up the young man who gave him that Halloween beating (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982).

Contemporary accounts of his rise to fame, however, contradict the myth of physical transformation. In a two-part article appearing in the November and December 1921 issues of *Physical Culture* magazine, there is no mention of Siciliano being weak. In fact, when he talks about his life in Italy, he states, "Before that time I was just a boy, healthy and happy, with no thought but of eating, sleeping, and playing" (Siciliano 1921, 36). While living in Brooklyn and learning "the way of becoming an American citizen" (Siciliano 1921, 36), he describes his physical condition: "I ought to say that I was never sickly but on the contrary was rather strong but not unusually so" (Siciliano 1921, 36-37). He does cite being too poor to join the YMCA and going to the Brooklyn Museum (there is no mention of the zoo) and the use of a combination of pulleys and weights as well as dips, squats, and chin-ups, to build up his body. The article features photographs of Atlas doing various dips and push-ups, which would later become the hallmarks of his plan (Siciliano 1921). The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) investigated Charles Atlas Ltd., the company that ran his mail-order business, on three separate occasions for fraud in advertising, alleging that it was impossible to develop his built body without using weights. All three times, the FTC ruled in Charles Atlas Ltd.'s favor. What this discrepancy between factual accounts reveals is that if true, Atlas actually did build his original muscle with weights but then enhanced and maintained it with the Dynamic-Tension method.

The Siciliano/Atlas tale of metamorphosis signals the importance of the conversion narrative for the European immigrant, stressing the need to shed an unhealthy, degenerate past. The Atlas embellished biography, which includes a factual retelling of the famous "The Insult that Made a Man Out of Mac" advertisement, created a narrative of transformation that appealed to the common man (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982).<sup>1</sup> The idea of corporeal revolution, modeled, as some scholars contend, on Theodore Roosevelt's own makeover from asthmatic to strong, barrel-chested leader advocating "the strenuous life" (Kasson 2001, 19) became an integral part of many masculine conversion narratives between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The spectacular display of the muscled male body, as performed on stage and captured in photographs, created, in John F. Kasson's (2001) view, the "Revitalized Man" (p. 19), who embodied, like the nascent physical culture movement, a new American masculine ideal (Bederman 2001, 170-215).

Siciliano's name change was integral to his successful completion of the conversion narrative. In 1921, Angelo Siciliano won the previously mentioned title of "The World's Most Handsome Man." When he won the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in Macfadden's 1922 "Greatest Physical Culture" show, his name appeared on the certificates as Charles Siciliano Atlas. In November 1922, however, when the first advertisements for his fitness plan began to appear in *Physical Culture*, he was officially Charles Atlas. Where did the name originate? Some sources cite that his last name was drawn from the Atlas Hotel in Rockaway,

New York; others say that his neighbors in Brooklyn likened his physique to the statue of Atlas at a local bank (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982; Taylor 1942). He derived Charles from his nickname, Charlie, a popular nickname for Italians who immigrated to the United States during this period.

Regardless of his name's origins, Angelo Siciliano's transformation from Italian immigrant to pillar of American masculinity had completed its first stage, creating a new name and racial identity based on the dominant masculine narratives of the day. George W. Stocking (1994) notes how at the turn of the twentieth century, the term *race* was in many ways a catchall phrase employed for various purposes, used to describe both cultural and national "character." Siciliano's deracialization necessitated the birth of Charles Atlas. He would complete the process, as I will show below, through the use of two emerging media, one visual and the other print: body-building photography and the creation and marketing of his iconic fitness plan. First, however, it is important to address the racial status of Italian immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to understand the social, historical, and cultural conditions that brought about Atlas's physical and nominative transformation.

## Italians, the United States, and Racial Identity

Ample textual evidence in magazines, journals, newspapers, and other primary sources articulates the inferior status accorded to Italians, in particular, southern Italians, as they arrived in the United States at the turn of the previous two centuries. Jacob Riis, for instance, in both his photography and his writings portrayed Italians as unclean, primitive, and with the typical distinctions between North and South (Bertellini 2004; Dickie 1997; Dickie 1999; Moe 2002). In the chapter from Riis's 1902 *The Battle with the Slum*, titled "Pietro and the Jew," he describes Italians as "dirty," "ignorant," and promoting child labor, among other things:

He is clannish, this Italian; he gambles and uses a knife, though rarely on anybody not of his own people; he "takes what he can get," wherever anything is free, as who would not, coming to the feast like a starved wolf? There was nothing free where he came from. Even the salt was taxed past a poor man's getting any of it. Lastly he buys fraudulent naturalization papers, and uses them. I shall plead guilty for him to every one of these counts. They are all proven. (Riis 1902, 186)

That is not to say, according to Riis, that the Italian does not have his good qualities. Riis (1902) also describes him as "sober, industrious, frugal, enduring" (p. 186). His loyalty is great, but he knows little of politics or social ethics. Some of Riis's more famous photographs, although not those that accompany this particular citation, emphasize his overall disparagement of Italians and Southern Italians in particular. Characteristic among them is their physical and moral darkness.



This attitude is typical of the period between 1880 and 1924, during which the largest wave of Italian immigration took place. The fear was that Southern Italians, with their high birthrate, could effect a kind of conquest by procreation, reinforcing the threat of miscegenation that formed the backbone of much immigrant prejudice at the turn of the century (Jacobson 1998, 80). These apprehensions fueled nativist positions, interpreted as the combination of ethnocentrism and nationalism and a reaction against religious, racial, and political differences. The perception was that immigrant groups' failure to assimilate demonstrated disloyalty and challenged the "American way of life" (Higham 1951, 6). After 1924, when the government placed new restrictions on immigration, minor divisions between white races gave way to the major binary division between black and white. Mediterranean immigrants were given what Matthew Frye Jacobson (1998) refers to as a "provisional or probationary whiteness" (p. 95).

The exact racial status of Italian immigrants is the source of much scholarly debate, ranging from the belief that Italians were not white at all (Riis 1902), somewhere in between nonwhiteness and full inclusion (Roediger 2005), or white "on arrival" (Guglielmo 2003). For the purposes of this article, I would like to follow Jacobson and make the crucial distinction between race and color. Jacobson (1998) argues that the concept of race is essential to understanding white European assimilation and that whiteness is an essential part of American citizenship, linked to the concept that any American citizen must be "fit for self-government" (p. 42)—according to the eighteenth-century wording. Thus, Italian immigrants' white skin did not prevent them from being described as racially different, attesting to a crucial distinction between color (here whiteness) and race—but that Italians did have some advantages, particularly, as is the case with Angelo Siciliano, in terms of the ability to pass as white and "become" Charles Atlas.

### **Charles Atlas, Physical Culture, and Photography**

In short, to be fit for citizenship, one had to be physically fit, and Siciliano's involvement in the physical culture movement is indicative of the growing role that particular cultural industry played in the everyday life of American masculinity. An outgrowth of the nineteenth-century movement involving public hygiene and physical improvements, the male body became the focus of social, political, and economic discourses related to efficient citizenship (Dutton 1995). As Michael Kimmel (1994) has shown, the "unstable world of economic competition" (p. 9) gradually led to a destabilized sense of masculinity in early nineteenth-century American culture. Manhood, rather than a birthright, was a capitalist competition of the fittest. One of the ways in which men regrounded "their eroding sense of manhood" (Kimmel 1994, 8) was through the rediscovery of the male body as a site of effective production and consumption, to be both displayed and improved on through the physical

culture industry. In both print and visual culture of the era, fit, rugged masculinity replaced a feminized, urban degeneracy (Kimmel 1994).

Sports played an integral role in this shift. Guided by figures such as Roosevelt and Macfadden and encouraged by the mass production of the bicycle, both men and women turned to individual and team athletics for leisure-time activity. Nationalism and race also figured into the picture, particularly with the onset of international competitions such as the first Olympics in 1896. Although some politicians, such as Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, saw athletic skill as evidence of white supremacy, immigrants also turned to sports to improve their health and strength to become better citizens (Green 1986).

One of the first immigrants to achieve fame through the physical culture movement was Eugen Sandow, a Prussian-born athlete who literally embodied several important trends in early twentieth-century physical culture (Chapman 1994). First, he introduced the German physical culture and naturalist movement to the United States and was among the earliest bodybuilders to model naked for contemporary photographers, and certainly the first one to pose, in 1894, for a motion picture camera, Edison's Kinetograph (Leddick 2000; Musser 2005). Second, Sandow, who at one time worked for Ziegfeld, used the popular stage as a site of display for the developed male body, employing music and a variety of props. His act reflected a shift in the physical culture world from demonstrations of feats of strength to the static display of masculine muscle. He was, in fact, a role model for Atlas: according to some accounts, the young Angelo Siciliano had placed a photograph of Sandow on his mirror for inspiration as he worked out (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982).

An equally important figure was Bernarr Macfadden, a master self-promoter and publisher of *Physical Culture*, numerous manuals, books, and fitness plans. With his catchphrase, "Weakness is a Crime. Don't be a criminal," the body of Macfadden's endeavors explored, as Ann Fabian (1993) notes, the connection between corporeal and textual reproduction. Macfadden's enterprises included, among other things, the magazine *True Story*, which grew out of the confessional writing submissions he encouraged in *Physical Culture*; movie directing and screenwriting (Zongar, 1918); movie production (the 1925 film *The Wrongdoers*, starring Lionel Barrymore); and in politics, a 1936 bid for the Republican presidential nomination and one attempt at the governorship of Florida (Fabian 1993; Ernst 1991; Hunt 1989; Green 1986).

The rise of the physical culture movement occurred simultaneously with the popularization of photographic consumption in the United States as both an art form and the preferred means of visual reproduction. As sports and leisure time became increasingly commodified in American culture, so did the photographs of individual athletes emerge as commodities in and of themselves (Waugh 1996; Doan and Dietz 1984). Early physique photography used classical, ancient statues as its primary model. By employing strategically placed details—the fig leaf, animal skins, Roman clothing, and weapons—late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographers immortalized their bodybuilding subjects, making them seem larger than life and

stronger than death (Chapman 1989). Similarly, this was also the period where a language of bodybuilding began to take shape, complete with references to classical and Renaissance sculpture, with words and phrases such as *balance*, *carve up*, *chisel*, *define*, *razor*, and *rip* (Murray 1994). This lexicon is important for how Atlas's body, with its iconographic indexing of those very concepts, successfully performs Americanness—the transference of the classical, even imperial ideal from Rome to America de-Italianizes and re-nationalizes the male body.

Richard Dyer (1998) in *White* notes how bodybuilding articulates white masculinity in popular culture by referencing ancient Greek and Roman art. The naked muscular body, rather than vulnerability, signifies both white mental and physical power: the white man is not born with the hard, muscular body—it takes both brains and brawn to achieve it. The bodybuilder's body constitutes an ideal, the Nietzschean *Übermensch*, who achieves his status as perfect man through contest, display, and performance—the planned, hairless body is one that is meant to be seen. Contemporary displays of bodybuilding were “bound up in classical rhetoric,” according to Maria Wyke (2002, 357). Bodybuilders would use names of classical heroes in their displays of strength, and the animal aspects “helped provide a supposedly natural and traditional (and, therefore, seemingly unproblematic) context for circus exhibitions of muscled men” (Wyke 2002, 357).

Furthermore, bodybuilding displayed not only muscles but also projected the ideal of good citizenship. Classical athleticism integrated the aesthetic of the male body (*kalos*) with the moral and political ideal of good citizenship, proving his literal fitness for self-government (*agathos*) (Wyke 2002). Just as, according to Kenneth Dutton (1995), the artists of the Renaissance relied on classical archetypes to transcend the “national, cultural and temporal particularity of their original creation” (p. 65), so Atlas was able to transcend his own racial background. He was not alone. Eugen Sandow, for instance, embellished his life story with a narrative of transformation from unhealthy child to the image of perfect strength and health, also involving a recourse to classical imagery; he resolved to transform his weakness into strength while on vacation with his father in Italy after viewing the beautifully proportioned male sculptures of ancient heroes (Kasson 2001). At the same time, for Dyer (1998), the sculpted male body came to be associated with a kind of Americanness, one that embraced hard work as well as health. In bodybuilding iconography, ethnic darkness transforms itself into a tanned whiteness, with dark skin, rather than inherited, acquired through the leisure activity of sunbathing.

Atlas's own whiteness and masculinity, however, to paraphrase Jacobson (1998), are necessarily probationary. Male physique photography destabilized heterosexual, normative boundaries, and in fact, many of Atlas's classically inspired photographs shared much of the homoerotic imagery with contemporary gay pornography. During a period in United States history when there were more bachelors than ever before and gay culture thrived openly in New York City, the use of photography to sell and reproduce that image of masculinity in the greater marketplace created a

sexualized and eroticized commodity marketed to men (Waugh 1996; Kasson 2001; Chauncey 1994).

As if to counter that image, the marketing and promotion of the Atlas image, as did Macfadden's own antihomosexual tirades in his various publications, emphasized a heterosexual manhood to an intended heterosexual male audience. What differentiated Atlas from another very public representation of Italian masculinity at the time, Rudolph Valentino, was that Atlas from the very beginning packaged himself as a manmade man, instead of being marketed, as Valentino was, to both the male and female audience (Studlar 1989; 1996). Moreover, the plan's aim was to create a superrace of American men, countering Atlas's own feminized, "degenerate" urban roots with decidedly eugenic overtones. The fitness plan appropriates the very discourses used to differentiate Italians from Americans, Northern Italians from Southern Italians, and Americans from aliens.

### Atlas Inscribed

Fresh from his triumphant participation in the 1921 and 1922 bodybuilding contests and now firmly entrenched as Charles Atlas, Atlas wrote his first fitness course in collaboration with Frederick Richard Tilney only one year after he won the "The World's Most Handsome Man" contest (Gaines, Butler, and Roman 1982). What distinguished his plan from others at the time was that it required no use of athletic equipment, relying on what he later termed Dynamic-Tension. Although Macfadden was among the first to feature resistance training in his fitness courses, what sets the two apart is that Macfadden aimed his plans—as well as his publications—at both women and men; *Physical Culture* consistently featured women on its covers and published articles targeted to both female and male readers. Macfadden even touted his second wife as "the perfect specimen of English womanhood," and raised her to an ideal of female procreation and sexuality as his biological laboratory (Fabian 1993, 54).

Atlas, on the other hand, was clearly concerned with men and masculinity, directing his fitness workouts only to men with headlines such as "Let Me Make You a PERFECT MAN"<sup>2</sup> and "These 5 Men Learned a Marvelous Secret! What They Have Done—You Can Do!"<sup>3</sup> drawing on marketing rhetoric similar to that used by Lionel Strongfort and the Milo Barbell Company (Green 1986). In the Charles Roman era, advertisements exploited masculine anxieties and fears of weakness and sexual inadequacy, with slogans such as "You don't have to be picked on" and "Show your girl what you are really made of."<sup>4</sup> During World War II, they integrated a bellicose, nationalistic discourse, with catchphrases such as "Let Atlas build you up for Your part in national defense" and "It's not enough to be 100% American—you must be 100% MAN."<sup>5</sup> The fact that most of these advertisements appeared, apart from *Physical Culture*, in publications such as *Popular Mechanics*, pulp fiction, and comic books highlights the attempt to seduce the male reader of diverse

ages and classes into believing the Atlas fitness plan to be the panacea for male inadequacies and the tool for achieving bodily perfection (Pendergast 2000, Mrozek 1989).

This shift is indicative of how manhood in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries came to be defined not against childhood, as in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but rather against femininity and a feminized, urban culture (Kimmel 1994). According to Kimmel (1994), the perceived feminization of American culture was due in part to immigration and industrialization, with the “weaker” and “less virile” races now populating American cities (p. 17). It played off of several cultural dichotomies: the sedentary, immobile, urban factory worker versus the hearty, healthy, and physically active rural outdoorsman. As for other immigrants, physical culture became a means of countering the believed feminization, projecting in both display and performance a hyperbolic, white masculinity imagined onto white muscles.

In brief, Atlas’s intended mission in his fitness plan was to improve both the body and the mind through a series of twelve lessons intended to modify his “students” from both inside and out. Like Sandow before him, the emphasis was on taking control of one’s life on the path to strength, health, and “perfect manhood” (Green 1986, 213). Exercises targeted the chest, abs, arms, spine, back, shoulders-thighs-legs, upper arms, calves, wrists, and fingers; other lessons concentrated on nutrition and other lifestyle changes, including “how to acquire physical magnetism.”<sup>6</sup> The principle was to always do the basic core exercises of lesson 1 morning and night, then to add two lessons, then to substitute those with the next two lessons. When the student completed the course, he would maintain his physique with a series of perpetual exercises, a “greatest hits” for each body part. According to the *Saturday Evening Post*, not all of Atlas’s exercises were of his own design. Atlas himself created eight original exercises in his fitness plan, and the rest came from a variety of sources, including Hindu muscle-control exercises, Walter Camp’s calisthenics, Bernarr Macfadden’s various fitness plans, and of course, the tigers at the zoo (Zolotow 1942).

From its very first pages, the Atlas fitness plan aimed to modify behavior through exercise, diet, and discipline:

Most courses on health and physical culture consist of a few exercises pulling at rubber straps, lifting weights, squeezing dumbbells, and they advertise extravagantly about the wonderful results which their course will give. They don’t tell you how and when to bathe, when to exercise what, how and when to eat, how to overcome your condition of weakness—if they do, it’s in a haphazard kind of way, being general rather than specific instructions. My system gives you full detailed information on vital factors concerning your best welfare.<sup>7</sup>

The language in this paragraph, which appears at the end of the first lesson, is typical of much of Atlas’s rhetoric throughout the plan. He positions himself as omniscient

guide to the willing pupil in all matters pertaining to health and fitness. He assumes the reader to be in a position of weakness, countering his own status as “the world’s most perfectly developed man” and “the world’s strongest physical director.”<sup>8</sup> Emphatic as to his own state of perfection, Atlas goads the reader’s need to transform himself into the perfect human specimen, the Atlas version of the revitalized man.

Several keywords and phrases recur throughout the twelve lessons, always appearing in uppercase letters: HEALTH, STRENGTH, SUCCESS, POWER, PERSISTENCE, MAGNETIC POWER, and FAITH. Integral to the success in the fitness program was complete and utter “faithfulness” in its success. Faith, in particular its religious connotations, was not a stranger to the physical culture movement, incarnated in the principles of Muscular Christianity. Muscular Christianity, imported from Victorian Great Britain as a term characterizing the works of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley, reflected an anxiety about demasculinized and overfeminized society. As a reaction to a world growing increasingly more confusing and fragmented, Muscular Christianity advocated the association between physical strength, religious certainty, and the ability to shape and control the world around oneself. Manliness was synonymous with physical and moral strength, emanating in an ideologically charged and aggressively poised male body (Hall 1994).

Immigrants had a dual stance in Muscular Christianity’s physical and ideological discourse, one of exclusion and one of inclusion. On one hand, the fusion of mind, body, and spirit attempted to build up white, middle-class American strength in the face of the growing immigrant presence. On the other hand, immigrants, particularly working-class physical laborers, were muscular models to whom others aspired. In terms of Italian immigrants, the concept of “Muscular Catholicism” developed within the confines of New York’s Catholic educational institutions, such as the Jesuit St. John’s College, which later became Fordham University, and the College of St. Francis Xavier, but never had the widespread reach that Muscular Christianity did (Putney 2001). That is not to say that Catholics completely rejected it: many who could afford it or who worked on the railroads where they initially proliferated did join the YMCA but more for recreational rather than spiritual reasons (Winter 2002).

In the United States, Muscular Christianity helped spur the growing athletic movement and the success of the YMCA. After its inception in 1851 and its spread across America during the latter part of the decade, the YMCA accentuated its commitment to the strenuous life, in which character building was spiritual, moral, and physical. By the first years of the twentieth century, 4,500 YMCAs across the country had gymnasiums on the premises. Cities were prime sites, seen by the organization’s leaders as a cure for urban hedonism. Despite the fact that it was predominantly a Christian organization, its emphasis on physical fitness had pagan origins. The innovative idea behind the YMCA’s metamorphosis, under the guise of Luther Gulick, into a fitness and sports organization originated in the classical Greek notion of a sound body in a sound mind (Putney 2001, Green 1986).

Whether Charles Atlas was familiar with either Muscular Christianity or its

Catholic appropriation is uncertain. What is known is that he remained a devout, practicing Catholic, but the language of the fitness plan is decidedly Protestant. Siciliano in his early years did frequent the YMCA, and in turn, Atlas's religious-like devotion to physical fitness echoes throughout the plan:

To succeed in the building of superb HEALTH you must have POWER OF WILL, resolutely making up your mind that you WILL follow the instructions no matter what sacrifices you are obliged to make. You must be HOPEFUL, and expect the results assured you will ultimately be yours. You must have COURAGE and fear nothing. You must have CONFIDENCE in this System, in addition to telling you what to do, I also tell you why. You must have FAITH in yourself and these methods, then results will more than satisfy you. And you must have PERSISTENCE. Please remember that weak, spasmodic efforts will get you nowhere.<sup>9</sup>

Muscular Christianity is part of Atlas's passing to (or as) American. The plan aligns his rhetoric with mainstream American religion: its emphasis on self-determination as opposed to divine providence, the ideal of hard work, and the promise of earthly reward for that hard labor. Its stress on cleanliness, sanity, and purity, common to the physical culture movement, distances Atlas from his immigrant roots, deracializes him, and safely positions him in the white, Protestant, American mainstream. Also absent is any kind of reference to a divine creation. At one point, he does encourage the students, as they lead the good, clean life by going to bed early, to "thank the Creator of life and health for the day just past, and call on the Universal Forces for increased energy for the new Tomorrow."<sup>10</sup> Instead, Atlas positions himself as reverend in this quest toward spiritual and corporeal fulfillment, with the body, not the Church, as temple (Putney 2001).

The plan, like aspects of American Muscular Christianity, also makes recourse to the classical rhetoric of contemporary bodybuilding discourse. A prototypical example of the plan's language is in lesson 1, which is devoted to his philosophy and chest exercises, which he believes "[give] unusual energy and strength to the entire body," and adds "the beauty of contour and symmetrical development, giving grace, poise and self-confidence."<sup>11</sup> The principle echoes what Kenneth Dutton (1995) refers to as the fusion of the powerful and the beautiful in Greek and Roman statuary: the Greek as idealized and beautiful male body and the Roman as powerful military hero. Exercise, thus, transforms the underdeveloped body into the muscular classical hero. Furthermore, integral for Atlas to the muscular body is the concept of citizenship, an element now purged from present editions of the plan—the classical fusion, once again, of kalos and agathos. Later editions from the 1930s feature phrases such as "my system of dynamic tension has helped my thousands of pupils become healthy strong citizens of every nation of the world."<sup>12</sup>

One concept that the plan stresses from the outset is the eugenic idea of "breeding" racial superiority, in this case through physical fitness: "I desire to build a PERFECT RACE, a country of PERFECT HUMAN MASTERPIECES."<sup>13</sup> The

eugenic overtones of these words are not coincidental. Many contemporary physical fitness plans reflected a right-wing fusion of the healthy mind and body with the health and future of the nation-state. The physical culture movement, especially as Macfadden envisioned it, came hand in hand with eugenics. His magazine would regularly publish articles with such titles as "Can We Have a Beautiful Human Race?" as well as admiring articles about Nazi and Fascist physical culture. In the 1930s, he went to Italy to seek out Mussolini, and Mussolini, in turn, sent Italians for Macfadden-inspired training (Fabian 1993, Wiggam 1921). Even the present edition of the Atlas plan contains these eugenic overtones: "You will take pains to develop your human machine—the body—to a state of perfection, until you arrive and become a MASTER OF MEN because you have learned to become MASTER of your own body. Aim to develop strength of character as well as strength of muscle. Make discipline an ally rather than an enemy."<sup>14</sup>

To link these eugenic, proto-fascist elements as emanating from Atlas's Italian roots would be misleading. As Bertellini (2005) has shown, many different models of Italian masculinity and virility coexisted in the first decades of the twentieth century. Mussolini, Valentino, and Atlas, especially in the urban milieu of New York City, each distinctly addressed "modern transnational Italianness" (p. 688): the virile, heroic political leader, the woman-made and sexually individualistic man, and the perfectly assimilated immigrant (Bertellini 2005). Just as the Italian nation was itself a recent and in many ways fictitious construction, so was a monolithic ideal of Italianness.

The Italian diasporic body, in Siciliano's case, embodied the hardworking, healthy, ideal American citizen, and the Atlas fitness plan literally enacts the assimilation. Atlas's ideas, in reality, did not represent anything new. He drew on established discourses in the physical culture movement as well as Greek and Roman iconography of bodybuilding as a way to legitimize and Americanize himself. What made his persona modern was the way Charles Roman advertised and marketed it by preying on contemporary male anxieties of feminization, weakness, and degeneracy. As opposed to participation in team sports, Atlas provided a model for which the individual could achieve his goals on his own regardless of class, race, or nationality and successfully enact Americanization, a fact attested to by the lack of general knowledge of his Italian heritage after his name change.

The bodybuilding craze between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along with masculine models such as Roosevelt, Tarzan, and other figures, helped make strength and health into prized American qualities (Green 1986). The Atlas fitness plan and the textual discourse accompanying the somewhat provocative photographs provided cues of interpretation for the reader to consume Atlas's image in a safe, Americanized, heterosexual way. Atlas's emphasis on robust health via proper exercise and nutrition countered Riis's (1902) image of dirty freeloader with that of the clean, hardworking deracialized man leading the good, clean life, and his fitness plan provided a blueprint for what it took to be a proper American man, one literally



and physically fit for self-government.

## Notes

1. This idea of transformation and conversion is the hallmark of Dominique Padurano's (2007) research on Atlas. Her work converges with mine in several areas, particularly the importance of physical and visual culture in the construction of the Atlas persona and his need to emphasize the "clean life" in an attempt to distance himself from his immigrant past. Our approaches differ, however, terminologically and conceptually. Padurano refers to Atlas's "ethnicity," a more recent concept that divorces cultural from biological traits and that, in my opinion, did not belong to the racial vocabulary of the time. My emphasis is on the physical and cultural intertwining of Atlas's racial identity and transformations.

2. Advertisement in *Physical Culture*, February 1923, p. 104.

3. *Ibid.*, May 1923, p. 129.

4. Advertisements viewed by the author in random binders at Charles Atlas Ltd., Harrington Park, New Jersey, April 2, 2003.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Undated Atlas plan, lesson 12, page 1. In my research, I consulted two fitness plans, both undated. The first, housed at Charles Atlas Ltd., Harrington Park, New Jersey, I was able to date to before 1935, because it lacks the iconic photograph of Atlas at the beach in that year and later included in all other plans. The other plan that I obtained appears to have been written before that one, because it contains only one reference to Dynamic-Tension and lacks the international orientation that later plans had. The plan's language, however, has undergone relatively few alterations over the last seventy years. In the most recent version, available at [www.charlesatlas.com](http://www.charlesatlas.com), the changes include the substitution of "person" for "man," a more complete health warning (in case of liability), and a few out-of-date word replacements. All references here to the fitness plan are to the earliest plan unless otherwise noted.

7. Undated Atlas plan, lesson 1, p. 8. See note 6 for additional source information.

8. *Ibid.*, cover letter.

9. *Ibid.*, lesson 1, p. 1.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-5.

12. Undated Atlas plan, cover letter, Charles Atlas Ltd., Harrington Park, New Jersey, April 2, 2003. See note 6 for additional source information.

13. Undated Atlas plan, lesson 1, p. 8. See note 6 for additional source information.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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